



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

True identity

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The identity card of a Christian should be the same in all respects as that of Jesus. And the Cross is what we have in common and what saves us. Because “if each one of us is not willing to die with Jesus, to be raised with him, we do not yet have a true Christian identity”. Pope Francis outlined this basic profile of every believer during Mass at Santa Marta.

The Pope’s reflection arose from the question: “But who do you say that I am?” that Jesus posed to his disciples in the day’s Reading from the Gospel according to Luke (9:18-22). Francis pointed out straight away that Jesus “protected his true identity in a special manner”. He let the people say of him: “He is a great one, no one speaks like he does, he is a great teacher, he heals us!”. However, “when someone would come close to his true identity, he would stop them”. It is important to understand the reason for this approach.

The Bishop of Rome recalled that “from the very beginning, with the temptation in the wilderness, the devil tried to get Jesus to confess his true identity”, telling him: “If you are the righteous one, if you are the Son of God, do this! Show me that you are!”. And then, “after several healings or in a few encounters, the demons who were chasing him away shouted at him” with these very words: “You are the righteous one! You are the Son of God!”. But, the Pope noted, “he silenced them”.

“The devil”, Pope Francis commented, “is intelligent, he knows more theology than all the theologians together”. And so he wanted Jesus to confess: “I am the Messiah! I have come to save you!”. This confession, he explained, would have caused “great confusion in the people”, who would have thought: “This one comes to save us. Now let’s form an army, let’s get rid of the Romans: this one will give us freedom, happiness!”.

And precisely so “the people would not err, Jesus safeguarded the crux of his identity”. The Gospel of Luke recounts how the Lord “puts his disciples to the test”. He does so after returning from a solitary place where he had gathered his thoughts in prayer. He went before them and asked: “Who do the people say that I am?” The disciples answered: “John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen”. This answer, Francis pointed out, “refers to what we heard yesterday in the Gospel passage: Herod was perplexed because he didn’t know whether this Jesus was John the Baptist or another”. Thus, the disciples said the same thing in response. And here, the Lord poses the question directly to them: “But who do you say that I am?”. Peter answered for all of them: “The Christ of God. This is your identity! You are the Messiah! You are the Christ of God! You are the anointed one, the one we have been waiting for!”. But even in this situation Jesus “charged and commanded them to tell this to no one”.

He thus wanted to “protect his identity”. Then, Jesus “explains, he begins to give a catechesis on his true identity”. And he says that “the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised”. This, he tells the disciples, is the very path “of your freedom, this is the path of the Messiah, of the righteous one: the passion, the cross”. But they, the Pontiff indicated, “do not want to understand, and in the passage from Matthew it is seen that Peter rejects this: “No, no, Lord!”. And so, with the disciples, “Jesus begins to open the mystery of his identity”, confiding in them: “Yes, I am the Son of God. But this is my journey: I must take this path of suffering”.

The Pope indicated that Jesus allows the crowd to speak of his identity only on Palm Sunday. He does so “only there, because it is the beginning of the final march”. And “Jesus does this in order to prepare the disciples’ hearts, the hearts of the people to understand this mystery of God: God’s love is so great, sin is so bad that he saves us this way, with this identity in the cross”.

After all, Francis continued, “one cannot understand Jesus Christ the Redeemer without the Cross”. And, “we can go so far as to think that he is a great prophet, he does good things, he is a saint. But Christ the Redeemer cannot be understood without the Cross”. However, he explained, “the hearts of the disciples, the hearts of the people were not prepared to understand this: they had not understood the prophecies, they had not understood that he was truly the sacrificial lamb”. Only on Palm Sunday did he allow the people to cry out: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”. And “if this people does not shout”, Pope Francis said, “the stones would cry out!”.

“The first confession of his identity”, the Pontiff affirmed, “was made at the end, after his death”. It

was already made “before his death, indirectly”, by “the good thief”; but “after his death the first confession was made: ‘Truly this was the righteous one! The *dikaïos!*’”. And these words, the Pope highlighted, were spoken by “a pagan, the centurion”.

Francis observed that “the pedagogy of Jesus, even with us, is like this: step by step he prepares us to understand him well”. And “he also prepares us to accompany him with our crosses on the path toward redemption”. In essence, “he prepares us to be Cyrenes in order to help him carry the cross”. Such that “without this, our Christian life is not Christian”. It is only “a spiritual, good life”; and Jesus himself becomes only “the great prophet”. Reality is different: Jesus has saved us all by making us take “the same path” that he chose. Thus, “our identity as Christians must also be protected”. And one must not fall into the temptation of “believing that to be a Christian is a merit, it is a spiritual journey of perfection: it is not a merit, it is pure grace”. It is also “a journey of perfection”, but “alone it does not suffice”. Because, the Pontiff concluded, “to be a Christian is to be a part of Jesus in his own identity, in that mystery of the death and resurrection”.