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# **"Jesus came to light a fire on the earth"**

Homily of Pope Francis at the Mass on October 6 for the opening of the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon. "Jesus did not come to bring a gentle evening breeze, but to light a fire on the earth."

10/07/2019

The Apostle Paul, the greatest missionary in the Church's history, helps us to make this "synod", this "journey together". His words to

Timothy seem addressed to us, as pastors in the service of God's People.

Paul first tells Timothy: "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands" (2 *Tim* 1:6). We are bishops because we have received a *gift of God*. We did not sign an agreement; we were not handed an employment contract. Rather, hands were laid on our heads so that we, in turn, might be hands raised to intercede before the Father, helping hands extended to our brothers and sisters. We received a gift so that we might become a gift. Gifts are not bought, traded or sold; they are received and given away. If we hold on to them, if we make ourselves the center and not the gift we have received, we become bureaucrats, not shepherds. We turn the gift into a job and its gratuitousness vanishes. We end up serving ourselves and using the Church.

Thanks to the gift we have received, our lives are directed to service. When the Gospel speaks of “useless servants” (*Lk 17:10*), it reminds us of this. The expression can also mean “unprofitable servants”. In other words, we do not serve for the sake of personal profit or gain, but because we received freely and want to give freely in return (cf. *Mt 10:8*). Our joy will be entirely in serving since we were first served by God, who became the servant of us all. Dear brothers, let us feel called here for service; let us put God’s gift at the center.

To be *faithful* to our calling, our mission, Saint Paul reminds us that our gift has to be *rekindled*. The image he uses is that of stoking a fire (*anazopyrein*). The gift we have received is a fire, a burning love for God and for our brothers and sisters. A fire does not burn by itself; it has to be fed or else it dies; it turns into

ashes. If everything continues as it was, if we spend our days content that “this is the way things have always been done”, then the gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear and concern for defending the *status quo*. Yet “in no way can the Church restrict her pastoral work to the ‘ordinary maintenance’ of those who already know the Gospel of Christ. Missionary outreach is a clear sign of the maturity of an ecclesial community” (BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 95). Jesus did not come to bring a gentle evening breeze, but to light a fire on the earth.

The fire that rekindles the gift is the Holy Spirit, the giver of gifts. So Saint Paul goes on to say: “Guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit” (2 *Tim* 1:14). And again: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and prudence” (v. 7). Not a spirit

of timidity, but of *prudence*. Paul places prudence in opposition to timidity. What is this prudence of the Spirit? As the *Catechism* teaches, prudence “is not to be confused with timidity or fear”; rather, it is “the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (no. 1806).

Prudence is not indecision; it is not a defensive attitude. It is the virtue of the pastor who, in order to serve with wisdom, is able to discern, to be receptive to the newness of the Spirit. Rekindling our gift in the fire of the Spirit is the opposite of letting things take their course without doing anything. Fidelity to the newness of the Spirit is a grace that we must ask for in prayer. May the Spirit, who makes all things new, give us his own *daring prudence*; may he inspire our Synod to renew the paths of the Church in Amazonia, so that

the fire of mission will continue to burn.

As we see from the story of the burning bush, God's fire burns yet does not consume (cf. *Ex 3:2*). It is the fire of love that illumines, warms and gives life, not a fire that blazes up and devours. When peoples and cultures are devoured without love and without respect, it is not God's fire but that of the world. Yet how many times has God's gift been imposed, not offered; how many times has there been colonization rather than evangelization! May God preserve us from the greed of new forms of colonialism. The fire set by interests that destroy, like the fire that recently devastated Amazonia, is not the fire of the Gospel. The fire of God is warmth that attracts and gathers into unity. It is fed by sharing, not by profits. The fire that destroys, on the other hand, blazes up when people want to promote

only their own ideas, form their own group, wipe out differences in the attempt to make everyone and everything uniform.

To rekindle the gift; to welcome the bold prudence of the Spirit; to be faithful to his newness. Saint Paul now moves on to a final exhortation: “Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord but take your share of suffering for the Gospel in the power of God” (2 *Tim* 1:8). Paul asks Timothy to bear witness to the Gospel, to suffer for the Gospel, in a word, to *live* for the Gospel. The proclamation of the Gospel is the chief criterion of the Church’s life. A little later, Paul will write: “I am already on the point of being sacrificed” (4:6). To preach the Gospel is to live as an offering, to bear witness to the end, to become all things to all people (cf. *1 Cor* 9:22), to love even to the point of martyrdom. The Apostle makes it

quite clear that the Gospel is not served by worldly power, but by the *power of God* alone: by persevering *in humble love*, by believing that the only real way to possess life is to lose it through love.

Dear brothers and sisters, together let us look to the crucified Jesus, to his heart pierced for our salvation. Let us begin there, the source of the gift that has given us birth. From that heart, the Spirit who renews has been poured forth (cf. *Jn* 19:30). Let each and every one of us, then, feel called to give life. So many of our brothers and sisters in Amazonia are bearing heavy crosses and awaiting the liberating consolation of the Gospel, the Church's caress of love. For them, and with them, let us journey together.

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