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"If we want the world to change, then first our hearts must change"

Homily of Pope Francis on March 25th during the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance with the Act of Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

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In the Gospel reading for today's Solemnity, the angel Gabriel speaks

three times in addressing the Virgin Mary.

The first is when he greets her and says, “Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you” (*Lk 1:28*). The reason to rejoice, the reason for joy, is revealed in those few words: *the Lord is with you*. Dear brother, dear sister, today you can hear those words addressed to you. You can make them your own each time you approach God’s forgiveness, for there the Lord tells you, “I am with you”. All too often, we think that Confession is about going to God with dejected looks. Yet it is not so much that we go to the Lord, but that he comes to us, to fill us with his grace, to fill us with his joy. Our confession gives the Father the joy of raising us up once more. It is not so much about our sins as about his forgiveness. Our sins are present but the forgiveness of God is always at the heart of our confession. Think about it: if our sins were at the

heart of the sacrament, almost everything would depend on us, on our repentance, our efforts, our resolves. Far from it. The sacrament is about God, who liberates us and puts us back on our feet.

Let us recognize once more *the primacy of grace* and ask for the gift to realize that Reconciliation is not primarily our drawing near to God, but his embrace that enfolds, astonishes and overwhelms us. The Lord enters our home, as he did that of Mary in Nazareth, and brings us unexpected amazement and joy - the joy of forgiveness. Let us first look at things from God's perspective: then we will rediscover our love for Confession. We need this, for every interior rebirth, every spiritual renewal, starts there, from God's forgiveness. May we not neglect Reconciliation, but rediscover it as *the sacrament of joy*. Yes, the sacrament of joy, for our shame for

our sins becomes the occasion for an experience of the warm embrace of the Father, the gentle strength of Jesus who heals us, and the “maternal tenderness” of the Holy Spirit. That is the heart of Confession.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us go forth and receive forgiveness. And you, dear brother priests who are ministers of God’s forgiveness, offer to those who approach you the joy of this proclamation: *Rejoice, the Lord is with you*. Please set aside rigidity, obstacles and harshness; may you be doors wide open to mercy! Especially in Confession, we are called to act in the person of the Good Shepherd who takes his sheep into his arms and cradles them. We are called to be channels of grace that pour forth the living water of the Father’s mercy on hearts grown arid. If a priest does not approach Confession with this attitude, it would be better for him to

refrain from celebrating the sacrament.

A second time the angel speaks to Mary. She was troubled by his greeting, and so he tells her, “Do not be afraid” (v. 30). The first time he says, “The Lord is with you”. Now, the second time, he says “Do not be afraid”. In the Scriptures, whenever God appears to those who receive him, he loves to utter those words: *Do not be afraid!* He says them to Abraham (cf. *Gen 15:1*), repeats them to Isaac (cf. *Gen 26:24*), to Jacob (cf. *Gen 46:3*) and so on, up to Joseph (cf. *Mt 1:20*) and Mary. *Do not be afraid!* In this way, he sends us a clear and comforting message: once our lives are open to God, fear can no longer hold us in thrall. For fear can truly hold us in thrall. You, dear sister, dear brother, if your sins frighten you, if your past worries you, if your wounds do not heal, if your constant failings dishearten you and you seem

to have lost hope, please, do not be afraid. God knows your weaknesses and is greater than your mistakes. God is greater than our sins. He asks of you only one thing: that you not hold your frailties and sufferings inside. Bring them to him, lay them before him and, from being reasons for despair, they will become opportunities for resurrection. Do not be afraid! The Lord asks us for our sins. This brings to mind the story of a monk in the desert. He had given everything to God and lived a life of fasting, penance and prayer. The Lord asked for more. "Lord, I gave you everything", said the monk, "what more is there?" The Lord replied, "Give me yours sins". Do not be afraid!

