



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

Thursday, 2 March 2017

[Multimedia]

“Lord, ‘increase our faith!’” (Lk 17:5). This cry sprung up spontaneously from the disciples as the Lord spoke to them of mercy and told them that they must forgive seventy times seven times. Let us make this cry our own — “increase our faith!” — as we begin this conversation. Let us ask this in the simple words of the *Catechism*, where we read: “To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the Word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be ‘working through charity,’ abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church” (n. 162).

I find it helpful to lean on three firm points: *memory*, *hope*, and *the discernment of the moment*. Memory, as the *Catechism* says, is rooted in the faith of the Church, the faith of our forefathers; hope sustains faith; and, as for the discernment of the moment, I rely on it whenever I act so that I can put into practice the “faith that works through charity”.

I would formulate these points in this way:

— I avail myself of a promise

— it is always important to *remember* the promise of the Lord who has set me on my journey.

— I am on the journey — I have *hope*: hope shows me the horizon; it guides me; it is both my guiding star and my sustenance; it is the anchor that binds me to Christ.

— And, each time I reach a crossroads, I must *discern* a concrete good, a step forward in the love I am called to give and in the way the Lord wants me to give it.

Remembering graces received in the past gives our faith the solidity of the incarnation; it places it within history, the history of the faith of our forefathers, who “died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar” (Heb 11:13).(1) Thus, “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”, let us look in the direction that they look and keep “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2).

Hope, for its part, is what opens faith to the surprises God has in store for us. Our God is always bigger than anything we can think of or imagine Him to be; of everything that belongs to Him and His way of acting in history. The openness of hope gives our faith freshness and a clear horizon. It is not the opening of a chimerical imagination that projects our fantasies and selfish desires, but rather an opening that provokes us to see the debasement of Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Paradoxically, the hope that attracts does not place before us an image of the transfigured Lord, but rather an image of shame. “I will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). It is the Lord’s total self-giving on the cross that attracts us because it reveals the possibility of being more authentic. It is the humiliation of one who does not hoard God’s promises for himself but, like a true testator, passes on the torch of the inheritance to His sons: “For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established” (Heb 9:16).

Finally, *discernment* is that which makes faith concrete; that which makes faith work through love (cf. Gal 5:6), that which permits us to give credible testimony: “I, by my works, will show you my faith” (Jas 2:18). Discernment, above all, looks to what is pleasing to our Father, “who sees in secret” (Mt 6:4, 6) and does not look at models of perfection according to cultural paradigms. Discernment is “of the moment” because, like Mary at Cana, it is attentive to the good of one’s neighbour so that the Lord can anticipate “his hour”; the Lord who “skips” the Sabbath so He can put a paralyzed man back on his feet. The discernment of the opportune moment (*kairos*) is fundamentally rich in memory and hope: by remembering with love, it directs our gaze with clarity to that which better guides us to the Promise.

And that which better guides me is always tied to the cross: to the giving up of my will; to the interior drama of “not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt 26:39) which places me in the hands of the Father, and does so in a way that it is He who guides my life.

Growing in faith

I would like to return for a moment to the theme of “growth”. If you go back and attentively read *Evangelii Gaudium* — a programmatic document — you will see that it always speaks of “growth” and “maturation” both in faith and love, in solidarity and in the understanding of the Word.(2)

Evangelii Gaudium has a positive dynamic. “The Lord’s missionary mandate includes a call to growth in faith: ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Mt 28:20). Hence it is clear that the first proclamation also calls for ongoing formation and maturation” (n. 160).

This is what I would emphasize: a journey of formation and maturation in faith. Taking this seriously means “it would not be right to see this call to growth exclusively or primarily in terms of doctrinal formation” (n. 161). Growth in faith takes place by encountering the Lord over the course of one’s life. These encounters are to be kept in memory as a treasure; they constitute a living faith within a personal history of salvation.

Our experience of these encounters is that of incomplete fullness. Incomplete, because we have to keep walking; full, because in all things human and divine, the whole is found in each individual part.(3) This continual maturation pertains as much to the disciple as to the missionary, as much to the seminarian as to the priest or bishop. In short, it is that virtuous circle referred to in the Aparecida Document which coined the term “missionary disciples”.

The firm point of the Cross

When I speak of a firm point or a “pivot point”, the most helpful image is that of a basketball player who plants his foot firmly on the court to make a pivot point as he maneuvers his body to protect the basketball, to find someone to pass to, or to make a break and run for the basket. For us, that pivot foot planted firmly on the court is the Cross of Christ. There is a phrase inscribed on the wall of the chapel at the San Miguel House for Spiritual Exercises in Buenos Aires that says: “The Cross stays firmly planted while the world turns” (*Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*), the motto of Saint Bruno and the Carthusians. After recognizing this, one moves, protecting the ball, hoping to make a basket, looking for someone to pass to.

