



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

Ever decreasing

Friday, 5 February 2016

(by *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly ed. in English, n. 6, 12 February 2016)

John the Baptist, “the greatest of the prophets”, teaches us a fundamental rule of Christian life: humble ourselves so that Jesus may grow. This is “God’s approach”, as opposed to “mankind’s approach”, as the Pope pointed out during Mass at Santa Marta on Friday morning.

In the day’s Gospel passage, Mark writes that “the people were talking about Jesus, because his ‘name had become known’” (6:14-29). In other words, “everyone was talking” and they asked themselves who he really was. One person said: “He is one of the prophets who has returned”. And another: “He is John the Baptist, who has been raised”. The fact is that “people were intrigued” by Jesus. Meanwhile King Herod, Mark writes, was also “fearful and perplexed” because he was “haunted by the ghost of John”, whom he had killed. In addition, Francis noted, “other characters appear in this Gospel passage: a wicked woman, who was hateful and held a grudge; a girl who understood nothing and whose only interest was vanity”. Thus, the story of Herodias and her daughter is “like a novel”.

This is how the evangelist frames “the end of John the Baptist, ‘the greatest man born of woman’ as the canonization formula states”. And “this formula was not stated by a Pope: Jesus said it!”. John truly “is the greatest man born of woman, the greatest saint: this is how Jesus canonized

him”.

But John “meets his end in prison, with his throat cut”. The Gospel passage seems to end on a note of “resignation”. John’s “disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb”. This is how “the greatest man born of woman” meets his end. “A great prophet, the last of the prophets, the only one allowed to see the hope of Israel”. Yes, “the great John who called for repentance: all the people followed him and asked him ‘what must we do?’”. The Pontiff added that “even soldiers” followed him. “Everyone followed him in order to be baptized, to ask forgiveness, to the point that the doctors of the law went to ask him: ‘are you the one we have been waiting for?’”. John’s answer is clear: “No, no, not me. There is another who comes after me. It is he. I am only the voice of one crying in the wilderness”.

On this point, the Pope explained, “St Augustine makes us think hard when he says: ‘Yes, John says of himself that he is the voice, because behind him comes the word’”. And “Christ is God’s word, the Word of God”. Truly, “John is great”, Francis repeated. Great when he says he is not the awaited one: “this phrase is his destiny, his life plan: ‘He, the one who comes after me, must increase; I instead must decrease’”. This is precisely “what John’s life was like: decreasing, decreasing, decreasing and ending in such a prosaic fashion, in anonymity”. Thus, John was “a great man who sought not his own glory but God’s”.

It doesn’t end there. The Pontiff then remarked that John “suffered in prison — let’s say the word — the inner torture of doubt”. He ends up asking himself: “Might I have made a mistake? This messiah is not how I imagined the Messiah would be!”. Thus, “he sent his disciples to ask Jesus: ‘Tell the truth, are you he who is to come?’”.

Obviously, “that doubt caused him to suffer” and he asked himself: “Was I wrong to proclaim one who isn’t he? Have I deceived the people?”. Thus, he had “great suffering and inner loneliness”. His words return in all their strength: “I instead must decrease, but decrease in this way: in spirit, in body, in all”. To John’s doubt, “Jesus responded: ‘Watch what happens’. He is confident, he doesn’t say, ‘I am he’. He says: ‘Go and tell John what you have seen’. He also gives signs, and leaves him alone with his doubt, to interpret the signs”.

Thus, Francis affirmed, “this is the great prophet”. However, also regarding John, “there is a final thing that gives us something to think about: with this attitude of ‘decreasing’ so that Christ may ‘increase’, he prepared the way for Jesus. Jesus died in anguish, alone, without the disciples”. John’s “great glory”, therefore, is being “a prophet not only with words, but also with his flesh: with his life he prepared the way for Jesus. He is a great man!”.

In conclusion, indicating that “it will do us good”, the Pope suggested “reading this passage of the Gospel of Mark today, the sixth chapter”. Yes, he said again, “read that passage” in order “to see how God overcomes: God’s approach is not mankind’s approach”. In the light of this Gospel

passage, let us “ask the Lord for the grace of John’s humility, and not to attribute to ourselves the merits or glories of others”. And ask “especially for the grace that in our life there may always be room for Jesus to grow as we become more lowly, to the very end”.