



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The grace of shame

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We must ask God for the “grace of shame”, because “it is a great grace to be ashamed of our sins and thus receive forgiveness and the generosity to give it to others”. This was Pope Francis’ invitation as he celebrated Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 21 March.

The Holy Father began his homily by talking about the day’s reading from the Gospel according to Matthew (18:21-35), in which Jesus speaks “to his disciples about fraternal correction, the lost lamb and the shepherd’s mercy. And Peter thinks he has understood everything and, brave as he is, and also generous, he asks: ‘But how many times do I have to forgive, with what you said about fraternal correction and the lost lamb? Is seven times enough?’ And Jesus says: ‘always’, using the figure ‘seventy times seven’”. In reality, Pope Francis continued, “it is difficult to understand the mystery of forgiveness because it is a mystery”, he said. “Why should I have to forgive, if justice allows me to carry on and ask that justice do what it must?”.

The answer comes from the Church, which “today allows us to enter into this mystery of forgiveness which is God’s great work of mercy”, the Pontiff explained. And the Church does this above all with the first reading from the book of the Prophet Daniel (23:16-20), which tells us “of Azaria’s prayer, a very sad moment in the history of the People of God”, Francis continued. “They are deprived of everything; they have lost everything and they are tempted to believe that God has abandoned them”. After describing the scene, Francis repeated their words: “Yet with a

contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted ... and may our sacrifice be in thy sight this day, and may we wholly follow thee, for there will be no shame for those who trust in thee.... Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in thy forbearance and in thy abundant mercy. Deliver us in accordance with thy marvellous works”.

Singling out Azaria’s plea: “Do not put us to shame”, Francis explained that they “felt shame inside because they remained that way, as he said earlier, ‘because of their sins’”. Thus, “Azaria clearly understands that the situation God’s people found themselves in was due to sin. And he is ashamed. And out of shame, he asks for forgiveness”. This then, is the first step: to have “the grace of shame. In order to enter the mystery of forgiveness, we must feel ashamed”. However, the Pontiff continued, “we cannot do this on our own; shame is a grace: ‘Lord may I feel shame for what I have done’. And in this way the Church places herself before this mystery of sin and shows us the way out: prayer, regret and shame”.

“The Church echoes the Gospel passage and explains what that ‘seventy times seven’ means”, Francis continued. It means that “we must always forgive. And Jesus tells this parable of the two servants: the first went to settle his account with the master, and the master wanted to take the law into his own hands”. The servant begged him: “‘Have patience’. He asked forgiveness, and the master felt compassion and forgave him”, the Pope said. But the servant left, only to come upon a second servant whose own debt to the first “was very small; he owed him 100 denarii, small change”, but instead of forgiving him, the first servant “takes him by the throat and says: ‘Pay me pay me’”. And when “the master heard of this, he became indignant and called the jailers and had him sent to prison: ‘So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart’”, Pope Francis stressed.

This begs the question: “Why did this happen? This man who had been forgiven” a debt so large “that he, his wife and his children were to be sold as a slaves, and all his possessions sold”, is then “incapable of forgiving small things”. Indeed, Francis stressed, “he did not understand the mystery of forgiveness”.

In a sort of imaginary dialogue with those present, the Holy Father asked: “If I ask you: ‘Are all of you sinners?’ — ‘Yes, father all of us’ — ‘And to receive the forgiveness of sins?’ — ‘We confess’ — ‘And how do you go to Confession?’ — ‘Well, I go; I tell my sins; the priest forgives me; he gives me three Hail Marys to pray, and then I am at peace again’”. If this is the case, the Pope continued, “you did not understand. You just went to the confessional to perform a banking transaction, an office procedure. You did not go with shame for what you did. You saw some stains on your conscience and you were wrong to think that the confessional was a dry cleaner” capable of removing “the stains”. You were unable to feel shame for your sins. Yes, you are forgiven because God is great, but he did not enter your consciousness; you were not conscious of what God did, of the wonder that he worked in your heart. And for this reason, you go out, you find a friend and you start to speak ill of someone else and of another, and you continue to sin”, Pope Francis said.

He then explained that the concrete experience of every day teaches us that “the mystery of forgiveness is very difficult” to understand. Therefore, the Pontiff noted, “today the Church is wise when she makes us reflect on these two steps”. Indeed, “I can forgive” only “if I feel forgiven. If you have no consciousness of being forgiven, you will never be able to forgive, ever”. In each person, “there is always the attitude of wanting to settle accounts with others”. However, “forgiveness is complete. But it can only be done when I feel my sin”, when “I feel shame”; when “I feel ashamed and ask God for his forgiveness, and I feel forgiven by the Father. And in this way, I can forgive. Otherwise, it is not possible to forgive; we are incapable of it. This is why forgiveness is a mystery”, Francis explained.

This is the teaching of the parable of the servant, “who was forgiven many, many, many things”, the Pontiff stressed. However, “he did not understand anything: he left happy; he got a weight off his chest, but he did not understand the generosity of that master. He left saying in his heart: ‘I managed to get out of it; I was clever!’, or other things”, Francis said. “Leaving the confessional, how often do we not say it, but we feel that we got away with it?”, he asked. “This is not receiving forgiveness: this is the hypocrisy of stealing forgiveness, a false forgiveness. And thus, since I do not have the experience of being forgiven, I cannot forgive others; I lack the ability, like this hypocrite who was unable to forgive his companion”.

Thus, Pope Francis concluded, “Let us ask the Lord today for the grace to understand this ‘seventy times seven’. After all, if the Lord has given me so much, who am I not to forgive?”.