

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

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We have heard what Jesus told his disciples before leaving this world and returning to the Father. He told us what it means to be a Christian: “Even as I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34). This is the legacy that Christ bequeathed to us, the ultimate criterion for discerning whether or not we are truly his disciples. It is the commandment of love. Let us stop to consider two essential elements of this commandment: Jesus’ love for us – “as I have loved you” – and the love he asks us to show to others – “so you must love one another”.

First, the words “as I have loved you”. How did Jesus love us? To the very end, to the total gift of himself. It is striking to think that he spoke these words on that night of darkness, when the atmosphere in the Upper Room was one of deep emotion and anxiety: deep emotion, because the Master was about to bid farewell to his disciples; anxiety because he had said that one of them would betray him. We can imagine the sorrow that filled the heart of Jesus, the dark clouds that were gathering in the hearts of the apostles, and their bitterness at seeing Judas who, after receiving the morsel dipped for him by the Master, left the room to enter into the night of betrayal. Yet at the very hour of his betrayal, Jesus reaffirmed his love for his own. For amid the darkness and tempests of life, that is the most important thing of all: God loves us.

Brothers and sisters, may this message be the core of our own faith and all the ways in which we express it: “...not that we loved God but that he loved us” (1 Jn 4:10). Let us never forget this. Our abilities and our merits are not the central thing, but rather the unconditional, free and unmerited love of God. Our Christian lives begin not with doctrine and good works, but with the amazement born of realizing that we are loved, prior to any response on our part. While the world frequently tries to convince us that we are valued only for what we can produce, the Gospel reminds us of the real truth of life: we are loved. A contemporary spiritual writer put it this way: “Long before any human being saw us, we were seen by God’s loving eyes. Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh, we were heard by our God, who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we were spoken to by the voice of eternal love” (H. NOUWEN, *Life of the Beloved*). He loved us first; he waits for us; he keeps loving us. This is our identity: we are God’s loved ones. This is our strength: we are loved by God.

Acknowledging this truth requires a conversion in the way we often think of holiness. At times, by over-emphasizing our efforts to do good works, we have created an ideal of holiness excessively based on ourselves, our personal heroics, our capacity for renunciation, our readiness for self-sacrifice to achieve a reward. This can at times appear as an overly “pelagian” way of viewing life and holiness. We have turned holiness into an unattainable goal. We have separated it from everyday life, instead of looking for it and embracing it in our daily routines, in the dust of the streets, in the trials of real life and, in the words of Teresa of Avila to her Sisters, “among the pots and pans”. Being disciples of Jesus and advancing on the path of holiness means first and foremost letting ourselves be transfigured by the power of God’s love. Let us never forget the primacy of God over self, of the Spirit over the flesh, of grace over works. For we at times give more importance to self,

flesh and works. No, the primacy is that of God over self, of the Spirit over the flesh, of grace over works.

The love that we receive from the Lord is the force that transforms our lives. It opens our hearts and enables us to love. For this reason, Jesus says – here is the second element – “as I have loved you, so must you love one another”. That word “as” is not simply an invitation to imitate Jesus’ love; it tells us that we are able to love only because he has loved us, because he pours into our hearts his own Spirit, the Spirit of holiness, love that heals and transforms. As a result, we can make decisions and perform works of love in every situation and for every brother and sister whom we meet, because we ourselves are loved and we have the power to love. As I myself am loved, so I can love others. The love I give is united to Jesus’ love for me. “As” he loved me, so I can love others. The Christian life is just that simple. Let’s not make it more complicated with so many things. It is just that simple.

In practice, what does it mean to live this love? Before giving us this commandment, Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet; then, after giving it, he gave himself up to the wood of the cross. To love means this: to serve and to give one’s life. To serve, that is, not to put our own interests first: to clear our systems of the poison of greed and competitiveness; to fight the cancer of indifference and the worm of self-referentiality; to share the charisms and gifts that God has given us. Specifically, we should ask ourselves, “What do I do for others?” That is what it means to love, to go about our daily lives in a spirit of service, with unassuming love and without seeking any recompense.

Then, to give one’s life. This is about more than simply offering something of ours to others; it is about giving them our very selves. I like to ask people who seek my counsel whether they give alms. And if they do, whether they touch the hand of the recipient or simply, antiseptically, throw down the alms. Those people usually blush and say no. And I ask whether, in giving alms, they look the person in the eye, or look the other way. They say no. Touching and looking, touching and looking at the flesh of Christ who suffers in our brothers and sisters. This is very important; it is what it means to give one’s life.

Holiness does not consist of a few heroic gestures, but of many small acts of daily love. “Are you called to the consecrated life? So many of you are here today! Then be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters, by fighting for justice for your comrades, so that they do not remain without work, so that they always receive a just wage. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Tell me, are you in a position of authority? So many people in authority are here today! Then be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain” (Gaudete et Exsultate, 14). This is the path of holiness, and it is so simple! To see Jesus always in others.

To serve the Gospel and our brothers and sisters, to offer our lives without expecting anything in return, any worldly glory: this is a secret and it is our calling. That was how our fellow travellers canonized today lived their holiness. By embracing with enthusiasm their vocation – as a priest, as a consecrated woman, as a lay person – they devoted their lives to the Gospel. They discovered an incomparable joy and they became brilliant reflections of the Lord of history. For that is what a saint is: a luminous reflection of the Lord of history. May we strive to do the same. The path of holiness is not barred; it is universal and it starts with Baptism. Let us strive to follow it, for each of us is called

to holiness, to a form of holiness all our own. Holiness is always “original”, as Blessed Carlo Cutis used to say: it is not a photocopy, but an “original”, mine, yours, all of ours. It is uniquely our own. Truly, the Lord has a plan of love for everyone. He has a dream for your life, for my life, for the life of each of us. What else can I say? Pursue that dream with joy.

