



The Holy See

VISIT OF THE HOLY FATHER TO BARI

FOR THE MEETING OF REFLECTION AND SPIRITUALITY,

“MEDITERRANEAN: FRONTIER OF PEACE” HOLY MASS HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS

Bari, 23 February 2020

[Multimedia]

Jesus quotes the ancient law: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (*Mt 5:38; Ex 21:24*). We know what that law meant: when someone takes something from you, you are to take the same thing from him. This law of retaliation was actually a sign of progress, since it prevented excessive retaliation. If someone harms you, then you can repay him or her in the same degree; you cannot do something worse. Ending the matter there, in a fair exchange, was a step forward.

But Jesus goes far beyond this: “But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil” (*Mt 5:39*). But how, Lord? If someone thinks badly of me, if someone hurts me, why can I not repay him with the same currency? “No”, says Jesus. Nonviolence. No act of violence.

We might think that Jesus’ teaching is a part of a plan; in the end, the wicked will desist. But that is not why Jesus asks us to love even those who do us harm. What, then, is the reason? It is that the Father, our Father, continues to love everyone, even when his love is not reciprocated. The Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (v. 45). In today’s first reading, he tells us: “You shall be holy; for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (*Lev 19:2*). In other words: “Live like me, seek the things that I seek”. And that is precisely what Jesus did. He did not point a finger at those who wrongfully condemned him and put him to a cruel death, but opened his arms to them on the cross. And he forgave those who drove the nails into his wrists (cf. *Lk 23:33-34*).

If we want to be disciples of Christ, if we want to 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. It is the Christian difference. Pray and love: this is what we must do; and not only with regard to those who love us, not only with regard to 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, behaving like everyone else! Yet his commandment of love is not simply a challenge; it 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.

Love your enemies. We do well today, at Mass and afterwards, to repeat these words to ourselves and apply them to those who treat us badly, who annoy us, whom we find hard to accept, who trouble our serenity. *Love your enemies.* We also do well to ask ourselves: “What am I really concerned about in this life? About my enemies, or about those who dislike me? Or about loving?” Do not worry about the malice of others, about those who think ill of you. Instead, begin to disarm your heart out of love for Jesus. For those who love God have no enemies in their hearts.

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.

True enough, you can object: “I understand the grandeur of the ideal, but that is not how life really is! If I love and forgive, I will not survive in this world, where the logic of power prevails and people seem to be concerned only with themselves”. So is Jesus’ logic, his way of seeing things, the logic of losers? In the eyes of the world, it is, but in the eyes of God it is the logic of winners. As Saint Paul told us in the second reading: “Let no one deceive himself... For the wisdom of this world is folly with God” (*1 Cor 3:18-19*). God sees what we cannot see. He knows how to win. He knows that evil can only be conquered by goodness. That is how he saved us: not by the sword, but by the cross. To love and forgive is to live as a conqueror. We will lose if we defend the faith by force.

The Lord would repeat to us the words he addressed to Peter in Gethsemane: “Put your sword into its sheath” (*Jn 18:11*). In the Gethsemanes of today, in our indifferent and unjust world that seems to testify to the agony of hope, a Christian cannot be like those disciples who first took up the sword and later fled. No, the solution is not to draw our sword against others, or to flee from the times in which we live. The solution is the way of Jesus: active love, humble love, love “to the end” (*Jn 13:1*).

Dear brothers and sisters, today Jesus, with his limitless love, raises the bar of our humanity. In the end, 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 we pray for help and favours 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, 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, whatever the cost, even if it means going against the tide. Let us not yield to the thinking of this world, or content ourselves with half measures. Let us accept the challenge of Jesus, the challenge of charity. Then we will be true Christians and our world will be more human.