



Sixth Sunday of Easter B

May 6, 2018

- **Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation (Part 3)**
- **Reflections on the Beatitudes 6–8 and the Great Criterion**

I previously shared with you two excerpts from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *"Rejoice and Be Glad."* Last week's column focused on the first five Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:1-12. This week, we continue with Beatitudes 6, 7, and 8.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

83. This Beatitude speaks of those whose hearts are simple, pure and undefiled, for a heart capable of love admits nothing that might harm, weaken or endanger that love. The Bible uses the heart to describe our real intentions, the things we truly seek and desire, apart from all appearances. "Man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart" (1Sam 16:7). God wants to speak to our hearts (cf. Hos 2:16); there he desires to write his law (cf. Jer 31:33). In a word, he wants to give us a new heart (cf. Ezek 36:26).

84. "Guard your heart with all vigilance" (Prov 4:23). Nothing stained by falsehood has any real worth in the Lord's eyes. He "flees from deceit, and rises and departs from foolish thoughts" (Wis 1:5). The Father, "who sees in secret" (Mt 6:6), recognizes what is impure and insincere, mere display or appearance, as does the Son, who knows "what is in man" (cf. Jn 2:25).

85. Certainly there can be no love without works of love, but this Beatitude reminds us that the Lord expects a commitment to our brothers and sisters that comes from the heart. For "if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have no love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). In Matthew's Gospel too, we see that what proceeds from the heart is what defiles a person (cf. 15:18), for from the heart come murder, theft, false witness, and other evil deeds (cf. 15:19). From the heart's intentions come the desires and the deepest decisions that determine our actions.

86. A heart that loves God and neighbour (cf. Mt 22:36-40), genuinely and not merely in words, is a pure heart; it can see God. In his hymn to charity, Saint Paul says that "now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor 13:12), but to the extent that truth and love prevail, we will then be

able to see "face to face." Jesus promises that those who are pure in heart "will see God."

Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

87. This Beatitude makes us think of the many endless situations of war in our world. Yet we ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding. For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it.

The world of gossip, inhabited by negative and destructive people, does not bring peace. Such people are really the enemies of peace; in no way are they "blessed."

88. Peacemakers truly "make" peace; they build peace and friendship in society. To those who sow peace Jesus makes this magnificent promise: "They will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9). He told his disciples that, wherever they went, they were to say: "Peace to this house!" (Lk 10:5). The word of God exhorts every believer to work for peace, "along with all who call upon the Lord with a pure heart" (cf. 2 Tim 2:22), for "the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (Jas 3:18). And if there are times in our community when we question what ought to be done, "let us pursue what makes for peace" (Rom 14:19), for unity is preferable to conflict.

89. It is not easy to "make" this evangelical peace, which excludes no one but embraces even those who are a bit odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life or simply uninterested. It is hard work; it calls for great openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating "a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority," or a project "by a few for the few." Nor can it attempt to ignore or disregard conflict; instead, it must "face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process." We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill.

Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

90. Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance. He reminds us how many people have been, and still are, persecuted simply because they struggle for justice, because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others. Unless we wish to sink into an obscure mediocrity, let us not long for an easy life, for “whoever would save his life will lose it” (Mt 16:25).

91. In living the Gospel, we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way. Saint John Paul II noted that “a society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people.” In such a society, politics, mass communications and economic, cultural and even religious institutions become so entangled as to become an obstacle to authentic human and social development. As a result, the Beatitudes are not easy to live out; any attempt to do so will be viewed negatively, regarded with suspicion, and met with ridicule.

92. Whatever weariness and pain we may experience in living the commandment of love and following the way of justice, the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification. We must never forget that when the New Testament tells us that we will have to endure suffering for the Gospel’s sake, it speaks precisely of persecution (cf. Acts 5:41; Phil 1:29; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 1:12; 1 Pet 2:20, 4:14-16; Rev 2:10).

