



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The law and the flesh

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There are “two paths”, and it is Jesus himself, with his “gestures of closeness”, who tells us which direction to take. One, indeed, is the path of the “hypocrites”, who close doors by sticking to the “letter of the law”. On the other, however, is “the path of charity”, which passes “from love to the true justice that is within the law”. These were the words of Pope Francis as he celebrated Mass at Santa Marta on Friday morning.

To present these two ways of living, the Pontiff referred to a passage from the Gospel according to Luke (14:1-6). One Sabbath, he recalled, “Jesus was at the home of one of the Pharisee leaders to dine with them; and they were watching him to see what he would do”. Most of all, the Pope pointed out, “they were trying to catch him in a mistake, even baiting him”.

At this point, a sick man enters the scene. Jesus turns to the Pharisees and asks, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”, as if to say, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath? Or shouldn’t I?”. Jesus’ question, the Pope added, is “a simple question but, like all hypocrites, they kept quiet, they didn’t say anything”. After all, Francis said, “they always fell silent” when Jesus confronted them with the truth, they “kept their mouths shut”; and although “they then talked behind his back” and tried to bring him down.

Essentially, the Pontiff stated, “these people were so attached to the law that they forgot about justice; so stuck to the law that they forgot about love”. But “not only to the law; they stuck to the words, to the letter of the law”. This is why “Jesus reproached them”, deploring their attitude: “If you, before the needs of your elderly parents, say: ‘Dear parents, I love you so much but I can’t help you because I gave everything to the temple’, which is more important? The fourth commandment or the temple?”.

This very way “of living, attached to the law, distanced them from love and from justice: they were attentive to the law, they disregarded justice; they were attentive to the law, they overlooked love”. Yet “they were the models”. Jesus, however, “finds only one word” for these people: “hypocrite”. One cannot go “around the world seeking converts” and then close “the door”. The Lord found these were “closed men, men too attached to the law”, or rather, too attached “to the letter of the law”, because “the law is love”. These men “always closed the doors of hope, of love, of salvation”. They were “men who only knew how to close”.

We must ask ourselves, “what is the way to be faithful to the law without overlooking justice, without neglecting love”. The answer “is the very way that comes from the opposite” side, Francis said, repeating Paul’s words in the Letter to the Philippians (1:1-11): “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless”.

It is indeed “the opposite path, from love to integrity; from love to discernment; from love to the law”. Paul, in fact, prays “that your charity, your love, your works of charity bring you to knowledge and to full discernment”. This is precisely “the path that Jesus teaches us, the exact opposite of that of the doctors of the law”. And “this path, from love to justice, leads to God”. Only “the path that goes from love to knowledge and to discernment, to complete fulfillment, leads to holiness, to salvation, to the encounter with Jesus”.

“The other path”, however, “that of sticking only to the law, to the letter of the law, leads to closure, leads to selfishness”. And it leads “to the arrogance of considering ourselves just”, to that so-called “‘holiness’ of appearances”. Such that “Jesus says to these people: you like people to see you as men of prayer, of fasting”. This is only for appearances. And “this is why Jesus said to the people: do what they say, not what they do”, because “that mustn’t be done”.

See then, “the two paths” that we have before us. And with “small gestures”, Jesus makes us understand which is the path that goes “from love to full knowledge and to discernment”.

Luke presents one of these gestures in the Gospel passage from the day’s liturgy: “Jesus had this man before him, ill, and when the Pharisees didn’t answer, what did Jesus do?”. According to the Evangelist, “He took him by the hand and healed him, and then He let him go”. Thus, first “Jesus draws near: closeness is the very proof” that we are “on the true path”. Because that is “the path

that God has chosen in order to save us: closeness. He drew close to us, he made himself man". And indeed, "God's flesh is the sign; God's flesh is the sign of true justice. God who made himself a man like one of us, and we who must make ourselves like the others, like the needy, like those who need our help".

Francis also pointed out how "beautiful" is Jesus' gesture of taking a sick person "by the hand". He also does this with "that young man" who had died, "the widow's son, in Nain"; just as "He does with the girl, the daughter of Jairus"; and again with "the boy, the one who had many demons, when He takes him and He gives him to his father". Jesus always takes people "by the hand, because He draws near". And "Jesus' flesh, this closeness, is the bridge that brings us close to God".

This "is not the letter of the law". Only "in the flesh of Christ", in fact, does the law have "complete fulfillment". Because "the flesh of Christ knows how to suffer, He gave his life for us". Meanwhile, "the letter is cold".

See then, the "two paths". The first belongs to those who say: "I stick to the letter of the law; you can't heal on the Sabbath; I can't help; I have to go home and I can't help this sick person". The second is that of those who commit to acting in a way, as Paul writes, "that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and full discernment": this is "the path of charity, from love to the true justice that is within the law". To help us are these very "examples of Jesus' closeness", which show us how to pass "from love to the fulfillment of the law", without "ever slipping into hypocrisy", because "a Christian hypocrite is too ugly".