



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO MOZAMBIQUE, MADAGASCAR AND MAURITIUS
(4 - 10 SEPTEMBER 2019) **MIDDAY PRAYER IN THE MONASTERY OF THE DISCALCED**
CARMELITES

Antananarivo
Saturday, 7 September 2019

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You will be given a copy of the text I prepared, so that you can read and ponder it quietly. But right now I would like to speak to you from the heart.

The reading from the First Book of Kings (2:2b-3) was addressed to Joshua. It begins with an appeal to be courageous: “Be strong, and show yourself a man!” Courageous. To follow the Lord, we always need *courage*, a bit of courage. It is true that the Lord does the heavy work, yet courage is required to let him do it.

I recall something that has helped me greatly in my life as a priest and as a bishop. Late one evening, two nuns, one very young and the other very old, were walking from the chapel, where they had just prayed vespers, towards the refectory. The old nun had difficulty walking and the young nun tried to help her, but the old nun was irritable. She said: “Don’t touch me! Don’t make me fall!” God knows, maybe sickness made the old nun a bit irascible. Smiling, the young nun accompanied her. Eventually they arrived in the refectory and the young nun tried to help her sit

down, and the old nun said: “Stop it, you’re hurting me, you’re hurting me here...”, but in the end, she sat down. A young person experiencing all this surely would have loved to send her packing! But that young woman smiled, took a piece of bread, prepared it and gave it to her. This is not some edifying story; it happened. The old nun was called Sister Saint Pierre, and the young nun, Sister Therese of the Child Jesus.

A true story, and one that gives us a glimpse into community life; it shows the spirit with which one can live in community. Charity in little things and in big things. That young woman could have thought, “Tomorrow I will go to the Prioress and ask if she could send someone stronger to help this old woman because I can’t do it”. But she didn’t think like that. She believed in obedience: “I have been given this job and in obedience I will do it”. With the strength born of obedience, she did this work with exquisite charity. I know that all of you, cloistered nuns, have come here to be close to the Lord, to seek the way of perfection; but the way of perfection can be found in these small steps along the path of obedience. Small steps of charity and love. Small steps that look like nothing, yet small steps that attract, that “seduce” God; little threads that “disarm” God. This young woman was thinking about the thread with which she can disarm God; she was thinking about the cords – the cords of love – which are the small acts of charity. Small, very small, because our little soul cannot do great things.

Be strong! Have the courage to take little steps, the courage to believe that your littleness makes God happy and brings salvation to the world. - “No, but I think religious life should be changed, it should be made more perfect and more divine, and for this I want to become a Prioress, a Superior, in order to bring about the change!...” I’m not saying that some of you think like this... But the devil instills these thoughts. If you want to transform and save the world with Jesus – and not just the monastery and religious life – it begins with these little acts of love and self-sacrifice, which “trap” God and bring him close to us.

Let’s go back to the story of the young nun and the old nun. One of those nights, before dinner, while they were going from the chapel to the refectory – they used to leave the chapel ten minutes early, to walk slowly to the refectory – Therese heard the sound of music from outside the convent, the sound of a party and dancing... And she imagined a party where young men and women were dancing, a nice family party, like a wedding or a birthday. She thought about the music and everything else, and she felt something inside. Maybe she felt: “It would be nice to be there”. I don’t know. But immediately, and firmly, she said to the Lord that she would never, ever trade any of her kindnesses to the old nun for that worldly party. Those kindnesses made her happier than all the dances in the world.

Worldliness will surely approach you in many hidden guises. Together with your Prioress and the monastic community, learn how to discern the voices of worldliness, so that they don’t make their way into the cloister. Worldliness is not like a cloistered nun; rather, it is like a goat that wanders in and leads you away from the cloister... When thoughts of worldliness come to you, close the door

and think of small acts of love: these are what save the world. Therese chose to take care of the old nun and to keep moving ahead.

What I'm going to tell you now is not to frighten you, but it is a reality. Jesus himself said it, so allow me to say it too. To enter the monastery, each of you had to fight; you did so many good things and you conquered the worldly spirit, sin, and the devil. Perhaps, on the day you entered the monastery, the devil stopped at the monastery door, dejected, and said: "I have lost a soul", and then left. But then he went and sought the advice of another devil, one older and more astute, who surely told him: "Just be patient, wait..." This is the devil's typical way of acting. Jesus says so. When a devil loses a soul, he leaves and comes back later and sees that beautiful, orderly and wonderful soul, and he wants to return to it.

