



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

MORNING MEDITATION IN THE CHAPEL OF THE
DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHAE

The shrewdness of Saint Paul

Thursday, 1 June

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A lesson from Paul of Tarsus. The life of the Apostle to the Gentiles, who were “always moving, agitated, always bustling about” was characterized by three “dimensions” from which every Christian has a lot to learn. Pope Francis underlined this point in the Mass on Thursday morning, 1 June, commenting on the day’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles (22:30; 23:6-11).

Saint Paul, the Pope recalled, was “a man who was always moving, bustling about”. It is difficult to imagine him, the Pope added, “sunning himself at the beach, resting”. Thus, from the day’s passage from the Acts, the Holy Father identified “three fundamental dimensions” of Paul’s “bustling” life.

The first thing that draws our attention “is the preaching, the proclamation”. In the Scriptures, one reads about Saint Paul “going from one place to the other to proclaim Christ; he traveled and felt that they were calling him elsewhere and he went ... and when he was not preaching in a certain place, he worked”. His main task, therefore, was preaching: this was, explained Pope Francis, his true and specific “passion”. Called “to preach and proclaim Jesus Christ”, Paul does not rest “sitting at his desk: no. He is always, always moving. He is always carrying forth the proclamation of Jesus Christ”.

Saint Paul, the Pope continued, “had a fire inside, a zeal, an apostolic zeal which propelled him onwards”. And “he never went backwards”. His was a passion which fortified him even in the face of many “difficulties”. It is precisely here that “the second dimension” of his life emerges, that of the “difficulties” or, “frankly, persecutions”

In fact, in the day’s liturgy we read about a group of the same “enemies” who opposed Jesus — “Pharisees, doctors of the law, elders of the temple, the elders, the Sadducees” — were going about “as a group to accuse him”. In effect, the Pope said “they wanted him expelled”. This hostility, Pope Francis noted, was manifested “many times, not just once”. Furthermore, at a certain point, “they left him for dead, after they had stoned him: they believed he was dead”. But why, the Pope asked, did they want to eliminate him? “Because Paul bore the true proclamation of Jesus, that which the Lord wanted for his people” And so, for them, he was a “troublemaker”.

Thus, Paul is brought to “judgement”. The day’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles described the scene in detail: “the commander made them remove his chains” — because, in order “to offer a plea, a defence at trial, the Romans taught us that one must be free, without chains” — and “he ordered that all the chief priests and the Sanhedrin should come together in one group: all together”. They presented themselves as if they were all “one against Paul”. At this point, the Pope noted, “the Spirit inspired Paul to be a bit shrewd”. The Apostle, in fact, knew that “they were not ‘one’” and “that among them there was a great deal of internal fighting, and that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, while the Pharisees did...”. So, “speaking aloud, he said: ‘brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees. I am called in judgment to give testimony to the hope of the resurrection of the dead’”. His words produced the desired effect. In fact, “as soon as he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the assembly, since the Sadducees did not believe ... and these men, who had seemed to be ‘one’, were all then divided, all of them”.

At this point, the Holy Father paused to reflect on the fact that these men “were the custodians of the law, custodians of the doctrine of the People of God, custodians of the faith. But one believed one thing, another group believed another...”. Thus, the Holy Father continued, “these people had lost the law, lost the doctrine, lost the faith, because it was transformed into an ideology and when the law becomes an ideology, it is weakened”. The same thing happens, the Pope observed, with regard to faith and doctrine. They demonstrated the same attitude towards the prophets, as is confirmed by Jesus’ criticism: “You did this with the prophets”, in other words: “they ‘ideologized’”.

And Paul had “to fight a lot with these people, a lot, a great deal”. And the same happened with the “Judaizers”. Here then, emerges “the second dimension of Paul’s life. The first was the proclamation, apostolic zeal: to bring forth Jesus Christ. The second is: to suffer persecution, the battles”.

This particular passage then sheds light on “a third dimension of Paul’s apostolate”. We read that “the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘take courage, for as you have testified about

me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome”’. Here then, the Pope said, we encounter the dimension of “prayer. Paul had this particular intimacy with the Lord: the Lord stood by him’. He stood by him several times”’. Actually on one occasion, Paul himself affirms that he was “caught up almost into seventh heaven, in prayer, and did not know how to speak of the beautiful things he had heard there”’.

So it was then that “this fighter, this boundless proclaimer”, possessed the “mystical dimension of the encounter with Jesus”’. And his “strength” was precisely “this encounter with the Lord that he had in prayer, as it had been at the time of the first encounter on the road to Damascus, when he was going about persecuting Christians”’. Paul, the Holy Father explained, “is that man who has encountered the Lord, and he cannot forget that, and he allows the Lord to encounter him and he seeks the Lord so as to encounter Him”’. Indeed, a “man of prayer”’.

Summarizing the three attitudes that characterize Saint Paul, the Pope recalled his “apostolic zeal to proclaim Jesus Christ; resistance — resisting persecutions; and prayer: encountering the Lord and allowing himself to be encountered by the Lord”’. And recalling “an expression of a Church Father of the first century”, the Pope added, “we can say that Paul was continuing on amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of the Lord”’.

Concluding his reflection, the Holy Father invited all to ask for “the grace to learn these three attitudes in our Christian life: to proclaim Jesus Christ; to resist the seductions brought about by the persecutions and seductions which lead us to distance ourselves from Jesus Christ; and the grace of encountering Jesus Christ in prayer”’.