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Sunday

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

From the Homily of Pope Francis

If we want to be disciples of Christ, or call ourselves Christians, this is the only way; there is no other. Having been loved by God, we are called to love in return; having been forgiven, we are called to forgive; having been touched by love, we are called to love without waiting for others to love first; having been saved graciously, we are called to seek no benefit from the good we do. You may well say: "But Jesus goes too far! He even says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). Surely he speaks like this to gain people's attention, but he cannot really mean it". But he really does. Here Jesus is not speaking in paradoxes or using nice turns of phrase. He is direct and clear. He quotes the ancient law and solemnly tells us: "But I say to you: love your enemies". His words are deliberate and precise.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This is the Christian innovation, the Christian difference. Pray and love: this is what we must do; and not only with regard to those who love us, not only concerning our friends or our own people. The love of Jesus knows no boundaries or barriers. The Lord demands of us the courage to have a love that does not count the cost. Because the measure of Jesus is love without measure. How many times have we neglected that demand? Yet his commandment of love is the very heart of the Gospel. Where the command of universal love is concerned, let us not accept excuses or preach prudent caution. The Lord was not cautious; he did not yield to compromises. He asks of us the *extremism of charity*. This is the only legitimate kind of Christian extremism: the extremism of love.

The worship of God is contrary to the culture of hatred. And the culture of hatred is fought by combatting the *cult of complaint*. How many times do we complain about the things that we lack, about the things that go wrong! Jesus knows about all the things that don't work. He knows that there is always going to be someone who dislikes us. Or someone who makes our life miserable. All he asks us to do is pray and love. This is the revolution of Jesus, the greatest revolution in history: from hating our enemy to loving our enemy; from the cult of complaint to the culture of gift. If we belong to Jesus, this is the road we are called to take! There is no other.

Dear brothers and sisters, today Jesus, with his limitless love, raises the bar of our humanity. Ultimately, we can ask ourselves: "Will we be able to make it?" If the goal were impossible, the Lord would not have asked us to strive for it. By our own effort, it is difficult to achieve; it is a grace and it needs to be implored. Ask God for the strength to love. Say to him: "Lord, help me to love, teach me to forgive. I cannot do it alone, I need you". But we also have to ask for the grace to be able to see others not as hindrances and complications, but as brothers and sisters to be loved. How often do we pray for help and favors for ourselves, yet how seldom do we pray to learn how to love! We need to pray more frequently for the grace to live the essence of the Gospel, and to be truly Christian. For "in the evening of life, we will be judged on love" (Saint John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*, 57).

Today let us choose love. Let us not yield to the thinking of this world. Let us accept the challenge of Jesus, the challenge of charity. Then we will be true Christians and our world will be more human.

Monday

THE STRUGGLE OF PRAYER

From a Commentary on Romans by Origen

"I beg you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to help me with your prayers to God." (Rom. 15) Paul asks the brethren in Rome to pray for him. Hearing this, who could be too proud to ask for the Church's prayers, even if those whose prayers they ask seem to be lower in merit than they are? Paul, endowed with the merits of an apostle, urges not only the Romans but even the Corinthians to pray for him! Note, indeed, the powerful religious obligation with which he binds them to do this: "I beg you", he says, *"by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to help me with your prayers to God!"*

The words *"to help me with your prayers"* translate into a much stronger Greek phrase which means *"struggle together with me by your prayers"*. He reveals that his own prayer is a struggle, a conflict, probably with those of whom he said: *"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."* It is certain that just as all these powers are hostile to faith and opposed to religion and make war on justice and truth and everything that is good, so too they obstruct and oppose prayer. If Paul thinks it necessary to ask the Romans to help him in this struggle, then clearly the struggle involved in prayer is not a minor one.

The first way in which the demons and hostile powers obstruct prayer is by trying to ensure that those who exert themselves in this struggle will be unable to lift up "hands that are clear and free from anger". Again, even if those praying manage to be free from anger, they will hardly avoid distractions—that is, superfluous and empty thoughts. You will scarcely find anyone who is not subject in prayer to some empty and irrelevant thoughts that turn aside and interrupt the attention of the mind to God. They carry it away by inappropriate reflections.

