Francis joins in praying the Rosary

On Thursday evening, 19 March, Solemnity of Saint Joseph, the Holy Father joined via streaming from Santa Marta, in praying the Rosary promoted by the Italian Episcopal Conference. In his introduction to the prayer, he invited families, the faithful and all religious communities to ask the Lord to protect each family, especially the sick and those caring for them. The following is the translation of Pope Francis’ words which he shared in Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I join in this moment of prayer that the Episcopal Conference [of Italy] is promoting, as a sign of unity for the whole country.

In this unprecedented situation, in which everything seems to be uncertain, let us help each other to remain steadfast to what really matters. This is the advice I have received in so many letters from your Pastors who, in sharing such a dramatic moment, seek to sustain your hope and your faith with their word.

The Rosary is the prayer of the humble and of the saints. In its mysteries, they contemplate, along with Mary, the life of Jesus, the merciful face of the Father. O, how much we all need to be truly comforted, to feel the embrace by his loving presence!

The truth of this experience is measured in our relationship with others, who at this moment, are our closest relatives. Let us be close to one another, being charitable, understanding, patient and forgiving.

Though you may be confined to your own homes, allow your hearts to expand so that it may be available and welcoming to all.

This evening we are praying together, entrusting ourselves to the intercession of St Joseph, Guardian of the Holy Family, Guardian of all our families. The carpenter of Nazareth too, experienced precariousness and bitterness. Though he worried about the future, he knew how to walk the darkness of certain moments, always letting himself be guided by God’s will without reservation.

Protect, O Holy Guardian, this our nation.
Enlighten those responsible for the common good, so that they might know — like you do — how to care for those entrusted to their responsibility.
Grant intelligence of knowledge to those seeking adequate means for the health and physical well-being of their brothers and sisters.
Sustain those who are spending themselves for those in need, even at the cost of their own safety: volunteers, nurses, doctors who are on the front lines in curing the sick.
Bless, St Joseph, the Church: beginning with her ministers, make her the sign and instrument of your light and your goodness.
Accompany, O St Joseph, our families: with your prayerful silence, create harmony between parents and their children, in a special way with the youngest.
Preserve the elderly from loneliness: grant that no one might be left in desperation from abandonment and discouragement.
Comfort those who are the most frail, encourage those who falter, intercede for the poor.
With the Virgin Mother, beg the Lord to liberate the world from every form of pandemic.

Amen.

Pope visits two pilgrimage sites in Rome: Saint Mary Major and San Marcello al Corso

On Sunday afternoon, 15 March, the Pope went on an unexpected pilgrimage to two places of symbolic importance for Rome: the Basilica of Saint Mary Major and the Church of San Marcello al Corso, to pray for an end to the Covid-19 pandemic. In both places the Holy Father invoked the end of the pandemic that is striking Italy and the world and prayed for the healing of the numerous sick and for the victims, asking for comfort for their families.

Pope Francis left the Vatican at around 4:00 pm and went to Saint Mary Major where he was welcomed by the Archpriest Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko and the Dominicans who preside liturgical celebrations at the Church. He then headed to the Basilica’s chapel where the icon of the Virgin, Salus Populi Romani is kept. There the Holy Father offered flowers to the Virgin, before praying in silence before the Marian image.

The Holy Father then proceeded on foot to the Church of San Marcello in Rome’s city centre. After offering flowers, Pope Francis prayed at the foot of the miraculous wooden Crucifix that had been carried in procession through Rome’s streets in 1522, to invoke an end to the great plague. This crucifix remained intact even after a fire broke out in the Church. At about 5:30 pm, the Holy Father headed back to the Vatican by car.

Prayers for an end to the pandemic
inviolate-
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning.

Today we will consider the fifth Beatitude which says: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7). There is a peculiar aspect to this beatitude. It is the only one in which the cause and the fruit of happiness coincide: mercy. Those who show mercy will find mercy, they will be "shown mercy".

This theme of reciprocity of forgiveness is not found only in this Beatitude, but is recurrent throughout the Gospel. How could it be otherwise? Mercy is the very heart of God! Jesus says: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned: forgive and you will be forgiven" (Lk 6:37). It is always the same reciprocity. And the Letter of James states that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jam 2:13).

