

Homily at the Vigil of the Stigmata - 16th September, 2023

For the great sweetness and compassion that he drew from every day, from the humility and in following in the footsteps of the Son of God, that which was bitter for his flesh, welcomed him and it felt like sweetness. And so much of it was so painful every day in the sufferings and bitterness that Christ suffered for us, and yet he was so afflicted in soul and body, that he did not care for his own ailments. (Cass 77: FF 1608).

As we make our way up here to La Verna on this night, we encounter feelings that seem to oppose each other, that may even be contradictory, but this allows us a glimpse of something of the mystery of our Brother Francis. In him are entwined sweetness and bitterness, light and darkness, fraternal friendship and distance, even loneliness. When Francis arrived at La Verna in 1224 for St. Michael's Lent, he was a tried man, he was like the grain of wheat that fell onto the ground and that was called upon to die in order to bear fruit. He was a believer who went through what spiritual men call the "spiritual night", which includes the experience of God's silence. It is here that Francis is profoundly purified. In his evangelical vocation Francis had invested the substance of his life, his very self, and to the very end. Seeing the very heart of that call to live the Gospel in the footsteps of the poor and crucified Christ which was questioned by many of his brothers and sisters, this touched him deeply and perhaps led him to doubt the very meaning of his choice.

Here are the contours of the "great temptation" that Francis brings with him to this mountain. He invested all of himself in responding to the call to live with Christ in the Spirit and this was questioned. His pain was great and generated questions:

Did this come from God through all that he had experienced?

What should he give back to God at this time?

How to know himself in truth?

What new steps to take in order to reencounter the Lord and know Him better?

In this we find the situation of darkness with which Francis made his way up to La Verna. It is the point of arrival that began long time before, it began from 1220. It is a decisive moment, a turning point, a new conversion, which always took place in the sign of the Cross, as at *San Damiano* so many years before.

He lived through difficult years because of tension regarding the Rule, that is, the true evangelical life. Diseases afflicted him more and more; he found himself amongst his brothers and the solitude he sought so earnestly. In the twenty years since his conversion, Francis wanted to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Christ and he did so with all the richness of his humanity, between lights and shadows. From here he went towards a transformation that touched the living centre of his being, to the point of truly restoring it to God and to himself. In his deep passion he lived and experienced the life that flows from death, the joy that flourishes in a condition humanly devoid of hope, the fruitfulness in expropriation, freedom within a form of impotence, the

wisdom of madness. It is here that he finds the light of the loving and consoling presence of the Lord.

The Seraphim is the sign of this new light, which pierces his very flesh. Thereupon, Francis responded to the call to follow Christ crucified by allowing himself to conform fully to His death and Resurrection. His baptism is fulfilled and marks his spirit and his own flesh with the sign of fire. He is now assimilated to Christ, one body and one spirit with Him. He can say with Paul: *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!"* Making our way up to La Verna on this evening of the 2023, marking the 800 year anniversary of the Stigmata reminds us of another date: 1993, when Pope St. John Paul II became a pilgrim to La Verna, on the 15th September, whilst in Palermo Blessed Don Pino Puglisi was killed by the mafia. The Pope learned here, right here, of that hopeless gesture: killing a witness, giving voice forever to those who had been suffocated in death; from a violent death, life and hope for many.

From a light that was believed to have been extinguished, to a fire that never ceases to burn. Being here thirty years after that date brings us back to the perfect joy experienced by St. Francis and along with him to the heart of the Gospel. The light of the witnesses of the Gospel accompanies us during the night of these difficult times we live in; it allows us to understand them so we are able to see hope that cannot be extinguished. We need such a light, a light that has crossed the darkness, and a light that makes its way even through the solid rocks. A light that does not dazzle, but lets us see which steps to take, that warms the heart and opens the mind.

The light that tonight again bathes the cliffs of La Verna, making them shine, reminds us of that light that was lit here 800 years ago and that to-day desires to touch us again and make us shine as believers and disciples of Jesus; a light that allows us to shine with luminous faith, in an unshakable hope, with active charity.

In front of the Crucifix, the young Francis prayed as follows: *Most High, glorious God, illuminate the darkness of my core. And give me direct faith, certain hope and perfect charity.* At La Verna, Francis crossed the valley where light and darkness intertwine, he said to God: *Good God, Father of mercy and God of all consolation, deign to manifest Your will to me.* May this same prayer that continued throughout his life reach us tonight: therefore, let us ask the Lord for a living faith for the time we live in, a time that needs God; may it give certain hope for those who seek it, even when it seems to reject it; may that faith give charity that transforms the words of our prayers into life-changing choices.

May the light of this night touch us and transform us and be enkindle in the lives of many.

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