Prayer is a mighty struggle. A mind always fixed on God contends with unwavering attention against the enemies opposing it. They try to steal away the spirit of prayer by wandering thoughts. If the mind perseveres in the struggle and even overcomes it, it can then say, in all honesty: *"I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race."*

Tuesday

SERVICE IS THE MEASURE OF GREATNESS IN THE CHURCH **From the Homily of Pope Francis (February 20, 2020)**

“If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all”. If we make compromises while trying to live out the Gospel, we will end up imbibing the spirit of the world, which leads to dominating others and is the “enemy of God”. On the contrary, Jesus calls us to the path of service.

Jesus knew that the disciples, because of ambition, had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest. This attitude of wanting to advance, of wanting to be raised up is “the spirit of the world”. St. James says in his letter: “To be a lover of the world means enmity with God”. (James 4:4)

This anxiety of worldliness, this concern to be more important than others, saying, “No! I deserve this, that person doesn’t deserve it”: this is worldliness, this is the spirit of the world, and those who breathe in this spirit, breathe in the enmity of God. Jesus, in another passage, says to the disciples, “Either you are with me or you are against me”. There are no compromises in the Gospel. And when someone wants to live the Gospel while making compromises, they ultimately find themselves with the worldly spirit, which always seeks to make compromises in order to climb higher, to dominate, to be greater.

There are indeed many actual wars in the world today. What about the wars among ourselves, like the one among the Apostles about who is the most important? So much of our quarrels come precisely from worldly desires. If we follow this path, then we admit that we are infected with worldliness, like careerists who are always striving for a higher place, for greater recognition. This is the spirit of the world, and this is not Christian. [They say] “No! It’s my turn! I have to earn more to get more money and more power”. This is the spirit of the world. And then, [there’s] the wickedness of chatter: gossip. Where does it come from? From envy. The great envious one is the devil, we know that it says so in the Bible. [It comes] from envy. Through the devil’s envy evil enters into the world. Envy is a worm that pushes you to destroy, to bad-mouth others, to annihilate others.

In the discussion among the disciples, all these passions were present; and so Jesus rebuked the disciples, and called them to become servants to all, and to take the last place.

Who is the most important in the Church? The Pope, the bishops, the monsignors, the cardinals, the pastors of the most beautiful parishes, the presidents of lay associations? No! The greatest in the Church are those who make themselves servants of all, those who serve everyone, not those who have titles. And to help us understand this, He took a child and placed him in their midst; and embracing him with tenderness – because Jesus spoke with tenderness, He had so much of it – He said to them: “Whoever receives a child, receives Me”. That is, whoever welcomes the most humble, the one who serves the most. This is the path. There is only one path against the spirit of the world: humility. Serving others, choosing the last place, not climbing the ladder.

Wednesday

HUMAN FRATERNITY

From the Video Message of Pope Francis (February 4, 2022)

Fraternity is one of the fundamental and universal values that ought to undergird relationships between peoples, so that the suffering or disadvantaged do not feel excluded and forgotten, but accepted and supported as part of the one human family. We are brothers and sisters!

In a mutual and shared spirit of fraternity, all of us must work to promote a culture of peace that encourages sustainable development, tolerance, inclusion, mutual understanding, and solidarity.

We all live under the same heaven, independently of where and how we live, the color of our skin, religion, social group, sex, age, economic conditions, or our state of health. All of us are different yet equal, and this time of pandemic has shown that clearly. Let me say once again: *we are not saved alone!*

We all live under the same heaven and, in the name of God, we who are his creatures must acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters. As believers from different religious traditions, we have a role to play. What is that role? To help our brothers and sisters raise their eyes and their prayers to heaven. Let us raise our eyes to heaven, because whoever worships God with a sincere heart also loves his or her neighbor. Fraternity makes us open to the Father of all and enables us to see others as our brothers or sisters, to share life, to support one another and to love and come to know others.