But it is above all in the "Lord’s Prayer" that we pray: "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt 6:12), and this question is taken up again at the end: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt 6:14-15; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2838).

There are two things that cannot be separated: forgiveness granted and forgiveness received. However, many people struggle; they cannot forgive. Often the harm received is so great that being able to forgive feels like climbing a very high mountain: an enormous effort. All one thinks: it cannot be done, this cannot be done. This fact of reciprocity of mercy shows that we have to overturn the perspective. We cannot do this alone. We need God’s grace, we must ask for it. Indeed if the fifth Beatitude promises mercy, and in the "Lord’s Prayer" we ask for the forgiveness of debts, it means that we are essentially debtors and we need to find mercy!

We are all debtors. All of us. To God who is so generous and to our brothers and sisters. Everyone knows that he/she is not the father or mother that he or she should be, the bride or groom, the brother or sister. We are all "in deficit" in life. And we need mercy: We know that we too have done wrong. There is always something lacking in the good that we should have done.

However, our very poverty becomes our strength to forgive! We are debtors and if, as we heard at the start, we shall be measured with the same measure with which we measure others (cf. Lk 6:38), then it would suit us to widen our measure and to forgive debts, to forgive. Each person should remember that they need to forgive, they are in need of forgiveness and they need patience. This is the secret to mercy: by forgiving one is forgiven. Thus God precedes us and he forgives us first (cf. Rom 5:8). In receiving his forgiveness, we too are capable of forgiving. One’s own misery and lack of justice therefore, become opportunities to open oneself up to the Kingdom of Heaven, to a greater measure, the measure of God who is mercy.

Where does our mercy come from? Jesus told us: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). The more one welcomes the Father’s love, the more we can love (cf. CCC 2342). Mercy is not a dimension among others but rather the centre of Christian life. There is no Christianity without mercy (cf. Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Dives in Misericordia (10 November 1980); Misericordiae Vultus Bull (1 to April 2016)).

I remember that this theme was chosen for the first Angelus that I had to recite as Pope: mercy. And this has remained very much impressed on me, as a message that I would always have to offer as Pope, a message for everyday mercy. I remember that on that day I even had an attitude that was somewhat "brazen", as if I were advertising a book about mercy that had just been published by Cardinal Kasper. And on that day I felt very strongly that this is the message that I must offer as Bishop of Rome: mercy, mercy, please, forgiveness.

God’s mercy is our liberation and our happiness. We live of mercy and we cannot afford to be without mercy. It is the air that we breathe. We are too poor to set any conditions. We need to forgive because we need to be forgiven. Thank you!

I greet the English-speaking young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds. Tomorrow we will celebrate the Solemnity of Saint Joseph. In life, at work and within the family, through joys and sorrows, always sought and loved the Lord, deserving the Scriptures’ eulogy that described him as a just and wise man. Always invoke him, especially in difficult times and entrust your life to this great Saint.

SPECIAL GREETINGS

Next Friday and Saturday, 20-21 March, the "24 Hours for the Lord" initiative will take place. It is an important Lenten appointment of prayer and drawing nearer to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Unfortunately, in Rome, Italy and in other countries, this initiative cannot take place in its customary manner due to the coronavirus emergency. However, in all the other parts of the world, this beautiful tradition will continue. I encourage the faithful to draw near to God’s mercy in confession in a sincere manner and to pray especially for those who are being tested by the pandemic.

I am certain that in those places where the "24 Hours for the Lord" cannot be celebrated, people will be able to live this penitential moment through personal prayers.

The more one welcomes the Father’s love, the more we can love (cf. CCC 2342). Mercy is not a dimension among others but rather the centre of Christian life. There is no Christianity without mercy (cf. Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Dives in Misericordia (10 November 1980); Misericordiae Vultus Bull (1 to April 2016)).