The Blessed Virgin Mary accompanies us: she cast her own anxiety upon God. The angel's proclamation gave her good reason to be afraid. He proposed to her

something unimaginable and beyond her abilities, something that she could not handle alone: there would be too many difficulties, problems with the Mosaic law, with Joseph, with the citizens of her town and with her people. Yet Mary did not object. Those words – *do not be afraid* – were sufficient for her; God’s reassurance was enough for her. She clung to him, as we want to do tonight. Yet so often we do the exact opposite. We start from our own certainties and, when we lose them, we turn to God. Our Lady, on the other hand, teaches us to start from God, trusting that in this way everything else will be given to us (cf. *Mt 6:33*). She invites us to go to the source, to the Lord, who is the ultimate remedy against fear and emptiness in life. There is a lovely phrase written above a confessional here in the Vatican that reminds us of this. It addresses God with these words, “To turn away from you is to

fall, to turn back to you is to rise, to abide in you is to have life” (cf. SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Soliloquies* I, 3).

In these days, news reports and scenes of death continue to enter our homes, even as bombs are destroying the homes of many of our defenceless Ukrainian brothers and sisters. The vicious war that has overtaken so many people, and caused suffering to all, has made each of us fearful and anxious. We sense our helplessness and our inadequacy. We need to be told, “Do not be afraid”. Yet human reassurance is not enough. We need the closeness of God and the certainty of his forgiveness, which alone eliminates evil, disarms resentment and restores peace to our hearts. Let us return to God and to his forgiveness.

A third time the angel speaks to Mary and says, “The Holy Spirit will come

upon you” (*Lk* 1:35). Again, the first time he says, “The Lord is with you”. The second time his words are, “Do not be afraid”. Now, he says, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you”. That is how God intervenes in history: by giving his very Spirit. For in the things that matter, our own strength is not enough. By ourselves, we cannot succeed in resolving the contradictions of history or even those of our own hearts. We need the wisdom and gentle power of God that is the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit of love who dispels hatred, soothes bitterness, extinguishes greed and rouses us from indifference. The Spirit gives us concord because he is concord. We need God’s love, for our love is fragile and insufficient. We ask the Lord for many things, but how often we forget to ask him for what is most important and what he desires most to give us: the Holy Spirit, the power to love. Indeed, without love, what can we offer to

the world? It has been said that a Christian without love is like a needle that does not sew: it stings, it wounds, and if it fails to sew, weave or patch, then it is useless. I would dare to say that this person is not a Christian. This is why we need to find in God's forgiveness the power of love: the same Spirit who descended upon Mary.

If we want the world to change, then first our hearts must change. For this to happen, let us allow Our Lady to take us by the hand. Let us gaze upon her Immaculate Heart in which God dwelt, "our tainted nature's solitary boast". Mary is "full of grace" (v. 28), and thus free from sin. In her, there is no trace of evil and hence, with her, God was able to begin a new story of salvation and peace. There, in her, history took a turn. God changed history by knocking at the door of Mary's heart.

Today, renewed by forgiveness, may we too knock at the door of her immaculate heart. In union with the Bishops and faithful of the world, I desire in a solemn way to bring all that we are presently experiencing to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. I wish to renew to her the consecration of the Church and the whole of humanity, and to consecrate to her in a particular way the Ukrainian people and the Russian people who, with filial affection, venerate her as a Mother. This is no magic formula but a spiritual act. It is an act of complete trust on the part of children who, amid the tribulation of this cruel and senseless war that threatens our world, turn to their Mother. It is like what young children do when they are scared; they turn to their mother for protection. We turn to our Mother, reposing all our fears and pain in her heart and abandoning ourselves to her. It means placing in that pure and undefiled heart, where

God is mirrored, the inestimable goods of fraternity and peace, all that we have and are, so that she, the Mother whom the Lord has given us, may protect us and watch over us.

Mary then uttered the most beautiful words that the angel could bring back to God: “Let it be to me according to your word” (v. 38). Hers was no passive or resigned acceptance, but a lively desire to obey God, who has “plans for welfare and not for evil” (*Jer* 29:11). Hers was the most intimate sharing in God’s plan of peace for the world. We consecrate ourselves to Mary in order to enter into this plan, to place ourselves fully at the disposal of God’s plans. After having uttered her “Fiat”, the Mother of God set out on a long journey to the hill country, to visit a relative who was with child (cf. *Lk* 1:39). She went with haste. I like to think of this image of Our Lady going with haste. She comes

with haste to help and take care of us. May she now take our own journey into her hands: may she guide our steps through the steep and arduous paths of fraternity and dialogue, along the way of peace.

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