



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAЕ

That first love

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“Never forget that first love”, which is “the joy of the first encounter with Jesus”. This means we need to constantly nourish our hope. And these “two parameters”, memory and hope, are the only “framework” in which a Christian can experience “salvation, which is always a gift of God”, without falling into the temptation of being “lukewarm”, like those who, along with their memory, have also lost hope and enthusiasm. Thus, Francis advised that we not remain “halfway”, as he celebrated Mass at Santa Marta on Friday morning.

“The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord” (Ps 37[36]:39). This Psalm verse, the Pope pointed out, reminds us of the truth that “salvation is a gift the Lord gives”: it can’t be bought nor obtained through study, for it is always “a gift, a present”. But the real question is: “How to protect this salvation? What to do so this salvation remains in us and bears fruit, as Jesus explains, like a seed or kernel of mustard?”. With this, Francis referred to the day’s Reading from the Gospel according to Mark (4:26-35).

And from the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews (10:32-39), read during the Mass, the Pope underscored that “there are criteria to protect this present, this gift of salvation; in order to allow this salvation to go forth and bear its fruit in us”.

The “first criterion”, the Pope explained, “is that of memory”. In fact, we read in the text: “Brethren, recall the former days, after you received the light of Christ”. Those are “the days of the first love”, as the prophets say: it is “the day of the encounter with Jesus”. Because, Francis remarked, “when we encountered Jesus”, or better yet, he indicated, when “He let Himself be encountered by us, for it is He who does all” — “it brought great joy, the will to do great things”, as the same author of the Letter explains. Therefore, the first criterion to protect the gift of salvation is “not to forget those first days” marked by “certain enthusiasm”: most of all, “do not forget” that “first love”.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews then goes on, emphasizing the “joy that enabled you to bear all things”, to a point when “all seemed meagre in those former days, and one went forth with enthusiasm”. He continued: the Letter “exhorts us not to abandon that courage — namely ‘this honesty’ — that *parrhesia* of those former days”. It is indeed that “first love” which “made grow within us that courage, that ‘let’s go on!’, that enthusiasm”.

The call, however, is to “not abandon honesty”. But, “abandon” is not even the “right word”, Francis noted, indicating that if “we go to the original text” we find a powerful expression: “Do not throw away, do not waste, do not reject honesty”. It is “like a rejection: do not push away this honesty, this courage, the courage of the former days”.

“This is why memory is so important, to remember the grace received”, the Pope stated. Indeed, “if we push away this enthusiasm which comes from our memory of that first love, this enthusiasm which comes from the first love” then what comes is “that serious danger to Christians: warmth”. For “lukewarm Christians stay there, idle; and yes, they are Christians, but they have forgotten that first love, they have lost their enthusiasm”. What’s more, “lukewarm Christians have also lost patience, that ‘tolerating’ things in life with the spirit of Jesus’ love; that ‘tolerating’, that bearing difficulties “on one’s shoulders””. This is why, the Bishop of Rome stated, “lukewarm Christians, the poor souls, are in grave danger”.

In this regard, Francis suggested, “there are two images which really strike me”, and of which each person should be warned: “But you are lukewarm, be careful!”. St Peter, in his Second Letter, uses “the image of the dog who turns back to its own vomit”. And “this image is distasteful” — the Pope acknowledged — however, it is a fitting example of “the lukewarm Christian” who returns to that “first love, as if that love never existed”.

“The second image, also unpleasant” — he warned — is the one that Jesus recounts of the person who wants to follow Him, and does follow Him, and then He casts out the demon”. This demon, who has gone out of the man, “passes through the desert” with the intention of returning “to that man, to that woman” from which he came. And when he “returns, he finds the house in order, clean and nice”. Thus “he gets angry, goes, looks for seven demons worse than him and returns” to take “possession of that house”. And in this way “the person isn’t wounded”, because it involves “‘polite’ demons: who even knock on the door to come in, but they do come in”. The same

happens to “a lukewarm Christian” who “doesn’t know who is knocking at the door and opens it”, even saying “come in!”. But, Jesus says, in the end, “that soul ends up even worse than before”.

“These two images of the warmth of the Christian make us think”, the Pontiff said. This way we must never “forget our first love”; rather, we should always “remember that first love”. This is why the answer to the question “how do I go on?” is: “with hope”. That is what the Letter to the Hebrews says to every Christian: “For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry”.

And thus there are “two parameters” available to the Christian: “memory and hope”. Ultimately it means “reclaiming the memory so as not to lose that most beautiful experience of the first love which nourishes our hope”. So often, the Pope admitted, “hope is dark”. But the Christian “goes forward. He believes. He goes, for he knows that hope does not disappoint, to find Jesus”.

“These two parameters”, he continued, “are the very framework in which we are able to protect this salvation of the righteous which comes from the Lord, this gift of the Lord”. We must protect this salvation, “for the little mustard seed to grow and bear its fruit”. However, Francis continued, many Christians, “cause pain, create heartache — so many Christians!”. They are the many Christians who go “halfway” and “fail along this path toward the encounter with Jesus”. Even if the journey “began with the encounter with Jesus”, in the middle of the road, “they have lost the memory of that first love and have no hope”.

The Pope asked the Lord for “the grace to protect the present, the gift of salvation”. It is a gift that each Christian must protect “on this journey that always reclaims the memory and hope”. But, he concluded, “He alone can give us this grace: may He send us the Holy Spirit to walk on this path”.