Francis continues his catechesis on the Beatitudes and recalls the key word of his Pontificate: mercy. With his thoughts turned to the dawn of his Petrine ministry, Pope Francis dedicated the General Audience on Wednesday, 18 March, to the Fifth Beatitude. The following is a translation of the Holy Father’s catechesis which he delivered on live streaming from the Library of the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace.
softening the hardened heart

Within the community. In fact, after the pastor's death, having neither liturgy nor sacraments, for continuing some kind of religious practice, without him, the religious significance of this small community became remoter, a series of fragile rules, rather than a lived faith. Give it freely. Do not be of interruption from Monsieur Babette, Babette’s singing teacher. It had the interior, good hearts, and asks that Babette may be given a room, in return for her services.

Naturally, the two sisters did not think that they or their community had any need of Babette’s service. After all, Babette was French and preferably a Catholic — (a “papist”, as the sisters’ father had called Papin), and to whom she was to all intents and purposes a pagan. What good could come from her? The two sisters lived to serve, but they disregarded anything that had to do with being served. Nevertheless, the French woman won them, and earns everyone’s appreciation. Then, 14 years later Babette sets out from France, from the setting of a lottery ticket. The two sisters thought that Babette would use the money to return to France; instead, she asks if she may use the money to prepare a meal in honour of the memory of their father, the pastor, on the centenary of his birth. Though flattered by this proposal, Marthine and Philippa suspect that the banquet is a threat to their spirit of life, and they ask the villagers to promise not to see and understand that God’s grace is infinite, Do not be afraid of love, of the love of God our Father. It is this love which makes us capable of grace; it is love that God has offered us, he gave us freely and give it freely. And this is the grace of Jesus Christ.... We have received it, and this is what, in the end, I want to tell you. Do not be afraid, do not be afraid. It is our joy, it is our freedom. We are free. Why? Because we live under grace. We are no longer slaves of the Law we are free, because Jesus Christ has freed us, he gave us freedom, the full freedom of God’s children, which we live under grace. This is a measure — the grace of Jesus Christ saves us from sin it saves us! If we — all of us — accept the grace of Jesus Christ he changes our heart and from sinners makes us saints. To become holy we do not need to turn our eyes and look somewhere else, or have it as we sit on a holy card!”

In this context, Babette — a refugee from the Commune of Paris insurrection in 1871 — unex- pectedly arrives in the form of an abundant meal, a magnificent feast, and stuns the town, and especially the General. The General then recounts the story of the Café Angèle in Paris, where a female chef used to cook, and who later disappeared without trace; a person who managed to turn a banquette “into a love affair” with her sublime cuisine. The dishes, who were unaccustomed to it, were so well prepared, are completely seduced and intoxicated by the meal. for it was the one who had been the chef at the Café Angèle, but her diners had no way of knowing this. Babette had wanted to organise the meal in order to express her artistic talent once again. While avoiding any comment about the food and cooking the General’s enthusiastic encom- nia, they find the strength to overcome the disagreements that divide them, and end up dis- covering the person who has prepared the meal, and that she is a French woman, the General takes the floor and quotes Psalm 95:6-7: “If today you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts under the starry sky before heading home. The real enemy of the fact that Babette is poor, remains in Denmark almost all, as the pontiff from the tum- mels when all the guests had left some time of his visit, “an artist is never poor”. As the crit- cist Hugo Munsterberg remarked, “we could say that Babette’s meal is a quiet celebration of a Grace that comes at every moment and redoubles our faith. And whenever we have been abandoned or lost is returned in over- abundance”.

Softening the hardened heart

While avoiding any comment ... they find the strength to overcome the disagreements that divide them, and end up dancing all together holding hands under the stardy sky
Tuesday, 4 February

Experiencing God's love for us

During his homily for Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 4 February, Pope Francis drew a parallel between David's sorrow at the death of his son Absalom and God's love for us. The text from the Second Book of Samuel narrates the account of Absalom who had waged war against David in order to replace him and had died instead of his son's death. “My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you!” Those who were with him were amazed at his reaction. “But why are you weeping? This person was against you, he said, he had denied you”, they said. David’s weeping is a historic fact, but it is also a prophecy, the Holy Father explained. “It makes us see God’s heart, what God does when we turn away from him”. And he continued, “The Lord is a Father, and he never denies this paternity”.

