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Apostolic Trip of Pope Francis to Panama for the 34th World Youth Day (23-28 January 2019) – Penitential Liturgy with young detainees in Pacora

Penitential Liturgy with young detainees in Pacora

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass in private in the apostolic nunciature, in the presence of faithful and collaborators of the archdiocese of Panama, the Holy Father Francis went to the “*Las Esclavas*” College, located near the nunciature, where he met privately with a group of 450 young Cuban pilgrims to the WYD. The Pope arrived at the College at the end of Mass, imparted his blessing and addressed a brief greeting to those present. The meeting was attended not only by the young people, but also by two Cuban bishops. At the end, he transferred by car to the *Centro de Cumplimiento de Menores Las Garzas de Pacora*, a detention centre for the young.

Upon arrival the Pope was received by the archbishop of Panama, H.E. Msgr. José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta, and by the director of the Centre, Ms. Emma Alba Tejada. Then, at 10.30 local time (16.30 in Rome), the penitential liturgy with the young detainees took place.

After the initial hymn and a brief testimony from one of the young inmates, the penitential liturgy took place. Then, following the reading of a brief Gospel passage, the Pope pronounced the homily.

This was followed by individual confessions and absolutions of twelve young people and, after the concluding blessing from the Holy Father and a brief greeting of thanks from the director of the Centre, the exchange of gifts took place.

After bidding farewell to the thirty young detainees, Pope Francis then departed for Marcos A. Gelabert Airport on board a military helicopter. Upon arrival he returned to the apostolic nunciature.

The following is the homily pronounced by the Pope during the penitential liturgy:

Homily of the Holy Father

“He receives sinners and eats with them”. We just heard this in the Gospel reading (*Lk 15:2*). They are the words muttered by some of the Pharisees and scribes, doctors of the law, who were greatly upset and scandalized by the way Jesus was behaving.

With those words, they tried to discredit and dismiss Jesus in the eyes of everyone. But all they managed to do was point out one of his most ordinary, most distinctive, most beautiful ways of relating to others: “He receives sinners and eats with them”. Now we are all sinners, all of us, and for that reason Jesus receives with care all of us who are here, and if anyone does not feel that they are sinners – among all of us who are here – they should know that Jesus is not going to receive them, and they would miss out on the best part.

Jesus is not afraid to approach those who, for countless reasons, were the object of social hatred, like the publicans – we know that tax collectors grew rich by exploiting their own people and they caused great resentment – or those on the receiving end of social hatred because they had made an error in their lives, because of their errors and mistakes, some fault, and now they were called sinners. Jesus does this because he knows that in heaven there is more joy for a single one of those who make mistakes, for a single converted sinner, than for ninety-nine righteous people who remain good (*Lk 15:7*).

And whereas these people were content to grumble or complain because Jesus was meeting people who were marked by some kind of social error, some sin, and closed the doors on conversion, on dialogue with him – Jesus approaches and engages, Jesus puts his reputation at risk. He asks us, as he always does, to lift our eyes to a horizon that can renew our life, that can renew our history. All of us, all have a horizon. All of us. Someone may say: “I do not have one”. Open the window and you will find it, open the window of love which is Jesus and you will find him. We all have a horizon. They are two very different, contrasting approaches, Jesus’ one, and that of the doctors of the law. A sterile, fruitless approach – that of complaining and gossip, the person who is always speaking badly about others and is self-righteous – and another, one that invites us to change and to conversion, which is the Lord’s approach, a new life as you have just said a short while ago [turning to the young man who gave testimony].

