



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

God always goes the distance

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There cannot be Christians, much less pastors, who sadly stop “midstream” for fear of “getting their hands dirty” or of being gossiped about or of compromising their ecclesiastical career. It is God who demonstrates to each one of us and to the Church as a whole the right manner of behaviour, personally coming down “into the field” and always going “forward, all the way, always going out” with tenderness and with a single objective: “no one must be lost!”, especially those who are distant. The Pope gave this practical instruction during Mass at Santa Marta on Thursday morning.

Francis began with the day’s Gospel Reading from Luke (15:1-10). He read that “the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near” to Jesus “to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’. They were scandalized”. After all, the Pope noted, Jesus’ gesture “was a real scandal in that time, for those people, wasn’t it?”. To which he added: “Let’s imagine that there were newspapers in that time”. Perhaps the headlines would have read: “The prophet eats with these people!”. In other words, it was a “scandal!”.

Yet, Francis clarified, “Jesus had come in search of those who had distanced themselves from the

Lord". And he made this easy to understand by telling "two parables: that of the shepherd", in order "to explain that He is the Good Shepherd; and that of the woman who had 10 coins and lost one. Analyzing the parables recounted by Luke, the Pontiff highlighted that the words "most repeated in this passage are: 'lose', 'seek', 'find', 'joy' and 'rejoice'".

These very terms used by Jesus, the Pope continued, "allow us to see what God's heart is like: God doesn't stop, God doesn't go only to a certain point" and stop. No, "God goes all the way, He goes the distance; He doesn't stop halfway to salvation, as if to say 'I've done it all, it's their problem!'" God instead "always moves, goes out, goes down into the field". For example, the Pontiff recalled a "particularly beautiful" phrase from the Book of Exodus: "I have heard the cry of the Israelites who were enslaved by the Egyptians and I will go there". In other words, "God hears the cry and He goes: this is the Lord! This is his love: it goes the distance!".

In reality, Francis said, returning to the day's Gospel passage, "Jesus is very generous because He almost compares these Pharisees and scribes with God", these people "who were murmuring". The parable begins with these words: "What man of you does not do this?". Perhaps it's true, everyone does it, however, they stop "halfway". Indeed, the Pope indicated, "it was important to them that the balance of profits and losses was more or less favourable", and things were "going pretty well" with this way of looking at things. And thus, still looking to the two parables of Jesus in the passage from Luke, those tax collectors might have said, "yes, it's true, I lost three coins, but I earned so much!".

This kind of reasoning, however, "never enters God's mind!", Francis stated. Because "God isn't a businessman: God is Father and He always goes all the way, He goes the distance, to the end!". And this way — referring to another parable, that of the prodigal son — "even that poor elderly man who saw his son at a distance", even "he went all the way, as far as he could, that is, the roof of the house, to look every day to see whether his son had returned, for he didn't know where he was".

God does the same. "He always goes the distance: God is Father and this is God's love". This manner of God also tells "us pastors, us Christians" how to behave. It really is sad to see a pastor who stops "halfway, it's sad!". And he may even do something, but he explains that he can do nothing more. In fact, the Pope remarked, "a pastor who opens the doors of the Church and stays there, waiting, is sad". Just as sad is "a Christian who doesn't feel inside, in his heart, the need, the necessity to go and tell others that the Lord is good".

There is so much perversity, Francis said, "in the heart of those who see themselves as just, like those scribes, those Pharisees" whom Luke tells us about today. "They don't want to get their hands dirty with the sinners". And they say among themselves that if Jesus were a prophet, he would have known that the woman was a sinner. See "the contempt: they used the people, then they scorned them".

Thus, “being a halfway pastor is a failure”. Indeed, “a pastor has to have the heart of God” in order to “go the distance”. He has to have “the heart of Jesus, who had received that word from the Father: don’t lose any one; don’t lose a few; no one must be lost!”. It is a matter which Jesus takes up again at the Last Supper, saying, “watch over them, Father, that they not be lost!”.

See then, that “the true pastor, the true Christian has this zeal inside: may no one lose it!”. And “this is why he isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty: he isn’t afraid! He goes where he must go, he risks his life, he risks hunger, he risks losing his comforts, his status, even losing his ecclesiastical career. But he is a good pastor!”.

And “Christians must also be this way”. Because “it is so easy to condemn others, like the tax collectors did, but it isn’t Christian! It isn’t how children of God are!”. Indeed, “the Child of God goes the distance, he gives his life, as Jesus gave his, for others”. And thus, “one can’t be calm, protecting oneself, one’s comforts, one’s reputation, one’s peace of mind”. This is why, Francis firmly emphasized: “never halfway pastors! Never Christians in midstream!”. We need instead to behave just as “Jesus did”.

In this Gospel passage, the Pope continued, “it is said that these people were drawing near to Jesus”, although “many times we read in the Gospel that it is He who goes to seek people”. Because of “the Good Shepherd, the good Christian goes out, is always outward bound: he always goes out of himself, is always going out toward God, in prayer, in adoration”. And “he goes out toward others to bring the message of salvation”.

Thus “the Good Shepherd and a good Christian embody tenderness”. On the other hand, “those scribes, the Pharisees, no, they don’t know” what it means to take “the sheep onto their shoulders with tenderness, and carry it back to its place with the others”. They are people who don’t know what joy is. In fact “a Christian and a pastor in midstream might know fun, tranquility, a kind of peace of mind”. But “joy” is another thing, “that joy that there is in Heaven, that joy which comes from God, that joy that really comes from the heart of a father who goes to save” and says: “I have heard the cry of the Israelites and I have come down into the field”. Francis explicitly pointed out the beauty of “not being afraid that they speak ill of us” when we go “to find our brothers and sisters who are distant from the Lord”. He concluded by asking the Lord for “this grace for each one of us and for our Mother, the Holy Church”.