Pope Francis pointed out that it is during confession that we encounter God’s weeping, aware that our lives are filled with moments of sin, and when we wish we had died instead of our son. “In Jesus, God dies in our place”. Indeed, Confession is like “going to the Father”. The text from the Gospel of John about the forgiveness of Sin is like “going to the Father”. This “temptation to humility” can also happen to priests and this in- terest is a grace that “keeps hearts open and faithful”. As we justify ourselves in this way, we lose our faithfulness to God and embrace false idols. He wants mercy, not sacrifice. Indeed, the Holy Father stressed, a heart without compassion is an idolatrous and self- sufficient heart that is sustained by its own selfishness and becomes strong only with ideologies. He gave the example of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots whose hearts had become hardened in fulfilling a project which was not of God as it lacked compassion.

Morning Mass at the Domus Sanctae Marthae

Indeed, Confession is like “going to the Father who weeps for me, precisely because he is a Father”. Through David’s sorrow which made him wish he had died instead of his son Absalom, we can gain insight into what God did for us. “In Jesus, God dies in our place.”

It would be good in the difficult moments in our lives ... in moments of sin, in moments when we feel far away from God, to hear his voice in our hearts”, reminding us that Jesus died for us. Just as Jesus went over Jerusalem, he continues to weep for us “when we do not let him love us”, the Pope said. The Holy Father concluded his homily by inviting us to “be humble” and to listen to God’s voice in times of temptation and sin.

Friday, 7 February

There is no humility without humiliation

The Holy Father invited the faithful gathered at Santa Marta for Holy Mass not to “be afraid of humiliation” as this is the path indicated to us by Jesus and John the Baptist. As he reflected on the day’s Gospel Reading from Mark which narrates the beheading of John the Baptist, the Pope explained that John’s task had been “to show the way of Jesus”, bearing witness to the path chosen by God for our salvation, hence the path of humiliation. Jesus himself had humiliated himself unto death on the Cross. Both Jesus and John had been tempted by the temptation of vanity and pride and while suffering from a kind of “human and spiritual depression”, they both ended in “the most humiliating ways”.

“The path of humiliation chosen by Jesus and John the Baptist is the path that Christians should follow”, Pope Francis said. One cannot be “human and spiritual depression” and stressed. When we try to draw attention to ourselves in the Church and in the community, we need to gain a position, we are behaving in a worldly way. This “temptation to climb” can also happen to priests and this intolerance, he continued, and this cannot be tolerated. “If a shepherd does not follow the humble path, he is not a disciple of Jesus” but “a climber in a cassock”.

Thursday, 13 February

Beware of sliding into worldliness

During his homily celebrated at Santa Marta on Thursday, 13 February, Pope Francis spoke of King Solomon’s apostasy in his elderly age and warned the faithful against letting their hearts wander in a similar way. Reflecting on the day’s Reading (Kings 11:4-13) which recounts that when Solomon was old and “his wives turned away his heart after other gods” (v. 4), Kind Solomon began as a “good boy” who asked the Lord for wisdom and received it. But Solomon’s heart became weak because he allowed his wives who served other gods, to convince him to adore their idols. His heart was not an apostasy from one day to the next, Pope Francis pointed out about Solomon. He slid into sin. The Lord rebuked Solomon for being led astray: “You turned away your heart”. This also occurs in our after 40 years of service at Casa Santa Marta and who was present at the Mass. Indeed, families are not only made up of father, mother, brothers, sisters and grandparents, but rather also of the larger family of those who accompany us for some time such as at the workplace or in our studies. Pope Francis compared Casa Santa Marta where he lives to a large family. Families, he said, are people who accompany us on our life journey and whose smiles ad greetings are like seeds that are sown in our hearts. The Lord, he pointed out, wants us to be in company, not alone.

Referring to Casa Santa Marta as an example, Pope Francis said that every name, is a presence, a history, a short stay and leaves a mark like Luisa, Cristina and the grandmother of the house and Sister Maria who joined when she was very young and decided to consecrate herself there. He also mentioned Mari- ano who left with her child and Elvira, an example of struggle in life, adding that it was difficult to forget others who had retired or moved elsewhere. It would do us good, the Holy Father suggested, for us to spend some time today gratefully remembering those who accompanied us on our life path and in gratitude to God for not leaving us alone.