The approach of complaining and of gossip

Now this is not something from a long time ago, it is current. Many people do not tolerate this attitude of Jesus; they don’t like it. First by complaining under their breath and then by shouting, they make known their displeasure, seeking to discredit Jesus’ way of acting and that of all those who are with him. They do not accept and they reject this option of drawing near to others and giving them another chance. These people condemn once and for all, they discredit once and for all and forget that in God’s eyes they are disqualified and need tenderness, need love and understanding, but do not wish to accept it. Where people’s lives are concerned, it seems easier to attach signs and labels that petrify and stigmatize not only people’s past but also their present and future. We put labels on people: “this one is like that”, “this one did that thing, and that’s it”, and he has to bear this for the rest of his days. That’s how people are who mutter – the gossips – they are like this. And labels ultimately serve only to divide: good people over here, and bad ones over there; the righteous over here and sinners over there. And this Jesus does not accept; this is the culture of the adjective; we delight in “adjectivizing” people, it gives us delight: “What is your name? My name is ‘good’”. No, that is an adjective. “What is your name?” Go to the person’s name: Who are you? What do you do? What dreams do you have? What does your heart feel? Gossips are not interested in this; they are quickly looking for a label to knock someone down off their pedestal. The culture of the adjective which discredits people. Think about that so as not to fall into what society so easily offers us.

This attitude spoils everything, because it erects an invisible wall that makes people think that, if we marginalize, separate and isolate others, all our problems will magically be solved. When a society or community allows this, and does nothing more than complain, gossip and backbite, it enters into a vicious circle of division, blame and

condemnation. Strange that these people who do not accept Jesus, and what Jesus is teaching us, are people who are always on bad terms with each other, among those who call themselves righteous. And what's more, it is an attitude of discrimination and exclusion, of confrontation leading people to say irresponsibly, like Caiaphas: "It is better that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (*Jn 11:50*). Better that they should all be kept over there, so that they will not give trouble; we want to live in peace. This is hard-hearted, and Jesus had to confront this; and we are also confronted with this today. Normally the thread is cut at the thinnest part: that of the poor and the defenceless. And it is they who suffer the most from this social disapproval that does allow them to raise themselves up.

How painful it is to see a society concentrate its energies more on complaining and backbiting than on fighting tirelessly to create opportunities and change.

The approach of conversion: the other approach

The Gospel, on the other hand, is completely characterized by this other approach, which is nothing more or less than that of God's own heart. God never chases you away, God never chases anyone away; God says to you: "Come". God waits for you and embraces you, and if you do not know the way, he is going to show you, as this shepherd did with the sheep. The other approach, however, excludes. The Lord wants to celebrate when he sees his children returning home (*Lk 15:11-31*). And Jesus testified to this by showing to the very end the merciful love of the Father. We have a Father – you said it yourself – I enjoyed your testimony: we have a Father. I have a Father who loves me, a beautiful thing. A love, Jesus' love, that has no time for complaining, but seeks to break the circle of useless, needless, cold and sterile criticism. "I give you thanks, Lord – said that doctor of the law – that I am not like that one, I am not like him. The ones who believe they have a soul ten times purified in the illusion of a sterile life that is no good for anything. I once heard a country farmer saying something that struck me: "What is the purest water? Yes, distilled water", he said; "You know, Father, that when I drink it, it has no flavour at all". This is how life is for those who criticize and gossip and separate themselves from others: they feel so pure, so sterile, that they have no flavour at all; they are incapable of inviting someone; they live to take care of themselves, to have cosmetic surgery done on their souls and not to hold out their hand to others and help them to grow, which is what Jesus does; he accepts the complexity of life and of every situation. The love of Jesus, the love of God, the love of God our Father – as you said to us – is a love that initiates a process capable of inventing ways, offering means for integration and transformation, healing, forgiveness and salvation. By eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus shatters the mentality that separates, that excludes, that isolates, that falsely separates "the good and the bad". He does not do this by decree, or simply with good intentions, or with slogans or sentimentality. How does Jesus do it? By creating bonds, relationships capable of enabling new processes; investing in and celebrating every possible step forward. That's why Jesus does not say to Matthew when he converts – you will see it in the Gospel: "Well, this is good, I congratulate you, come with me". No, he says to him: "Let us celebrate in your home", and he invites all his friends, who with Matthew had been condemned by the society, to celebrate. The gossipmonger, the one who separates, does not know how to celebrate because he has an embittered heart.

