



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

As the disciples of Emmaus

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We each must enter a “dialogue of three”, each as a protagonist, face-to-face with both Jesus and the adulterous woman, who is a sinner but victim *par excellence* of those “hearts of stone”. In this way, we can be overwhelmed by the “tenderness of God” who, as he did with the two disciples of Emmaus, “warms our heart” and opens our eyes. With this invitation during his homily at Santa Marta on Tuesday morning, 2 May, Pope Francis strongly advised that we not close ourselves off in the “rigidity” that leads us to “close our ears and grind our teeth”, not allowing the Holy Spirit to pass.

“Last week we reflected on ‘being Christian’”, Francis recalled, and “we saw that a Christian is a witness to obedience”, just as Jesus, “who obeyed unto death, death on the Cross”. And, “today the first reading shows us another witness of obedience in Stephen”, the Pope explained, referring to the passage from the Acts of the Apostles (7:51 - 8:1) which recounts how he is “persecuted, accused, even with the same cruelty to which Jesus” had been subjected, “for telling the truth, for being a witness to obedience”. This, Francis said, “makes me think about the different ways of not understanding the Word of God, because these people who stoned Stephen did not understand the Word of God”.

For comparison, the Pontiff offered the example of the “disciples of Emmaus”, who “did not understand and were on the road”. So, “what does Jesus say to them? — ‘Foolish men, and slow of heart to believe’”. Francis then observed: “they were not closed, but they did not understand”. Of course, the Pope acknowledged, calling someone foolish “is not praise; but it is not as harsh as what Stephen says to these people” who end up stoning him: in fact, Stephen calls them “‘stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears’ — and saying ‘uncircumcised’ is to say ‘pagan’”.

Jesus “does not say ‘pagan’” to the disciples of Emmaus, but says “halfway believer”. He says: “You believe; you did believe, but not now: you have doubt”. However, Francis explained, those who stone Stephen “are convinced. They are pagans”. The disciples of Emmaus “did not understand; they were even afraid because they did not want problems, and they distanced themselves from Jerusalem: they were afraid. But, they were good”. They had “these limitations, but they were good: they were open to the truth”.

On the other hand, the Pope remarked, the people who accused Stephen and stoned him “were closed to the truth, closed; and when Stephen rebuked them with these harsh words — ‘As your fathers did, so do you’ — they were vicious at heart: their heart was closed by rage ‘and they ground their teeth against’ Stephen”. The disciples of Emmaus, for their part, had a different attitude to the rebuke: “they listened, they let Jesus’ words enter, and their hearts warmed”.

The Acts of the Apostles, the Pontiff continued, also recounts that “when Stephen says he sees Jesus in his glory”, his persecutors “stopped their ears: they did not want — did not want! — to listen”. And “this is the tragedy of closure: closing the heart; the hardened heart; hardness of heart”.

“The Lord admonishes his people in Psalm 95[94]: ‘Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah’”, the Pope repeated. “Then, with the Prophet Ezekiel, he makes a beautiful promise: ‘you have a heart of stone, but I will give you a heart of flesh’”, that is, a heart that is able to hear, that is able to listen, that is able to receive the witness of obedience and that the Word truly became flesh”. This, the Pontiff added, “makes the Church suffer so very much: closed hearts, hearts of stone, hearts that do not want to open, that do not want to hear; hearts that know only the language of condemnation”. They “know how to condemn” and “do not know how to say: ‘explain to me, why do you say this?’”. Instead, the Pope stressed, they remain hardened: “they are closed; they know everything; they do not need explanations”. And, he continued, “as Stephen and even as Jesus rebuked them: ‘what did you do to the prophets? You killed them, because they told you what you did not like’”.

In other words, the Pope said, “there was no room in their heart for the Holy Spirit”. But “today’s reading tells us that Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, had understood everything: he was witness to the obedience of the Word made flesh, and the Holy Spirit does this”. And, whereas Stephen’s heart “was full” of the Holy Spirit, “an empty heart, a stubborn heart, a pagan heart does not allow

the Spirit to enter, and feels self-sufficient”.

Francis recommended that we fix our gaze on “these two groups: we are the two of Emmaus, with many doubts, many sins”, and often “we are cowards and want to distance ourselves from the Cross, from trials. But let us make room to feel Jesus, who warms the heart. And let us ask for the grace to be like them”.

“Let us look at the other group”, the Pope continued, made up of those “who stopped their ears; they did not want to hear: [self-]sufficient, closed in the rigidity of the law”. In response, “Jesus spoke a great deal” to these men, “and said worse things than Stephen had said”. Thus, Francis said, “we can end with a dialogue, a dialogue of three: each one of us enters a dialogue between Jesus and the victim of the hearts of stone, the adulterous woman”. The scribes and Pharisees “wanted to stone her: she was a sinner”. But “Jesus simply responds: ‘Look within yourselves’”. And this way, the Pontiff stated, “we see this tenderness of Jesus: the witness to obedience, the great witness Jesus, who gave his life, shows us the tenderness of God, as compared to us, to our sins, to our weaknesses.

Therefore, “let us enter this dialogue”, Francis concluded, “and let us ask for the grace that the Lord make these rigid hearts more tender”, the hearts “of those people who are closed within the law and condemn all that is outside that law: they do not know that the Word came in the flesh, that the Word is witness to obedience; they do not know that God’s tenderness can move a heart of stone and put in its place a heart of flesh”.