93. Here we are speaking about inevitable persecution, not the kind of persecution we might bring upon ourselves by our mistreatment of others. The saints are not odd and aloof, unbearable because of their vanity, negativity and bitterness. The Apostles of Christ were not like that. The Book of Acts states repeatedly that they enjoyed favour “with all the people” (2:47; cf. 4:21.33; 5:13), even as some authorities harassed and persecuted them (cf. 4:1-3, 5:17-18).

94. **Persecutions are not a reality of the past, for today too we experience them, whether by the shedding of blood, as is the case with so many contemporary martyrs, or by more subtle means, by slander and lies. Jesus calls us blessed when people “utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Mt 5:11). At other times, persecution can**

take the form of gibes that try to caricature our faith and make us seem ridiculous.

Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness.

THE GREAT CRITERION

Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God’s gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters.

95. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel (vv. 31-46), Jesus expands on the Beatitude that calls the merciful blessed. If we seek the holiness pleasing to God’s eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (vv. 35-36).

96. Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture. As Saint John Paul II said: “If we truly start out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified.” The text of Matthew 25:35-36 is “not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ.” In this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate.

97. Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness. In other words, without any “ifs or buts” that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is “the beating heart of the Gospel.”

98. **If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?**

99. For Christians, this involves a constant and healthy unease. Even if helping one person alone could justify all our efforts, it would not be enough. The bishops of Canada made this clear when they noted, for example, that the biblical understanding of the jubilee year was about more than simply performing certain good works. It also meant seeking social change: “For later generations to also be released, clearly the goal had to be the restoration of just social and economic systems, so there could no longer be exclusion.”

The worship most acceptable to God

104. We may think that we give glory to God only by our worship and prayer, or simply by following certain ethical norms. It is true that the primacy belongs to our relationship with God, but we cannot forget that the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged is what we have done for others. Prayer is most precious, for it nourishes a daily commitment to love. Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God’s gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters.

105. **Similarly, the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy.** For “mercy is not only an action of the Father; it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are.” Mercy “is the very foundation of the Church’s life.” In this regard, I would like to reiterate that mercy does not exclude justice and truth; indeed, “we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.” It is “the key to heaven.”

106. Here I think of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who asked which actions of ours are noblest, which external works best show our love for God. Thomas answered unhesitatingly that they are the works of mercy towards our neighbour, even more than our acts of worship: “We worship God by outward sacrifices and gifts, not for his own benefit, but for that of ourselves and our neighbour. For he does not need our sacrifices, but wishes them to be offered to him, in order to stir our devotion and to profit our neighbour. Hence mercy, whereby we supply others’ defects, is a sacrifice more acceptable to him, as conducing more directly to our neighbour’s well-being.”

107. **Those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy. Saint Teresa of Calcutta clearly realized this: “Yes, I have many human faults and failures... But God bends down**

and uses us, you and me, to be his love and his compassion in the world; he bears our sins, our troubles and our faults. He depends on us to love the world and to show how much he loves it. If we are too concerned with ourselves, we will have no time left for others.”

108. Hedonism and consumerism can prove our downfall, for when we are obsessed with our own pleasure, we end up being all too concerned about ourselves and our rights, and we feel a desperate need for free time to enjoy ourselves. We will find it hard to feel and show any real concern for those in need, unless we are able to cultivate a certain simplicity of life, resisting the feverish demands of a consumer society, which leave us impoverished and unsatisfied, anxious to have it all now. Similarly, when we allow ourselves to be caught up in superficial information, instant communication and virtual reality, we can waste precious time and become indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters. Yet even amid this whirlwind of activity, the Gospel continues to resound, offering us the promise of a different life, a healthier and happier life.

109. The powerful witness of the saints is revealed in their lives, shaped by the Beatitudes and the criterion of the final judgement. Jesus’ words are few and straightforward, yet practical and valid for everyone, for Christianity is meant above all to be put into practice. It can also be an object of study and reflection, but only to help us better live the Gospel in our daily lives. I recommend rereading these great biblical texts frequently, referring back to them, praying with them, trying to embody them. They will benefit us; they will make us genuinely happy.

Have a blessed week,