Creating relationships, celebrating. This is what Jesus does, and that way he breaks with another form of complaining, one even harder to detect, one that "stifles dreams" because it keeps whispering: "you can't do it, you can't do it". How many times you have heard this: "you can't do it". Watch out! This is like a woodworm that eats you from the inside out. Watch out when you feel "you can't do it", give yourself a slap: "Yes, I can and I will show you". The whisper, the interior whisper that haunts those who repent of their sin and acknowledge their mistakes, but don't think that they can change. And this happens when they think that those who are born publicans will always die publicans; and that is not true. The Gospel tell us quite the opposite. Eleven of the twelve disciples were bad sinners, because they committed the worst sin: they abandoned their Master, others disowned him, others ran far away. The Apostles betrayed him, and Jesus went to look for them one by one, and they are the ones who changed the whole world. It did not occur to any of them to say: "you can't do it", because having seen Jesus' love after their betrayal, "I am going to be able to do it, because you give me the strength". Watch out for the "you-can't-do-it" woodworm, be very careful.

Friends, each of us is much more than our labels which people attach to us; each is much more than the adjectives that they want to give us, each is much more than the condemnation foisted on us. And that is what Jesus teaches us and asks us to believe. Jesus' approach challenges us to ask and seek help when setting out on the path of improvement. There are times when complaining seems to have the upper hand, but don't believe it, don't listen to it. Seek out and listen to the voices that encourage you to look ahead, not those that pull you down. Listen to the voices that open the window for you and let you see the horizon: "Yes, but it's far off". "But you can do it. Focus on it carefully and you will be able to do it". And every time the woodworm comes with "you can't do it", answer it from within: "I can do it", and focus on the horizon.

The joy and hope of every Christian – of all of us, and the Pope too – comes from having experienced this approach of God, who looks at us and says, "You are part of my family and I cannot leave you at the mercy of the elements"; this is what God says to each one of us, because God is Father – you said it yourself: "You are part of my family and I am not going to leave you to the mercy of the elements, I am not going to leave you lying in the ditch, no, I cannot lose you along the way – God says to us, to each of us, by name and surname – I am here at your side". Here? Yes, Lord. It is that feeling that you, Luis, described at those times when it seemed it was all over, yet something said: "No! It is not all over", because you have a bigger purpose that lets you see that God our Father is always with us. He gives us people with whom we can walk, people to help us achieve new goals.

So Jesus turns complaining into celebration, and tells us: "Rejoice with me, we are going to celebrate!" In the parable of the prodigal son – I like a translation I found once – it says that the father said, when he saw his son who had returned home: "We are going to celebrate", and then the feast began. And one translation said: "And then the dance began". The joy, the joy with which God receives us, with the Father's embrace; the dance began.

Brothers and sisters: You are part of the family; you have a lot to share with others. Help us to discern how best to live and to accompany one another along the path of change that we, as a family, all need.

A society grows sick when it is unable to celebrate change in its sons and daughters. A community grows sick when it lives off relentless, negative and heartless complaining, gossip. But a society is fruitful when it is able to generate processes of inclusion and integration, of caring and trying to create opportunities and alternatives that can offer new possibilities to the young, to build a future through community, education and employment. Such a community is healthy. Even though it may feel the frustration of not knowing how to do so, it does not give up, it keeps trying. We all have to help each other to learn, as a community, to find these ways, to try again and again. It is a covenant that we have to encourage one another to keep: you, young men and women, those responsible for your custody and the authorities of the Centre and the Ministry, and all your families, as well as your pastoral assistants. Keep fighting, all of you – but not among yourselves, please – fighting for what? – to seek and find the paths of integration and transformation. And this the Lord blesses, this the Lord sustains and this the Lord accompanies.

Shortly we will continue with the penitential service, where we will all be able to experience the Lord's gaze, which never looks at adjectives, but looks at a name, looks into our eyes, looks at our heart; he does not look at labels and condemnation, but at his sons and daughters. That is God's approach, his way of seeing things, which rejects exclusion and gives us the strength to build the covenants needed to help us all to reject complaining: those fraternal covenants that enable our lives to be a constant invitation to the joy of salvation, to the joy of keeping a horizon open before us, to the joy of the son's feast. Let us go this way. Thank you.
