



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

You never forget your first love

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You never forget your first love. And this also goes for bishops and priests, who must carry with them the beauty of their first encounter with Jesus. And they must also be shepherds, following the Lord step by step, without worrying about how their own life will end.

The dialogue between Jesus and Peter at the end of John's Gospel (21:15-19) is one of Jesus' many "beautiful" dialogues, following his conversations with "the blind man, the Samaritan, the sick man in the pool". The conversation with Peter is "calm", it transpires "after the Resurrection" and even "after a nice breakfast". And in just this passage of the Gospel, the Pope confided that he also found "the style of dialogue we priests, that is priests and bishops, need to have with the Lord". The Holy Father proposed four points for reflection, specifically in reference to "our dialogue with Jesus".

John recounts that "Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him". This means, explained the Bishop of Rome, that "the love the Lord wants from a bishop, from a priest is greater than the others: it's unique, always more". The third time Jesus asked, the Pope pointed out, Peter "was distressed, perhaps because he remembered having denied Jesus. But even more, he was aggrieved on account of the doubt: 'why do you ask me these things?'".

The answer is clear: the Lord wanted to take him "back, to that first afternoon when he found his

brother Andrew”, who then encountered Peter and told him, “We’ve found the Messiah”. In a word, Jesus wanted to take Peter back “to the first love”. Thus “when the Lord asks us priests if we love him, he wants to take us back to the first love”. On this point the Pope referred to the Book of Jeremiah: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness” (2:2).

This, then, is a matter of returning to “that first love that all of us had”. And it is precisely “in order to renew this love today that the Lord wants us to remember the first love”.

Many married couples “come from parishes” to the morning Mass at Santa Marta, Pope Francis confided, “to celebrate their 50th or 60th wedding anniversary”. And “I ask them: ‘how has [your marriage] been?’”. Their “answers are always colourful: one spouse says one thing, the other says something else...!”. But in their testimonies, he said, there is always one expression: “We’ve been happy!”. And once, he recalled, both spouses, who were celebrating 70 years of marriage, answered: “we argue” but we’re “as much in love as the first day”.

Bishops and priests also have to ask themselves the same question in order to understand how their love with Jesus is today: “Am I in love as much as the first day? Or do work, worries make me focus on other things and forget the love a little bit?”. In marriage, the Pope said, “it’s normal to argue”, also because “when there’s no love, [then] there’s no arguing, and it breaks down”. Here then is the reason why Jesus asked Peter those three questions: “to take him back to that first love”. Because “the first love must never be forgotten, never!”.

The second point coming from John is “the command: feed my sheep, be a shepherd!”. Someone, the Pope pointed out, could perhaps object: “But Lord, you know, I have to study because I want to become an intellectual in philosophy, theology, patristics...”. The necessary response to these ideas is: “Be shepherds, the rest will come later! Feed my sheep! With theology, with philosophy, with patristics, with whatever you study, but feed my sheep! Be shepherds!”.

The Pontiff explained, “the Lord called us for this” and the imposition of the “bishop’s hands on our heads is so that we will be shepherds”. Thus, after that regarding the “first love”, here is a second question useful to bishops and priests in examining the conscience: ‘Am I a shepherd or am I just an employee of this NGO called the Church?’”. A question which, the Pope confirmed, we all have to ask ourselves, answering with Jesus’ command: “Feed my sheep! Feed them! Go forth!”.

The third point coincides with another question, precisely that which Peter asked Jesus with regard to the Apostle John: “but what will become of him?”. This is “an interesting question”, noted the Pope, which “Peter asks out of curiosity, after this dialogue, when he sees John: ‘and what will become of him?’”.

Essentially, “the Apostles, on the very day of the Ascension, asked [Jesus] the same question: is

the triumph coming now?”. Almost as if to say, “What will become of this first love, which has gone so far? What will become of these shepherds? Will it end with glory, with majesty?”. The answer, however, is quite different: “No, brother, it will end in the most common way, often times even more humble”. It will perhaps, said Pope Francis, “end in bed, where they have to feed you, dress you, helpless there, sick”. It’s no use repeating, “But Lord, I did this for you”, I had “great love, I fed your sheep as you told me, and I end up like this?”. Yes, the Pope explained, one has to “end up as he did! That love dies like the seed of wheat, and this way then, the fruit will come. But I won’t see it!”.

The forth and final point is based on a stronger phrase: “follow me!”. This is just what Jesus says “if we have lost our way and we don’t know how to respond to love, we don’t know how to answer with regard to being shepherds, or we’re not sure that the Lord won’t leave us alone in the most difficult times of life, in illness”. This “follow me!” must be “our certainty, on the footprints of Jesus, on that path”.

Pope Francis ended with a prayer for bishops and priests: “may the Lord give all of you the grace to always find, or always remember, the first love; to always be shepherds; to not be ashamed of a humble end in bed”, or of senility. He also asked that the Lord “always give us the grace to walk behind Jesus, on the footprints of Jesus”, and that he thus grant us “the grace to follow him”.