Faith — progress and growth in faith — is always rooted in the Cross: “it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe”; that is, the proclamation of “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:21-23). Therefore, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”, we live and move by holding firm to our memories — remembering the “great cloud of witnesses” — while we “run with perseverance the race that is set before us”, discerning the temptations against faith, “so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (cf. Heb 12:1-3).

A Deuteronomic memory

In *Evangelii Gaudium* I wanted to emphasize the dimension of faith we call “Deuteronomic”, analogous to the memory of the people of Israel: “The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: ‘It was about four o’clock in the afternoon’ (Jn

1:39)” (n. 13). Some in that “‘great cloud of witnesses’ ... we recall with great joy: ‘Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God’ (Heb 13:7). Some of them were ordinary people who were close to us and introduced us to the life of faith: ‘I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice’ (2 Tim 1:5). The believer is essentially ‘one who remembers’” (*ibid.*).

Faith is fed and nourished by memory, the memory of the Covenant that the Lord made with us. He is the God of our fathers and grandfathers. He is not a “last-minute God” or a God with no family history, or a God who, in responding to every new paradigm, has to throw out the precedents because they are old and ridiculous. A family history is never a “fleeting fashion”. The clothing and hats of our grandparents might look old, and the photographs faded, but the affection and courage of our ancestors, who spent themselves so that we could exist and have what we have, are a flame that burns in every noble heart.

Let us never forget that progressing in faith is never merely a sheer act of the will to believe more strongly from now on; it is also an exercise of returning with our memory to fundamental graces. It is possible to “progress by going backwards”, by searching out once again the treasures and experiences that have been forgotten but which nevertheless very often contain keys for understanding the present. This is truly a “revolutionary” thing: to go back to our roots. The clearer our memory of the past, the clearer the future appears to us, because in this way we can see the road that is really new and distinguish it from the roads that have already been taken but that led us nowhere. Faith increases by remembering, by connecting things with a history that has really been lived by our fathers and all the People of God: the entire Church.

For this reason, the Eucharist is the Memorial of our faith, that which situates us again and again each day in the fundamental event of our salvation; in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord, the centre and pivot point of our faith. To return constantly to this Memorial — to actualize it in the Sacrament that sustains us throughout life — this is what it means to progress in faith. As Saint Albert Hurtado said: “The Mass is my life and my life is a continual Mass”.(4)

If I want to go into the wellspring of memory, it always helps me to reread a passage from the prophet Jeremiah and another from Hosea in which they speak to us of how the Lord remembers his People. For Jeremiah, the Lord remembers his People as a beloved bride of his youth, who later was unfaithful to him: “I remember” — He says to Israel — “the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness.... Israel was holy to the Lord” (Jer 2:2-3).

The Lord reprimands his people for their infidelity, which is shown in a poor choice: “for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.... But you said, ‘It is hopeless, for I have loved strangers and after them I will go’” (2:13, 25).

For Hosea, the Lord's memory of his People is that of a pampered son who then turns ungrateful: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me ... burning incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.... My people are bent on turning away from me" (11:1-4, 7). Today, just as then, the ingratitude of the shepherds affects the poorest of the faithful people, who remain at the mercy of strangers and idolaters.

Hope not only for the future

Faith is sustained and given room to progress through hope. Hope is still anchored in Christ, in a transcendent future, of which the temporal future — considered in a chronologically linear way — is only an expression. Hope invigorates the backwards glance of faith, leading us to find new things in the past — in the treasure of our memory — because one meets the same God one hopes to meet in the future. Moreover, hope extends to the outermost boundaries, in all the expanse and depth of the immediate and daily present, and it sees new possibilities in one's neighbour and in what can be done in the here and now. Hope is knowing how to see — in the face of the poor whom we encounter every day — the same Lord who will come again one day to judge us according to the criteria we read in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew: "As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (v. 40).

In this way, faith progresses existentially by believing in the transcendent "impulse" that moves — is active and operative — toward the future, but also toward the past in all the breadth of the present moment. This is how we can interpret the passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians where he says that what really counts is "faith working through love" (5:6): a charity that, when moved by memory, confesses, with praise and joy, that it has received love; a charity that, when it looks on high, confesses its desire to open its heart to the fullness of the greatest Good; these two confessions of a faith rich in gratitude and hope translate into action in the present: faith confesses itself in practice, by going out of itself, by transcending itself in adoration and service.