Pope Francis did not fail to mention the problems that always arise when people are involved, including families. However, sin, patience and apologies for failings are all part of families. Offering Patria’s farewell as an opportunity to remember, thank and apologize, he urged everyone to do the same for those who accompany us. The Pope’s homily concluded with a big thank you to those who work at Casa Santa Marta and best wishes of another 40 years to Patrizia.

Tuesday, 18 February

Open our hearts to compassion

Reflecting on the day’s Gospel passage from Mark in which Jesus rebukes the disciples for their hardened hearts as they worry over the shortage of bread, during his homily for Holy Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 18 February, Pope Francis spoke about a heart that has become hardened. “Have you eyes and cannot see, have you ears and cannot hear?”, Jesus asks the disciples as he reminds them of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. The Lord wants us to have a compassionate heart like his. He wants us to sacrifice. Indeed, the Holy Father stressed, a heart without compassion is an idolatrous and self-sufficient heart that is sustained by its own selfishness and becomes strong only with false ideologies. He gave the example of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots whose hearts had become hardened in fulfilling a project which was not of God as it lacked compassion.

Memory, is like a medicine against a hardened heart, Pope Francis continued. It is a grace that “keeps hearts open and faithful”. When hearts become hardened, he explained, one forgets about the grace of salvation and gratuitousness and we are led to quarrel, war and selfishness. Indeed, he stressed God’s greatest message of salvation is compassion for us, as the Gospel often repeats. “Jesus is the compassion of the Father”, he concluded, and he is the “slap to every hardness of heart”.

We shall be judged on our compassion for others at the Last Judgement, not on our ideologies. Humility, the memory of our roots and our salvation will help us to be compassionate. Because we all have something that is hardened within our hearts, we should ask the Lord to give us a righteous and sincere heart. The Pope concluded by reminding the faithful that the Lord cannot enter hardened and ideological hearts but open and compassionate like his.
Accepting Jesus even to the Cross

Reflecting on the day's Gospel on Thursday, 20 February, Pope Francis urged his listeners to accept Jesus.

He identified three steps to help us learn who Jesus truly is: to know, to witness and to accept the path. The power of God and of the Holy Spirit is as we cannot do this on our own.

To accept Jesus means to ask ourselves what is the purpose of Jesus’ life? Why did he come?

Mass at the Domus Sanctae Marthae

During his holy Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday, 25 February, the Holy Father commented on the day’s Gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples that “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” When we make compromises in trying to please and protect others, we absorb the spirit of the devil that “evil enters into the devil and it is through this envy that “evil enters into the world.”

“Witnessing to Jesus is bearing witness to his death, his Resurrection”, the Holy Father pointed out. It does not mean simply proclaiming: “You are God” and stopping there. It means accepting the path that the Father chose for him: humiliation. If we do not accept this path, he added, then we are not disciples of Jesus and “we deserve what Jesus said to Peter: ‘Get behind me, Satan’.”

Scaffolding erected for the restoration of the drum

Saint Peter’s majestic dome

The restoration of Saint Peter’s grand dome, in particular the drum, began on 2 September 2009 with the assembly of the scaffolding. The drum of Saint Peter’s is characterized by the presence of sixteen buttresses that punctuate the entire architectural surface.

This intervention is divided into two large lots, each of which includes eight sectors of the drum “explains” the architect. The restoration commenced with the front part of the building — the one that looks onto the square —, so it could be the first to be dismantled and permit pilgrims and visitors to “appreciate the main façade of the dome in its newfound integrity and in its original whiteness”.

The project will require four years of work in the total twenty-two months. The first two years will be dedicated to the first lot, which includes eight panels and eight buttresses. The second lot, to fix the eight buttresses and eight panels, will also require two years. The two lots combined, Virgilio notes, and the restoration of all the external elevations of the Basilica will then have been completed. In fact, the façade was restored to coincide with the Jubilee in 2000.