What does Jesus tell us? That devil then goes and looks for seven others worse than he is and comes back with them to enter the orderly house. But they don't enter loudly, like thieves; they enter politely. These "polite" devils ring the bell and say: "Might I come in? Could you help me with this or that?" Then they are allowed in. They are polite devils, they come into the house, settle in and then, Jesus says, the end of that man or woman is worse than the beginning. - But didn't you realize that this was an evil spirit? - "No, he was so polite, so nice! And now, no, I'm going home because I can't take it any more". Now it's too late; you let him enter too deeply into your heart. Didn't you realize, couldn't you have talked to the Prioress, couldn't you have talked with the Superior or with some of the Sisters in the community?

The tempter does not want to be discovered; that is why he disguises himself as a noble, educated person, and even at times as a spiritual father... Please, Sister, when you feel something strange, talk right away! Speak up! Make it known. If Eve had spoken up in time, if she had gone to the Lord to tell him: "This snake is telling me such and such; what do you think?" If only she had spoken up on time! But Eve did not speak up, and then disaster struck. So this is my advice: when there is something that troubles your tranquility, speak up immediately, speak on time. I do not say your *peace*, but even before peace, your *tranquility*. This is the help, the defense you have in community, that each of you helps the other to form a united front, to defend holiness, to defend the glory of God, to defend love, to defend the monastery.

- "But shouldn't feel well protected from spiritual worldliness and from the devil because we have double grill and a curtain!" The double grill and the curtain are not enough. You could have hundreds of curtains! Charity and prayer are required. The charity needed to ask in time for advice from the Sisters and from the Prioress. But also say a prayer to the Lord: "Lord, is it real, what I am feeling; what the serpent is telling me, is it true?" The young Therese, as soon as she felt something inside, spoke about it with her Prioress, the Prioress, who didn't like her! - "But how can I go to the Prioress if she snarls at me every time I go to her!" Yes, but the Prioress is Jesus. - "But, Father, the Prioress is not a good person, she's bad". Let the Lord decide that; for you, the Prioress is Jesus. - "But the Prioress is a bit old, things are not working well...". Let the chapter

decide; if you want to bring this forward, say it at the chapter, but you have to report to the Prioress, because she is Jesus. There should always be transparency of the heart! You always win by speaking up.

So then, Therese, who knew that the Prioress did not like her that much, would go to her anyway. Well, we have to realize that not all Prioresses get the Nobel Prize for sympathy! But they are Jesus. The path of obedience is one that submits you to love, that makes us submissive to love.

Then, Therese got sick. She fell ill and little by little she thought she was losing her faith. The poor thing, who in her life knew how to deal with the “polite” devils, was, at the time of her death, at a loss; she couldn’t cope with the devil that was besetting her. She would say: “I can see him circling around me”. The darkness of the last days and months of life. When it comes to temptation and spiritual warfare, charity does not go into retirement: you have to keep fighting to the end. To the very end. Even when you are surrounded by darkness. Therese thought she had lost her faith! So she called for the nuns to sprinkle holy water on her bed and to bring blessed candles... In the monastery, the battle continues to the end. But it is a beautiful battle, for in this cruel but magnificent battle, when it is real, peace is never lost.

I’m sure you are going to say: “This Pope is a bit ‘folksy’; instead of talking theology, he talked to us like children. Would that you were all children, at least in spirit. With that aspect of being a child that the Lord loves so dearly!

I would like to finish the story of Therese and that old woman. That same Therese now accompanies an old man. I would like to give a testimony about this, because she has accompanied me at every step of the way. She taught me how to walk. Sometime I am a little irritable and I send her away, as Mother Saint Pierre did. Sometimes I listen to her; sometimes my troubles keep me from listening carefully... But she is a faithful friend. That is why I didn’t want to talk to you in the abstract; I wanted to share with you my experience with a saint, and in doing so, to tell you about what a saint can do and about the path to becoming saints.

Be strong! And keep going!

Prepared Homily of the Holy Father

Dear Mother Madeleine of the Annunciation,

Dearest Sisters,

Thank you, Mother, for your warm welcome and your kind words, which echo the sentiments of the contemplative nuns of all the different monasteries of this country. I thank every one of you, dear Sisters, for leaving the cloister for a moment in order to show your communion with me and with

the life and mission of the entire Church, particularly the Church in Madagascar.

I am grateful for your presence, for your fidelity and for the radiant witness to Jesus Christ that you offer to the community. In this country, there may be poverty, but there is also great richness! For here we find a great treasure of natural, human and spiritual beauty. You too, dear Sisters, share in this beauty of Madagascar, its people and its Church, for it is the beauty of Christ that lights up your faces and your lives. Indeed, thanks to you, the Church in Madagascar is all the more beautiful in the Lord's eyes and in the eyes of the whole world as well.

The three Psalms of today's liturgy express the anguish of the Psalmist in a moment of trial and danger. Allow me to reflect on the first of them, taken from Psalm 119, the lengthiest of the Psalter, since it devotes eight verses to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. No doubt, its author was a contemplative, someone familiar with prolonged and beautiful experiences of prayer. In today's passage, the word "consume" appears several times and, significantly, in two senses.

