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PAPAL CHAPEL

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

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[Multimedia]

At the heart of the Gospel we have just heard (*Mk 6:30-37*) is the “compassion” of Jesus (cf. v. 34). *Compassion* is a key word in the Gospel. It is written in Christ’s heart; it is forever written in the heart of God.

In the Gospels, we often see Jesus’ compassion for those who are suffering. The more we read, the more we contemplate, the more we come to realize that the Lord’s compassion is not an occasional, sporadic emotion, but is steadfast and indeed seems to be *the attitude of his heart*, in which God’s mercy is made incarnate.

Mark, for example, tells us that when Jesus first passed through Galilee preaching and casting out demons, “a leper came to him begging him, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean’. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’” (1:40-42). In this gesture and with these words, we see the mission of Jesus, the Redeemer of mankind. He is a *compassionate Redeemer*. He incarnates God’s will to purify men and women afflicted by the scourge of sin; he is “the outstretched hand of God”, who touches our sickly flesh and accomplishes this work by bridging the chasm of separation.

Jesus *goes out in search of the outcast*, those without hope. People like the man paralyzed for thirty-eight years who lay beside the pool of Bethzatha, waiting in vain for someone to bring him to

the waters (cf. *Jn* 5:1-9).

This compassion did not appear suddenly at one moment in the history of salvation. No, *it was always there in God*, impressed on his paternal heart. Let us think about the account of the calling of Moses, for example, when God spoke from the burning bush and said: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry... indeed, I know their sufferings" (*Ex* 3:7). This is the compassion of the Father!

God's love for his people is drenched with compassion, to the extent that, in this covenant relationship, what is divine is compassionate, while, sad to say, it appears that what is human is so often lacking in compassion. God himself says so: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender... For I am God and no mortal, the holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (*Hos* 11:8-9).

Jesus' disciples often show themselves *lacking compassion*, as in this case, when they are faced with the problem of having to feed the crowds. In effect, they say: "Let them worry about it themselves..." This is a common attitude among us human beings, even those of us who are religious persons or even religious "professionals". We wash our hands of it. The position we occupy is not enough to make us compassionate, as we see in the conduct of the priest and Levite who, seeing a dying man on the side of the road, pass to the other side (cf. *Lk* 10:31-32). They would have thought: "It's not up to me". There are always excuses and justifications for looking the other way. And when a man of the Church becomes a mere functionary, the result is even more sour. There are always justifications; at times they are even codified and give rise to "institutional disregard", as was the case with lepers: "Of course, they have to keep their distance; that is the right thing to do". That was the way of thinking and it still is. This all too human attitude also generates structures lacking compassion.

At this point we can ask ourselves: are we conscious – we, in the first place – of having been *the object of God's compassion*? In a particular way, I ask this of you, brother cardinals and those about to become cardinals: do you have a lively awareness of always having been preceded and accompanied by his mercy? This awareness was always present in the immaculate heart of the Virgin Mary, who praises God as her "Saviour", for he "looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant" (*Lk* 1:48).

I find it helpful to see myself reflected in the passage of Ezekiel 16 that speaks of God's love for Jerusalem. It concludes with the words: "I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done" (*Ezek* 16:62-63). Or again, in that other prophecy of Hosea: "I will bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her... There shall she respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt (2:14-15). We can ask ourselves: Do I feel God's compassion towards me? Do

I sense in me the conviction of being a son of compassion?

Do we have a lively awareness of this compassion that God feels for us? It is not something optional, or a kind of “evangelical counsel”. No, it is essential. Unless I feel that I am the object of God’s compassion, I cannot understand his love. This is not a reality that can be explained.

Either I feel it or I don’t. If I don’t feel it, how can I share it, bear witness to it, bestow it on others? Perhaps, I am not able to do this. Concretely: am I compassionate towards this or that brother or sister, that bishop, that priest? ... Or do I constantly tear them down by my attitude of condemnation, of indifference, of looking the other way and actually washing my hands of it?

On this lively awareness also depends, for all of us, *the ability to be loyal* in our own ministry. This also holds true for you, brother cardinals. The word “compassion” came to my mind right from the moment I started writing my letter to you of 1 September. The readiness of a cardinal to shed his own blood – as signified by the scarlet colour of your robes – is secure if it is rooted in this awareness of having been shown compassion and in the ability to show compassion in turn.

Otherwise, one cannot be loyal. So many disloyal actions on the part of ecclesiastics are born of the lack of a sense of having been shown compassion, and by the habit of averting one’s gaze, the habit of indifference.

Today, let us implore, through the intercession of the apostle Peter, the grace to have a compassionate heart, in order to be witnesses of the One who loved and still loves us and who has looked with favour upon us, who chose us, consecrated us and sent us to bring to everyone his Gospel of salvation.