In 2007, the restoration of the external elevations began, and successively the two smaller domes — the Gregorian and the Clementine —, “for a total area of over 35,000 square meters”. This present intervention, explains Virgilio, “is divided into two large parts: the first part concerns the restoration of the drum, the second part, to fix the eight buttresses and eight panels, will require two years. The two lots combined, Virgilio notes, and the restoration of all the external elevations of the Basilica will then have been completed. In fact, the façade was restored to coincide with the Jubilee in 2000. In 2007, the restoration of the external elevations began, and successively the two smaller domes — the Gregorian and the Clementine —, “for a total area of over 35,000 square meters”. This present intervention, explains Virgilio, “is divided into two large parts: the first part concerns the restoration of the drum, the second part, to fix the eight buttresses and eight panels, will require two years. The two lots combined, Virgilio notes, and the restoration of all the external elevations of the Basilica will then have been completed. In fact, the façade was restored to coincide with the Jubilee in 2000.

To get an idea of the total size of the surface concerned, the drum “develops over a total area of 8,900 square meters of travertine, including the architectural overhangs and the surface of the sixteen buttresses, while the protruding part of the drum develops over a surface of 440 square meters of exposed brick masonry”. The overall height of the drum is 36.65 meters, the circum- ference of the columns of the buttresses is 168 meters, which at the base of the window is 153 meters. These imposing dimensions for these interventions are therefore significant and a continuation of the previous restoration of the side elevations of the Basilica itself and the Gregorian and Clementine domes, which began in April 2007. The smaller domes, the architect points out, are “almost identical in shape and surface, and have a surface of 1,345 square meters each”.

This project was founded and developed with the intention of satisfying both aesthetic and functional needs. In fact, if one of the objectives was “to restore the ancient splendor to the complex architectural structure of the Basilica, on the other hand there is a need to restore the mechanical characteristics of efficiency and safety of the stone which makes up the architectural elements”. In order to better understand the size of the building site and the complexity of the entire mechanism that was set in motion for a successful outcome, it should be considered that “the overall surface area of the drum is more than two thousand square meters larger than the entire façade of the Basilica, which develops over a total surface area of seven thousand square meters of travertine”. In particular, it is necessary to assemble an imposing metal scaffolding to carry out the restoration work.

This scaffolding, “from the floor level of the terrace, which is about 43 meters above the ground floor of the Basilica, will make it possible to reach the highest level of the building to be restored which is about 80 meters up, and corresponds to the so-called “gelo dei monti” [four of the mountains] above the attic of the dome’s drum”.

From a technical point of view, Virgilio continues, the project includes diagnostic investigations and the realization of a survey carried out with a laser-scanner. This survey “serves to better understand the complexity of the stone façade, signed by Michelangelo and Giacomo della Porta.” This elaboration “summarizes all the information regarding the state of conservation of the materials and the different types of degradation, physical and mechanical deterioration and alteration, that are present on the stone”. In addition, on the scaffolding will be mounted around Saint Peter’s majestic building the complex architectural structure de- formed by the passage of time, such as the effects that the passage of time has produced on the material to what happened on the day the ashlars were laid”. For Saint Peter’s, “the ‘cleaning of the stone façade represents the principal aim of the restoration work’; the calibrated choice of the “degree it is cleaned”, without “completely whitening the stone surface, so as to preserve the precious ‘historical patina’ on the building, [and which] constitutes the highpoint of the whole intervention, because from it the ‘new look’ will appear to our eyes once the restoration is completed”.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6
At the Angelus on Sunday, 22 March, Pope Francis thanked priests, who at this time of pandemic, are not behaving like the character Don Abbondio from The Betrothed, but rather are trying to be close to the people in thousands of ways, through their creativity. His words, which were live streamed from the Library of the Apostolic Palace, were a reflection on the Gospel passage of John on the Samaritan woman. The following is a translation of the Pope’s remarks which he delivered in Italian.

Thank you to priests who are close to the people

Marian prayer from the Library of the Vatican Apostolic Palace

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good Morning!

At this moment the Mass for the sick, doctors, nurses and volunteers, that is being celebrated by the Archbishop of Milan, Don Mario Delpini, is coming to an end. The Archbishops’s Archepiscopal see is close to God in prayer.

