

"There is no sin God cannot forgive"

In his September 11 Angelus address, Pope Francis asked: "Have you ever thought about how each time we go to the confessional, there is joy and celebration in heaven?"

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today's liturgy brings us to Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, considered the chapter of mercy. It collects three

parables with which Jesus responds to the grumbling of the scribes and the Pharisees, who are criticizing his actions, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (v. 2).

With these three stories, Jesus wants to make us understand that God the Father is the first one to have a welcoming and merciful attitude toward sinners. God has this attitude.

In the first parable, God is presented as a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go look for the one that is lost. In the second, he is compared to a woman who has lost a coin and searches until she's found it. In the third parable, God is imagined as a father who welcomes the son who had distanced himself; the figure of the father reveals the heart of a merciful God, manifested in Jesus.

A common element in these parables is expressed in the verbs that mean rejoice together, make a celebration.

Mourning is not spoken of; there is rejoicing, there is celebrating. The shepherd calls his friends and neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep” (v 6). The woman calls her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost” (v. 9). And the father says to his other son: “now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (v. 32).

In the first two parables, the focus is on the joy that is so uncontainable that it must be shared with “friends and neighbors.” In the third parable, the focus is on the celebration that springs from the heart of the merciful father and expands to the whole household. God’s celebration over those who return to Him repentant is intoned as never before in this Jubilee Year that we are living,

as the term itself expresses: “jubilee,” that is, jubilation.

With these three parables, Jesus presents us the true face of God, a God with his arms always open, a God who deals with sinners with tenderness and compassion. The parable that is most moving for everyone — because it manifests the infinite love of God — is that of the father who clings to and embraces the child who’s been found. That is, what is moving is not so much the sad story of a youth who rushes into degradation, but rather his decisive words, “I shall get up and go to my father” (v 18).

The path to return home is the path of hope and new life. God awaits our returning to the journey, he awaits us with patience, he sees us when we are still a long way off, he runs to meet us, he embraces us, he kisses us, he forgives us. That is how God is.

That is how our Father is. And his forgiveness cancels the past and regenerates us in love. To forget the past — this is the weakness of God. When he embraces us, he forgives us, and he loses his memory. He doesn't have memory. He forgets the past. When we sinners convert and bring ourselves to be re-encountered by God, reproaches and sternness do not await us, because God saves, he welcomes us home again with joy and makes a celebration.

Jesus himself in today's Gospel says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance."

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever thought about how each time we go to the confessional, there is joy and celebration in heaven? Have you ever thought of this? It's beautiful.

This fills us with a great hope because there is no sin in which we may have fallen, from which, with the grace of God, we cannot rise up again. There is never a person who can't be recovered; no one is unrecoverable, because God never stops wanting our good — even when we sin!

May the Virgin Mary, Refuge of Sinners, make rise in our hearts the confidence that was lit in the heart of the prodigal son: “I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you’” (v 18). On this path, we can give glory to God, and his glory can become his celebration, and ours.

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