
Pope at audience: “Evangelizing is not the same as proselytizing”

“When Christian life loses sight of the horizon of proclamation, it grows sick: it closes in on itself, becomes self-referential, it becomes atrophied. Without apostolic zeal, faith withers”, the Pope said today in the Paul VI Hall, where he began a new series of catecheses “dedicated to an urgent and decisive theme for Christian life: the passion for evangelisation, that is, apostolic zeal.” “Mission is the oxygen of Christian life: it invigorates and purifies it”, Francis remarked. The Holy Father reminded the faithful that “the community of Jesus' disciples is in fact born apostolic, born missionary, not proselytizing”. “Being missionary, being apostolic, evangelizing, is not the same as proselytizing” The Holy Spirit moulds the Church outwardly “so that it is not closed in on itself, but turned outward, a contagious witness of Jesus – the faith is also contagious – reaching out to radiate His light to the ends of the earth”, Francis pointed out. “It can happen, however, that the apostolic ardour, the desire to reach others with the good news of the Gospel, “diminishes, becomes tepid, sometimes it seems to be eclipsed”: there are ‘closed-off’ Christians, they don’t think of others.” At the end of the audience the Pope sent out yet another appeal not to forget the “martyred Ukraine”, which is facing “harsh sufferings”, and to pray for peace in that “dear country.”

“Jesus does not stop at the adjective – Jesus always seeks out the noun”,

Francis said referring to the calling of Matthew, at the heart of today’s general audience: “Jesus goes to the person, to the heart. ‘This is a person, this is a man, this is a woman.’ Jesus goes to the subject, the noun, never the adjective, He leaves aside the adjectives.” “Few people saw Matthew as he was”, the Pope pointed out. “They knew him as the one who was ‘sitting at the tax booth’. He was, in fact, a tax collector: that is, someone who collected taxes on behalf of the Roman empire that occupied Palestine. In other words, he was a collaborator, a traitor to the people. We can imagine the contempt the people felt for him: he was a “publican,” as they were called.” “But in the eyes of Jesus, Matthew is a man, with both his miseries and his greatness”, Francis remarked: “And while there is distance between Matthew and his people, Jesus draws near to Him, because every man is loved by God. ‘Even this wretch?’ Yes, even this wretch. Indeed, the Gospel says He came for this very wretch: ‘I have come for sinners, not for the righteous.” “This gaze of Jesus is really beautiful. It sees the other, whoever he may be, as the recipient of love, is the beginning of the evangelising passion”, the Pope said: “Everything starts from this gaze, which we learn from Jesus.” We can ask ourselves: how do we look upon others?” Francis called on the faithful: “How often do we see their faults and not their needs; how often do we label people according to what they do or what they think! Even as Christians we say to ourselves: is he one of us or not? And Christians are called to do as Christ did, **looking like Him especially at the so-called ‘distant ones.’** As we read in the Gospel, “the first thing Jesus does is to detach Matthew from power: from sitting to receive others, He sets him in motion towards others. He makes him leave a position of supremacy in order to put him on an equal footing with his brothers and sisters and open to him the horizons of service.” “This is what Christ does, and this is fundamental for Christians”, Francis went on: “do we disciples of Jesus, we Church, sit around waiting for people to come, or do we know how to get up, to set out with others, to seek others?”

“Saying, ‘But let them come to me, I am here, let them come,’ is a non-Christian position”,

the Pope said in unscripted remarks: “No, you go to seek them out, you take the first step.” “**We do not have to wait until we are perfect** and have come a long way following Jesus to bear witness to Him, no. Our proclamation begins today, there where we live”, the final exhortation: “And it does not begin by trying to convince others, no, not to convince: by bearing every day to the beauty of the Love that has looked upon us and lifted us up.” “And it is this beauty, communicating this beauty that

will convince people – not communicating ourselves but the Lord Himself”, Francis pointed out:

“We are the ones who proclaim the Lord, we don’t proclaim ourselves, we don’t proclaim a political party, an ideology”,

the Pope continued off text.

“For as Pope Benedict taught us, ‘The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by ‘attraction’”,

His Holiness said quoting from his predecessor. “When you see Christians proselytising, making a list of people to come... these are not Christians, they are pagans disguised as Christians, but the heart is pagan.” In unscripted remarks, the Pope recalled an episode occurred in a hospital in Buenos Aires, when a group of sisters from Korea came to offer their help. After having taken possession of the sisters’ house in the hospital “they came down to visit the sick in the hospital, but they didn’t speak a word of Spanish. They only spoke Korean and the patients were happy, because they commented: ‘Well done! These nuns, bravo, bravo!’ ‘But what did the sister say to you?’ ‘Nothing, but with her gaze she spoke to me, they communicated Jesus,’ not themselves, with their gaze, with their gestures. To communicate Jesus, not ourselves: This is attraction, the opposite of proselytism.”

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