



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

An examination of conscience

Thursday, 16 January 2014

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In his homily at Holy Mass, Pope Francis commented on the day's first Reading (1 Samuel 4:1-11), which recounts Israel's crushing defeat by the Philistines, as well as Psalm 43, which expresses "Israel's prayer after the many defeats she experienced in her history". "Lord, thou hast cast us off and abased us, and hast not gone out with our armies. Though hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil" (v. 9-10).

Such defeats raise questions, the Pope said. "Why did the Lord leave Israel in the hands of the Philistines? Did the Lord abandon his people? Did he hide his face?". The Pope specified further what the basic question is: "Why did the Lord abandon his people in the battle against their enemies? But they were not just the enemies of the people but the enemies of God". Enemies, he said, who "hated God", who "were pagans".

The Pope looked for "the key to an answer" to this question in a passage from yesterday's first Reading: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Samuel 3:1). "The word of the Lord was not present among the people, so much so that Samuel did not understand" who was calling him, Pope Francis said. The people, then, "were living far from God's Word, they had distanced themselves from it". The elderly priest Eli was "weak" and "his sons were "corrupt". "They frightened the people and cudgelled them". Thus, "without God's word, without God's strength" the door was left open to "clericalism" and to "clerical corruption".

However, within this context, the people realized that they were “far from God, and they say: ‘let us go in search of the ark’”. But they brought the ark into the camp as though it were something magical: they didn’t seek the Lord but rather “something magic”.

“The Philistines understood the danger” as the ark arrived into the camp amid Israel’s “mighty shout”, and they asked themselves what it meant. “They learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp” (v. 6). In fact, the Pope said, the first Book of Samuel states that the Philistines said: “A god has come into the camp”. (v. 7). The Philistines thought that the Israelites had gone to seek God, and that he had really come to their encampment. Yet Israel had not realized that the ark was not their “entrance into life”.

The Pontiff went on to note Israel's two battles with the Philistines. In the first there were some 4,000 dead; in the second, 30,000; and then “the ark of God was captured by the Philistines and the two sons of Eli, Ofni and Fineès, died”.

“This passage from Scripture makes us think about our relationship with God, with the word of God,” the Pope said. “Is it a formal relationship, a distant relationship? Does the word of God enter our hearts, change our hearts, does it have this power or not?”. Or, he asked, “is it a formal relationship ... but our hearts are closed to this word?”

This series of questions, he said further, “leads us to think about the Church’s many defeats, to the many defeats of the people of God”. These defeats, he said, are due simply to the fact that the people “do not hear the Lord, do not seek the Lord, do not allow themselves to be sought by the Lord”. Then, after the tragedy has already occurred, we turn to the Lord to ask: “But Lord, what happened?”. In Psalm 43, we read: “Thou has made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those about us. Thou hast made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples”. And this, he said, leads us “to think about the scandals in the Church, but are we ashamed?”.

“So many scandals that I do not wish to mention individually, but we all know about them. We know where they are! Some scandals have been very costly”. At this point, Pope Francis spoke bluntly about the “shame of the Church” over the scandals that resound as so many “defeats of priests, bishops and laity”.

The problem, the Pope continued, is that “the word of God was rare in those scandals. In those men, in those women, the word of God was rare. They did not have a bond with God. They had a position in the Church, a position of power and comfort” but not “the word of God”. The Pontiff added: “It is pointless to say: “but I wear a medal, I wear a cross: yes, like those who carried the ark without a living relationship with God and God’s word!”. Recalling what Jesus’ own words regarding scandals, he repeated that they lead to “the decay of the people of God, to weakness and the corruption of priests”.

Pope Francis concluded his homily with two thoughts: the word of God and the people of God. Regarding the first, he suggested an examination of conscience: “Is the word of God alive in our hearts? Does it change our lives, or is it like the ark that comes and goes” but “fails to enter our hearts?”. Regarding the people of God, he paused to reflect on the harm that scandals cause them: “Poor people ... poor people!” he said. “We do not give them the bread of life to eat! We do not give them the truth! So many times, we give them poisoned food!”.