Last week’s photograph of him alone on the roof of the Duomo, praying to Our Lady comes to mind. I would also like to thank all the priests, the creativity of priests. A lot of news of this creativity has been reaching me from the Region of Lombardy. It is true that Lombardy has been highly affected. There are priests who think of thousands of ways to be close to the people, so that the people do not feel abandoned; priests with apostolic zeal, who have fully understood that during this time of pandemic, one must not be like “Don Abbondio” (character from The Betrothed). Many thanks to you priests.

The Gospel passage from today, the Third Sunday of Lent, tells us of Jesus’ meeting with a Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:5-42). He is on a journey with his disciples and takes a break near a well in Samaria. The Samaritans were considered heretics by the Jews, and were very much despised as second-class citizens. Jesus is tired, thirsty. A woman arrives to draw water and he says to her: “Give me a drink” (v. 7). Breaking every barrier, he begins a dialogue in which he reveals to the woman the mystery of living water, that is, of the Holy Spirit, God’s gift. Indeed, in response to the woman’s surprised reaction, Jesus says: “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (v. 10).

Water is the focus of this dialogue. On the one hand, water is an essential element that slakes the body’s thirst and sustains life. On the other, water is a symbol of divine grace that gives eternal life. In the biblical tradition, God is the source of living water: as it is said in Psalms and in the Prophets: distancing oneself from God, the source of living water, and from his Law, leads to the worst drought. This is the experience of the People of Israel in the desert. During their long journey to freedom, as they were dying of thirst, they cried out against Moses and against God because there was no water. Thus, God willed Moses to make water flow from a rock, as a sign of the Providence of God, accompanying his people and giving them life (cf. Ex 17:1-7). The Apostle Paul, too, interprets that rock as a symbol of Christ. He says: “And that rock was Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 10:4). It is the mysterious figure of his presence in the midst of the People of God on their journey. Christ, in fact, is the Temple from which, according to the prophets, flows the Holy Spirit, the living water which purifies and gives life. Whoever thirsts for salvation can draw freely from Jesus, and the Spirit will become a wellspring of full and eternal life in him/her. The promise of living water that Jesus made to the Samaritan woman becomes a reality in his Passion: from his pierced side flowed “blood and water” (Jn 19:34). Christ, the Lamb, immolated and risen, is the wellspring from which flows the Holy Spirit who remits sins and regenerates new life.

This gift is also the source of witness. Like the Samaritan woman, whoever personally encounters the living Jesus feels the need to talk about him to others, so that everyone might reach the point of proclaiming that Jesus “is truly the saviour of the world” (Jn 4:42), as the woman’s fellow townsmen later said. Generated to new life through Baptism, we too are called to witness the life and hope that are within us. If our quest and our thirst are thoroughly quenched in Christ, we will manifest that salvation is not found in the “things” of this world, which ultimately produce drought, but in he who has loved us and will always love us, Jesus, our Saviour, in the living water, that he offers us.

May Mary, Most Holy, help us nourish a desire for Christ, font of living water, the only one who can satisfy the thirst for life and love that we bear in our hearts.

After the Angelus, the Holy Father continued:

Dear brothers and sisters, Saint Peter’s Square is closed during these days. Therefore, my greetings go directly to you who are connected through the means of communications. In this time of pandemic in which we find ourselves living more or less isolated, we are invited to rediscover and deepen the value of communion that unites all members of the Church. United to Christ we are never alone, but rather, we form one sole Body, with him is the head. It is a union that is nourished by prayer and by spiritual communion in the Eucharist, a practice that is highly recommended when it is not possible to receive the Sacrament. I say this to everyone, especially to those who live alone.

I renew my closeness to all the sick and those caring for them. This extends to all the caregivers and volunteers who help those who cannot leave their homes, and those who are meeting the needs of the poorest and the homeless.

Thank you so much for all the effort that each of you is making to help during this difficult time. May the Lord bless you. May Our Lady keep you, and please do not forget to pray for me. Have a nice Sunday. Enjoy your lunch! Thank you.