

FRANCIS: A POPE WITH A HEART OPEN TO HOPE AND TO RELISHING THE GOSPEL



In our journey under the guidance of the Spirit, within the framework of the Gospel, it sometimes happens that a picture takes root so deeply in our minds as to become the delicate pattern through which we sift history. For me, an excerpt from the Gospel of John prompts me to rethink some of the features of the pontificate of Pope Francis:

"In all truth I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a bandit. He who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; the gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out all those that are his, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him because they do not recognize the voice of strangers." Jesus told them this parable but they failed to understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus spoke to them again: "In all truth I tell you, I am the gate of the sheepfold. All who have come before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep took no notice of them. I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: such a one will go in and out and will find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:1-10).

Each flock does not have its own sheepfold. Instead, there is a single sheepfold to which all the shepherds lead their flocks at dusk. Jesus enters the enclosure, calling each sheep by name, identifying each one individually, and then leads them out, show-

ing them the way. Pope Francis has often used this image to describe the Church:

When the Church becomes closed in on itself, it gets sick, it gets sick! Think of a room that has been sealed up for a year. When you enter that room, you can smell the dampness. There are a lot of things wrong with that room. A Church in that condition is the same: it's a sick Church. It has to come out of itself. And where must it go? Toward the peripheries of existence, whatever those may be. The important thing is to go out. Jesus says: "God out to the whole world! Go forth! Preach! Witness to the Gospel!" (cf. Mk. 16:15) What happens when a person comes out of him/herself? It could happen that he/she has an accident—a risk that every person runs upon leaving home. But I tell you I prefer a thousand times over a Church suffering from an accident than a Church that is sick because it is closed in on itself. Go forth! Go forth!" (18 May 2013)

But beware: the Church must not go forth recklessly. Our journey toward the peripheries must be guided by the Lord Jesus. In fact, in his first homily in the Sistine Chapel, Pope Francis said to the Cardinals gathered there:

We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord (14 March 2013).

The evangelist John presents entering and leaving as complementary actions: "I am the gate: those who enter through me will be saved." It is only by living the life of Christ, by witnessing to his words and deeds in our own life, that we can be saved, that is, that we can live fully and abundantly.

What is most striking about Pope Francis is the fact that his life is clearly rooted in God. He allows himself to be guided by the Spirit, without trying to impose on others his own idea of the Church. Instead, he asks himself, through continual discernment in the Holy Spirit and with the help of his collaborators, what style of life the Lord is asking the Church to live today.

By doing this, he keeps his heart open to hope and to the capacity to relish the Gospel, because "we can touch others in depth only when we reach out to them from our own depths" (F. Varillon, *The Humility of God*, Qiqajon 1999).

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