

"Lord, do not turn away from me"

In his 3 January general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about spiritual struggle.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last week we introduced the theme of vices and virtues. It refers to the spiritual struggle of the Christian. Indeed, the spiritual life of the

Christian is not peaceful, linear and without challenges; on the contrary, Christian life demands constant striving: the Christian striving to preserve the faith, to enrich the gifts of faith in us. It is no coincidence that the first anointing that every Christian receives in the sacrament of Baptism - the catechumenal anointing - is without any aroma and symbolically announces that life is a struggle. In fact, in ancient times, wrestlers were fully anointed before the competition, both to tone their muscles and to make their bodies elusive to their opponent's grasp. The anointing of catechumens immediately makes it clear that the Christian is not spared the struggle, that the Christian must strive: his existence, like everyone else's, will have to descend into the arena, because life is a succession of trials and temptations.

A famous saying attributed to Abbot Anthony the Great, the first great father of monasticism, goes like this: “Remove temptations and no-one will be saved.” The saints are not men who have been spared temptation, but rather people well aware of the fact that in life the seductions of evil appear repeatedly, to be unmasked and rejected. We all have experience of this, all of us: that a bad thought comes to you, that you feel a desire to do this, or to speak badly of others... All of us, all of us are tempted, and we must strive not to give in to these temptations. If any of you have no temptations, say so, because that would be an extraordinary thing! We all have temptations, and we all have to learn how to behave in these situations.

There are many people who absolve themselves, who declare they are “just fine” – “No, I am good, I don’t have these problems”. But none of us

are “alright”; if someone feels they are alright, they are dreaming; every one of us has many things to adjust, and must also be vigilant. And at times it happens that we go to the sacrament of Reconciliation and we say, sincerely, “Father, I don’t remember, I don’t know if I have any sins...”. But this is a lack of awareness of what is happening in the heart. We are all sinners, all of us. And a little examination of the conscience, a little insight, will be good for us. Otherwise, we risk living in the dark, because we have become accustomed to darkness and no longer know how to distinguish good from evil. Isaac of Nineveh said that, in the Church, he who knows his sins and mourns them is greater than he who raises a dead man. We must all ask God for the grace to recognize ourselves as poor sinners, in need of conversion, keeping in our hearts the confidence that no sin is too great for the infinite mercy of God the Father.

This is the inaugural lesson Jesus gives us.

We see it in the first pages of the Gospels, primarily in the account of the baptism of the Messiah in the waters of the river Jordan. The episode contains within it something disconcerting: why does Jesus submit to such a rite of purification? He is God, He is perfect! Of what sin must Jesus ever repent? None! Even the Baptist is shocked, to the point that the text says: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (*Mt 3:15*). But Jesus is a very different Messiah from the way John had presented Him and the people imagined Him: He does not embody the wrathful God and does not summon for judgement, but, on the contrary, queues up with sinners. How come? Yes, Jesus accompanies us, all us sinners. He is not a sinner, but He is among us. And this is a

beautiful thing. “Father, I have many sins!” – “But Jesus is with you: talk about them, He will help you come out of it.” Jesus never leaves us alone, never! Think about this. “Oh Father, I have committed serious ones!” – “But Jesus understands you and He accompanies you: He understands your sin and He forgives you.” Never forget this! In the worst moments, in the moments when we slip into sin, Jesus is by our side to help lift us up. This brings consolation. We must not lose this certainty: Jesus is by our side to help us, to protect us, even to lift us up again after sin. “But Father, is it true that Jesus forgives everything?” – “Everything. He came to forgive, to save. Simply, Jesus wants your heart to be open. He never forgets to forgive: it is we who, many times, lose the capacity to ask for forgiveness. Let us regain the capacity to ask for forgiveness. Every one of us has many things to ask forgiveness for: let each one of us

think about it, inwardly, and speak about it with Jesus today. Speak with Jesus about this: “Lord, I do not know if this is true or not, but I am sure that You will not turn away from me. I am sure that You forgive me. Lord, I am a sinner, but please do not turn away from me.” This would be a beautiful prayer to Jesus today: “Lord, do not turn away from me.”

And straight after the episode of the baptism, the Gospels tell us that Jesus retreated into the desert, where He is tempted by Satan. In this case too, we ask ourselves: what must the Son of God know temptation? Here too, Jesus shows Himself to be in solidarity with our frail human nature, and becomes our great *exemplum*: the temptations He faces and overcomes among the arid stones of the desert are the first instruction He gives to our life as disciples. He experienced what we too must prepare ourselves to

confront: life is made up of challenges, tests, crossroads, opposing views, hidden seductions, contradictory voices. Some voices are even persuasive, so much so that Satan tempts Jesus by resorting to the words of the Scripture. We must preserve our inner clarity in order to choose the path that truly leads to happiness, and strive not to stop along the way.

Let us remember that we are always torn between opposite extremes: arrogance challenges humility; hatred opposes charity; sadness hinders the true joy of the Spirit; the hardening of the heart rejects mercy. Christians continually walk along these dividing lines. Therefore, it is important to reflect on vices and virtues: it helps us to defeat the nihilistic culture in which the boundaries between good and evil become blurred and, at the same time, it reminds us that the human

being, unlike any other creature, can always transcend itself, opening up to God and journeying towards holiness.

The spiritual struggle, then, leads us to look closely at those vices that shackle us and to walk, with the grace of God, towards those virtues that can flourish in us, bringing the springtime of the Spirit into our lives.

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