



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

God's gift is free

Tuesday, 4 November 2014

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 45, 7 November 2014)

We shouldn't be afraid of the gratuitousness of God which upsets the order of human convenience and exchange. Pope Francis highlighted this idea during his homily at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 4 November. His reflection was inspired by a passage from the Gospel of Luke (14:15-24) which follows the one in which Jesus explained that in God's Law, "*quid pro quo* doesn't work" and in order to make the concept understandable, he advised: "when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just".

"When one of those who sat at the table" with Jesus exclaimed in response: "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!", in other words "This would be wonderful!", Jesus replied with "the parable of the man who gave a great banquet" and whose invitation was rejected. The Pope thus sought to explain the three responses given to the host by as many guests : "Everyone likes to go to a party, they like to be invited" but there is something here that these three didn't like". The problem was: "invited to what?".

One in fact, boasting of having recently bought a field, sets his wish of "vanity", of "pride", of "power" first, preferring to go and check on his field, in order to "feel a little powerful" rather than

“sitting as one of many at that lord’s table”. Another speaks about business — “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them” — and thinks more about his earnings than of going “to waste time with those people”, thinking: “they will discuss many things but I won’t be at the centre, I’ll be one of many”. Last is the man who offers the excuse of having just gotten married. He could also bring his wife to the banquet but he wants “the attention for himself”. In this case, selfishness prevails. In the end, the Pontiff underlined, “all three have a preference for themselves” and don’t want “to share a party”. Because, in reality, “they don’t know what a party is”.

The men in the parable — “who are examples of so many” — always show an “interest”, they seek an “exchange”, a “*quid pro quo*”. The Pope explained: “If I were the guest, for example, ‘Come, I have two or three business friends coming from another country, we could do something together’, without a doubt, no one would have excused himself”. Indeed, “what frightens them is the gratuitousness”, that “being one like the others”. It is “selfishness”, the desire “to be at the centre of everything”. When one lives in this dimension, when “one turns round himself”, he ends up without horizons “because he himself is the horizon”. And so it is “difficult to hear the voice of Jesus, the voice of God”. And, Francis added, “behind this attitude”, there is another thing, even “more profound”: there is the “fear of gratuitousness”. God’s gratuitousness, in fact, compared with so many life experiences which have caused us to suffer, “is so great that it frightens us”.

Man is disoriented. The Pontiff recalled that this attitude is similar to that of the disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They said to each other: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”. And also: “the gift was so great that we were disappointed. And we are afraid”. The same thing happened with the “most practical” Thomas, who said to those who spoke of the Risen Jesus: “Don’t come with any stories”, because “if I don’t see, don’t touch.... I once believed, and everything collapsed! No. Never again!”.

Even Thomas “was afraid of God’s gratuitousness”. In this regard, the Pope recalled a popular saying: “When the offer is so great, even the holy are suspicious”. In other words, when a gift is too large, it puts us on guard, because “gratuitousness is too much” for us. So, if “God offers us such a banquet” we think: “better not to get involved”, better to be “with ourselves”. We are indeed “more certain in our sins, within our limits”, because nevertheless “we are at home”.

On the other hand, to go out “from our home at God’s invitation, to God’s house, with the others”, it “frightens” us. And “all of us Christian”, the Bishop of Rome admonished, “have this fear hidden inside”, but not very much. Too often, in fact, we are Catholics but not too Catholic, “confident in the Lord, but not too much”. And this “not too much”, in the end, “diminishes” us.

Pope Francis then considered, in the Gospel parable, the attitude of the host after the servant tells him of the guests’ rejection. He is “angry, because he has been scorned”. So he “sends him to bring all those who are outcast, the needy, the sick, through the streets and the lanes of the city; the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame”. And when the servant tells him there is still room in the

hall, he tells him: “Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in”, that my house may be filled”. One verb, “compel them”, which makes us think: “So many times”, the Pope highlighted, “the Lord has to do the same with us”: with proof, so much proof”, He “compels that heart, that spirit to believe that there is gratuitousness” in Him, that his gift “is free, that salvation isn’t bought: it is a great gift”. God’s love is, indeed, “the greatest gift”.

Yet we, the Pontiff concluded, are frightened and “we think that we make holiness with things and in the long run we become a little Pelagian”. However, “salvation is free”, even if we stubbornly argue: “I don’t understand, Lord, tell me: this celebration for everyone, who pays for it? Do I have to pay for it?”. We don’t realize that, as Paul recalls in the Letter to the Philippians (2: 5-11), all of this “is free, because Jesus Christ, despite being in the form of God, did not retain the privilege, but “emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant. He humbled himself”. It is Jesus, the Pope recalled, who “paid for the feast, with his humiliation until death, death on the Cross”. This is the “great gratuitousness” of God.

“When we look at the Crucifix, we say: ‘This is the entrance to the celebration. Yes, Lord I’m a sinner, I have many things, but I look at you and I go to the Father’s feast. I trust. I won’t be disappointed, because you have paid for everything”. Thus “the Church asks us not to fear the gratuitousness of God”, because it can seem “folly”. But Paul says: “Christ’s Cross is folly for the world: it cannot comprehend it. But it is He who has paid so that for us all is gratuitous”. We have only to “open our heart, do from our part, all that we can; but He will provide the grand feast”.