We all live under the same heaven. Now is the fitting time to journey together, believers and all people of goodwill. Do not leave it to tomorrow or an uncertain future. Now is the fitting time to journey together: believers and all people of goodwill, together. This is a good day to extend a hand, to celebrate our unity in diversity – unity, not uniformity, unity in diversity – in order to say to the communities and societies in which we live that the time of fraternity has arrived. All together, for it is essential to live in solidarity with one another. For this reason, I repeat, now is not a time for indifference: either we are brothers and sisters, or everything falls apart. This is not to be melodramatic; it is the truth! Either we are brothers and sisters, or everything falls apart. We see this in the little wars, in this third world war now being fought piecemeal, as peoples are destroyed, as children go hungry, as their opportunities for education decline... It is destruction. Either we are brothers and sisters, or everything falls apart.

This is not a time for forgetfulness. Each day we need to remember what God said to Abram: that raising up his eyes to heaven, he would see the promise of his descendants, that is, ourselves (cf. *Interreligious Meeting at the Plain of Ur*, 6 March 2021). A promise has also been fulfilled in our lives: that of a fraternity as vast and bright as the stars of heaven!

Thursday

THE SCANDAL OF INCONSISTENCY

A reflection from a Homily by Pope Francis

The Apostle James speaks expressly about inconsistency in the passage from his Letter proclaimed at today's liturgy. There he takes issue with "inconsistent persons who boast of being Christian, yet take advantage of their employees", the Pope said. James writes: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (v. 4).

Turning to the day's Gospel passage from St Mark (9:41-50), Pope Francis said that the Lord speaks strongly against scandal. He says: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin [whoever "scandalizes" them], it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea". The "inconsistent Christian does great harm" and the Lord uses a very powerful image. "The life of a Christian is found on the way of consistency"; and yet we also need to keep before us "the temptation not to be consistent, and to cause great scandal. And scandal kills!".

The consequences are there for all to see. Everyone has heard it said: "I believe in God but not in the Church, because you Christians say one thing and do another!". These are words "we have all heard: I believe in God but not in you!". And this occurs precisely because of "inconsistency", the Pope explained.

He then affirmed that today's two readings help us "to pray for Christian consistency, in order that we may act, feel and think as Christians". He added that "we need to pray in order to live a consistent Christian life, for Christian consistency is a gift of God". It is a gift we should strive to ask for, saying: "Lord, may I be consistent! Lord, may I never give scandal! May I be a person who thinks like a Christian, who feels like a Christian, who acts like a Christian!". And "this is a prayer for all of us today, for we need to be consistent!".

Pope Francis then proposed a very practical example: "If you happen to be with an atheist who tells you that he does not believe in God, you can read him the whole library, where it says that God exists, and where it is proven that God exists, and he will not believe". However, he continued, "if in the presence of this same atheist you witness to a consistent, Christian life, something will begin to work in his heart". And "it will be your witness that brings him the restlessness on which the Holy Spirit works".

The Pope then reminded those present that "all of us, the whole Church" should ask the Lord for "the grace to be consistent". Acknowledging ourselves as sinners, weak and inconsistent, but always ready to ask for the Lord's forgiveness. All of us, in fact, "can ask for forgiveness, and God never tires of forgiving". It is important, then, "to have the humility to ask for forgiveness" when we have not been consistent.

In the end, he said, it is a matter of "proceeding forward in life with Christian consistency" by testifying that we believe in Jesus Christ and by acknowledging that we are sinners. But with "the courage to ask for forgiveness when we make mistakes" and "with great fear of giving scandal". Pope Francis concluded by praying that "the Lord may give all of us this grace".

Friday

GOD IS NOT AN EQUATION

A reflection from a Homily by Pope Francis

“Jesus is so merciful”, Pope Francis insisted, “he is so great that never, never, never does he close the door to sinners”. You can see this when he asks them: “What did Moses command you? What did Moses command you?”. The answer is that “Moses permitted the writing of an act of repudiation”. And “it’s true, it’s true”. But Jesus responds in this way: “It was because of your hardness of heart that he wrote this rule for you”.

Here, the Pontiff said, “is the fullness of truth, the truth that is powerful and blunt, but there is also human weakness and hardness of heart”. And “Moses, the legislator, did this, but things remain clear: the truth is one thing, while the hardness of heart is another that is the sinful condition of us all”. Therefore, “Jesus leaves the door open here to God’s forgiveness, but at home to the disciples, he repeats the truth: ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery’”. Jesus “states it clearly and bluntly: ‘And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’”.

