



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE *DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE*

A bishop bids farewell

Tuesday, 30 May 2017

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“Let us pray for pastors, for our pastors: for parish priests, for bishops, for the Pope; that theirs might be a life without compromise, a life on a journey, a life in which they do not believe themselves to be at the centre of history and thus can learn to say their farewells”. This was the invocation offered by Pope Francis at the end of his homily in which he commented on the Liturgy of the Word during morning Mass on Tuesday, 30 May.

In particular, the Holy Father focused on the first reading, a passage from the Acts of the Apostles (20:17-27) which, he said, “one can entitle ‘A bishop’s farewell’”. In fact, in the account “Paul bids farewell to the Church of Ephesus. That Church he had founded, that day of the Pentecost of Ephesus, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them”.

The Pope thus described the scene, saying that Paul now finds he must leave them: “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the Church”. In today’s terminology, Francis explained, this would translate as “a meeting of the presbyteral council, but one where the bishop resigns, where the pastor says goodbye”. For that matter, he noted, “we pastors all must leave. There comes a moment in which the Lord says to us: ‘go to another place, go there, come here, come to me’. And this is one of those moments that a pastor experiences. And one of the steps that the pastor must take is also to prepare himself to bid farewell in a good way, not to leave half-heartedly”. The Pope warned that, “the pastor who does not learn to say goodbye ... has

some flawed attachment to the flock, an attachment which has not been purified by Jesus' Cross".

Thus, the narrative continues, "Paul parted from them". But, as the Holy Father pointed out, "the passage regarding this farewell does not finish with today's reading, but concludes at the end of chapter 20". The Pontiff therefore made the following suggestion: "I ask all of you to read chapter 20 from verses 17 until the end. Chapter 20. That presbyteral council in which Paul, the bishop, takes his leave".

Francis stressed that the passage clearly identifies "three attitudes" which characterize the Apostle's departure. The first can be seen upon the arrival of the Church elders to whom Paul says: "You yourselves know how I lived among you all the time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials". Thus, Paul "does not boast; it is not an act of vanity. No. He recalls the history". In this way, the Pope stressed, Paul "underscores: 'I did not shrink away'. One of the things which gives much peace to a pastor who takes his leave is to remember that he has never been a compromising pastor" and has "never shrunk away", without compromises".

It takes courage to do this, the Pope observed, as Paul himself affirms: "You remember ... so that I might instruct you, preach to you, bear witness to all of you". Thus, Paul "does not boast, because he says that he is the worst of sinners; he knows it and he says so. But here he is relating an account of his own history in this Church". And, the Pope observed, the account of "this examination of conscience" is taken up again "in the other part of the passage, ... right up to the end". Thus, Pope Francis explained, "the pastor bids farewell and his heart is at peace knowing that he did not lead the Church with compromises. He did not shrink away". This is why, the Pope said, if we read this passage "to the end" by ourselves, alone, "we cry, as did the presbyters". This is "the beauty of truth, of life".

Passing then to the second point, the Holy Father noted that, after looking at the past, Paul now thinks about the present: "And bound in the Spirit I go to Jerusalem not knowing what shall befall me there". In other words, the apostle is saying: "I obey the Spirit: 'bound in the Spirit I go'". Here we come to the Holy Father's second point of emphasis: "the pastor knows he is on a journey". In fact, while Paul "was guiding the Church", he did so without "making compromises. Now the Spirit asks him to go on a journey, without knowing what will happen. And Paul continues on because he does not have interests of his own; he has not misappropriated the flock. He has served. 'Now God wants me to go? I am going not knowing what shall befall me except that' — the Spirit had made that much known to him — 'the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me'. That much he knew".

Therefore, the Pontiff suggested, it is as if Paul wished to say: "I am not going into retirement. I am going elsewhere to serve other Churches. Always with a heart open to the voice of God: I leave this and I will see what the Lord asks of me. And that uncompromising pastor is now a

pastor on a journey, since he has not ‘appropriated’ the flock” as his own.

Thus, the question spontaneously arises: why did he not wish to “appropriate” the flock, to make it his own? The Holy Father continued in his reflection, highlighting “the third aspect”. Saint Paul, he noted, says: “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious”. In other words, it is as if he were saying: “I am not the centre of history, the grand history or the little history; I am not the centre. ‘I do not account my life as precious. I am a servant’”. Thus, Paul “bids farewell with the freedom that he had on that day when he asked them the question: ‘Have you received the Holy Spirit?’ And then the freedom without compromise, on the journey”, and the idea that “‘I am not the centre of history’: this is how a pastor says goodbye. The great Paul teaches us”.

The chapter concludes with the scene in which the Apostle’s followers are in tears as he says to them: ‘You will see my face no more’. In conclusion, the Pope said, “he knelt down and prayed with them all ... then they brought him to the ship, and he departed”. In closing, using “this really beautiful example”, the Holy Father invited everyone to pray “for our pastors”.