The one who prays is "consumed" by the desire to encounter God. You yourselves are a living testimony to this insatiable desire present in the heart of all men and women. Amid the many proposals that claim to satisfy the human heart, but prove incapable of doing so, the contemplative life is the torch that leads to the one eternal fire, "the living flame of love that wounds tenderly" (Saint John of the Cross). You are a visible sign of "the goal toward which the entire ecclesial community journeys. For the Church 'advances down the paths of time with her eyes fixed on the future restoration of all things in Christ', thus announcing in advance the glory of heaven" *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 2).

We are constantly tempted to satisfy our desire for eternity with fleeting things. We find ourselves adrift on surging seas that only end up overwhelming our lives and our spirit. For this reason, "the world needs you every bit as much as a sailor on the high seas needs a beacon to guide him to a safe haven. Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away. Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time. Be sentinels of the morning (cf. *Is* 21:11-12), heralding the dawn (cf. *Lk* 1:78). By your transfigured life, and with simple words pondered in silence, show us the One who is the way, and the truth and the life (cf. *Jn* 14:6), the Lord who alone brings us fulfilment and bestows life in abundance (cf. *Jn* 10:10). Cry out to us, as Andrew did to Simon: 'We have found the Lord' (cf. *Jn* 1:40). Like Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, announce to us: 'I have seen the Lord!' (*Jn* 20:18)" (ibid., 6).

The Psalm also speaks of another way of being "consumed". It speaks of the malicious, who seek to ruin the just. They persecute them, set traps for them, try to bring them down. A monastery is always a space where people consumed by the pain and sorrows of this world can come and find a hearing. May your monasteries, faithful to your charism of contemplation and your constitutions, also be places of welcome and listening, especially for those in greatest need. With us today are two mothers who have lost their children and who embody all the hurt and pain felt by our brothers

and sisters on this island. Please be attentive to the pleas and the grief of those in your midst who, consumed by the experience of suffering, exploitation and discouragement, turn to you. Do not be like those who listen only to pass the time, to satisfy curiosity or to have something else to talk about.

You have a fundamental mission in this regard. The cloister sets you in the heart of God; his heart is thus always present in your midst. Your sensitivity to the heart of the Lord will enable you to hear him speaking in your brothers and sisters. The persons around you are often very poor, weak, troubled and hurting in a thousand ways; yet they are full of faith. In you, they instinctively recognize witnesses of God's presence and invaluable sources of encouragement on the way to encountering him and receiving his help. However great the pain that consumes them, robbing them of joy and hope, and making them feel isolated and alone, you can be a pathway to that rock evoked in another passage from the Psalms: "Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (*Ps* 61:1-2).

Faith is the greatest treasure of the poor! How important it is that the faith be proclaimed to them, strengthened within them, and help them to live in hope. May the contemplation of God's mysteries, which finds expression in your liturgy and your times of prayer, enable you better to discover his active presence in each human situation, even the most troubling, and to be thankful that, in contemplation, God gives you the gift of intercession. Thanks to your prayer, you are like mothers, taking your children upon your shoulders and carrying them towards the promised land. Indeed, "our prayer will be all the more pleasing to God and more effective for our growth in holiness if, through intercession, we attempt to practise the twofold commandment that Jesus left us. Intercessory prayer is an expression of our fraternal concern for others, since we are able to embrace their lives, their deepest troubles and their loftiest dreams. Of those who commit themselves generously to intercessory prayer we can apply the words of Scripture: 'This is a man who loves the brethren and prays much for the people' (*2 Mac* 15:14)" (*Gaudete et exsultate*, 154).

Dear contemplative Sisters, what would the Church and those who live on the human peripheries of Madagascar be like without you? What would happen to all those who work in the forefront of evangelization, especially here, in very precarious, difficult and often dangerous conditions? They rely on your prayers and on the ever-renewed gift of your lives, an inestimable gift in the sight of God, one that makes you share in the mystery of the redemption of this land and of the beloved persons who dwell in it.

"For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke", says the Psalm (119:83), reminding us of how time passes when we experience this two-fold way of being consumed: by God and by the difficulties of the world. At times, almost imperceptibly, we can fall into "listlessness, mere routine, lack of enthusiasm and paralyzing lethargy" (*Vultum Dei quaerere*, 11). It makes no difference how old you are, or how difficult it is to walk or to arrive on time for prayers... We are not wineskins

drying next to the smoke, but logs burning until they are consumed in the fire which is Jesus. For he never fails us, he covers our every debt.

Thank you for this time we have spent together. I entrust myself to your prayers. To you I entrust all the intentions I carry in my heart during this visit to Madagascar. Let us pray together that the spirit of the Gospel may spring up in the hearts of all your people.