The Gospel passage speaks to us of “the truths that Jesus gives us, which are full truths, given by God, the Father, which are always this way”. It also shows us “the way”, that is, “how Jesus acts before sinners: with forgiveness, leaving the door open”. And “in this reference to Moses, he leaves a little something for the forgiveness of people who failed to carry out this compromise”. Moreover, even “today, in this world in which we live, with this culture of the provisional, this reality of sin is so strong”.

Jesus, “recalling Moses, tells us that there is the hardness of heart, there is sin”. But “you can do something: forgiveness, understanding, accompaniment, integration, the discernment of these cases”; with the understanding that “truth can never be sold, never”. Jesus “can speak this truth, which is so great, and at the same time he is forgiving towards sinners, towards the weak”. However, “this small group of enlightened theologians, who fall into their case studies, are both incapable of great horizons and of loving and understanding human weakness”.

“We must walk with these two things that Jesus teaches us: truth and understanding,” Pope Francis said. And “this cannot be resolved like a mathematical equation”, but “with flesh itself: that is to say, as a Christian, I help that person, I help those marriages that are facing difficulty, that are wounded, on their path to approaching God”. The fact remains that “that is the truth, but this is another truth: we are all sinners, on the road”. And “there is always this work to do: how to help, how to accompany, but also how to teach those who want to get married what the truth is about marriage”.

In conclusion, Pope Francis expressed his hope “that Jesus may teach us to have in our hearts a great adherence to truth and also a great understanding and support for all of our brothers who are in difficulty”. And “this is a gift: it is what the Holy Spirit teaches, not those enlightened doctors who, in order to teach us, need to reduce the fullness of God to a case study and equation”.

Saturday

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GOD'S WORD

A reflection from a text by St. Simeon the New Theologian

We all believe in the Son of God who is the son of Mary, the ever-virgin and mother of God. As believers, we faithfully welcome the Gospel into our hearts as she did. We confess our belief in words, and we repent our past sins with all our heart. The word which we receive when we believe appears within us as a seed. It does this just as truly as the Word of the Father entered the virgin's womb when she consented to God's request.

Are you amazed when you hear the truth about this awe-inspiring mystery? What we hear is true and its truth is guaranteed by God's inspired word in Scripture confirmed in Jesus Christ. We receive this seed, which is Jesus Christ, in a way that is not bodily—as it was for the virgin—but one that is both spiritual and substantial in us and in her. We hold in our hearts the very one whom the chaste Virgin also received. As St. Paul says: "It is God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, who has shown in our hearts to reveal the knowledge of his Son". He has become wholly substantial in us and wholly real.

Is this really what God meant to say? Recall the text that says, "We contain this treasure in earthenware pots" and in the context, it is the Spirit that is meant. But elsewhere the Lord is also called Spirit: "The Lord is the Spirit". And we also hear that if the words 'the Son of God' are used we are to think of the Spirit and that we should join the Heavenly Father to the Spirit in thought because it is also said concerning the Heavenly Father "God is Spirit".

We have been constantly taught that the Holy Trinity is inseparable and of one and the same substance. We are taught that where the Son is the Father is also, and where the Father is the Spirit is too. And where the Holy Spirit is the whole of the divinity in three persons is—the One God and Father with Son and Spirit and all of the same substance.

It follows that if we wholeheartedly believe and repent ardently, we receive the Word of God in our hearts, as has been said. This is like the Virgin, if of course, we bring with us souls that are chaste and pure. Just as the fire of the divinity did not consume the Virgin, since she was supremely pure, so neither does it consume us, if we bring with us chaste and pure hearts. On the contrary, it becomes in us a dew from heaven, a spring of water, as a stream of immortal life.

Are you afraid that you cannot bring such a heart? But that is God's gift to you, as it was to the Virgin. If you have received God's gift by believing and repenting, why should you fear that your heart will not be pleasing to God? God has come to dwell in you by faith and faith has brought forth repentance and these two have brought about an inward transformation that is making you ever more and more chaste and pure.

Why should you hesitate to believe that God is doing in you what God promised? Look within! Do you find faith there? Could you be so hesitant if you were not experiencing the gift of repentance as well? Trust in God's love and gifts. It is transforming you as it did the Virgin.