Discernment of the moment

In this way, we see that faith, invigorated by the hope of discovering Christ in the depth of the present moment, is tied to discernment. It is fundamental to discernment to take a step back, just like when we step back for a moment to get a better look at the panorama. There is always a temptation to act on our "first impulse", making us want to resolve a question or problem immediately. In this sense, I believe there is a vital and powerful initial discernment: namely, not to allow ourselves to be deceived by the force of evil, but rather to look at the victory of the Cross of Christ in every human situation. In this regard, I would like to reread with you an entire section of *Evangelii Gaudium*, because it will help us discern the insidious temptation of sterile pessimism:

“One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’. Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents. While painfully aware of our own frailties, we have to march on without giving in, keeping in mind what the Lord said to Saint Paul: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9). Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil. The evil spirit of defeatism is brother to the temptation to separate, before its time, the wheat from the weeds; it is the fruit of an anxious and self-centred lack of trust ... in these situations we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink. At times, this becomes a heavy cross, but it was from the cross, from his pierced side, that our Lord gave himself to us as a source of living water. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!” (85-86).

An expression such as “let us not allow ourselves to be robbed...” reminds me of Saint Ignatius’ rules for discernment; Saint Ignatius customarily represents the devil as a thief. He says that the devil acts as a captain who attacks our weakest points in order to win and take from us what he wants (*Spiritual Exercises*, 327). In our case, today, I believe he is looking to rob us of joy — as if he wants to rob us of the present moment (5) — and of hope — of going out, of walking — which are the graces for which I ask most, and for which I ask for prayer for the Church in this time.

At this point, it is important to take another step forward and say that faith progresses when, in the present moment, we discern how to concretize love in the good that is possible as measured by the good of the other. The first good of the other is the power to grow in faith. The shared plea of the disciples — “increase our faith!” (Lk 17:6) — implies an understanding of faith as a common good. We also need to consider that to seek the good of the other involves a risk. As we read in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “A missionary heart is aware ... that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (45).

This discernment entails an implicit act of faith in Christ as present in the poorest, the lowliest, the lost sheep, the demanding friend. Christ is present in those who come to meet us: either making themselves seen, like Zacchaeus or the sinful woman who enters the room with a vase of perfume; or almost unnoticed, like the woman with a haemorrhage. Christ is also present in those we run up to meet, feeling compassion for them as we see them from afar lying on the side of the road. To believe that Christ is there, to discern the best way to make a small step toward Him for the good of that person: this is how faith grows. Just like praising Him is progress in faith and desiring more of Him is progress in faith.

It would be good for us to pause for a moment and reflect on this idea of the progress in faith that occurs through the discernment of the moment. Progress in faith within the framework of memory and hope is more developed; whereas this firm point of discernment, perhaps less so. It could

even seem that where faith is, there is no need for discernment: one believes, and that is enough. But this is dangerous, especially if in the place of renewed acts of faith in a Person — in Christ our Lord —, which have all the dynamism we have already considered, one substitutes merely intellectual acts of faith, the dynamism of which is exhausted in the elaboration of abstract reflections and formulas. Conceptual formulation is a necessary moment in thought, just as choosing a means of transportation is necessary to reach a destination. But faith is not exhausted in abstract formulas, nor charity in a particular good. Rather, it is constitutive of faith and charity that they grow and progress by reaching a greater level of trust and the desire for a greater common good. It is constitutive of faith to be “operative”, active, just as it is for charity. And the touchstone is discernment. Faith, in fact, can fossilize by protecting the love it has received, turning it into a museum piece. Faith can also vaporize into a projection of desired love, turning it into a virtual object that exists only on a utopic island. The discernment of real, concrete love is possible in the present moment as it works for the good of someone most dramatically in need, and this makes faith active, creative, and effective.

Rome, 2 March 2017

(1) Cf. *Address to Pontifical Representatives*, 21 June 2013.

(2) Cf. nn. 160, 161, 164, 190.

(3) Cf. J.M. Bergoglio, *Message at the Mass for Education*, Easter 2008.

(4) *Un fuego que enciende otros fuegos*, Santiago de Chile, 2004, 69-70; cf. *Aparecida Document*, 191.

(5) See also *Spiritual Exercises* 333: “Fifth rule. We ought to note well the course of the thoughts, and if the beginning, middle and end is all good, inclined to all good, it is a sign of the good Angel; but if in the course of the thoughts which he brings it ends in something bad, of a distracting tendency, or less good than what the soul had previously proposed to do, or if it weakens it or disquiets or disturbs the soul, taking away its peace, tranquillity and quiet, which it had before, it is a clear sign that it proceeds from the evil spirit, enemy of our profit and eternal salvation”.
