



Homily “Looking at the Bridegroom”
Br. Darko Tepert, General Secretary for Formation and Studies
Basilica of St Clare, 16th July 2024

Dear Sisters

dear Brothers,

this morning, we reflected on the balance between contemplation and activities in our lives. This was a question that posed a serious problem for Francis and his first companions: whether he should withdraw to the hermitages and lead a life of contemplation alone, or whether he should go out to preach the Gospel to all. According to St Bonaventure's account in his *Legenda Major* (LM XII, 2), in his doubt, Francis turned to two people: to Brother Sylvester, described by Bonaventure as one who “devoted himself uninterruptedly to prayer on the mountain above Assisi” and to St Clare with her sisters. Therefore, it was very natural to ask for the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist here today, together with our sisters, in the Basilica of St Clare.

Francis, at the crossroads between the contemplative life and the active life, sought advice from two contemplatives. Perhaps he too was inclined in this direction and hoped to receive an answer that would favour the contemplative life and lead him to a hermitage forever. Instead, the response was different, and St Bonaventure tells us that “the divine will was that he, the herald of Christ, should go out and preach”. This primacy of God's will seems fundamental to me. Francis does not want to decide for himself, he does not want to let himself be taken in by his own desires or needs, he does not want to trust either his own heart or his own intellect. He desires to know God's will and seeks to know it by seeking advice from people he trusts. Shortly afterwards, St Bonaventure recounts how Francis climbed the Mount of La Verna, “straining to seek God's will”, and sought it in the threefold opening of the Gospel, from which he understood that “he had to be conformed to Christ in the sufferings and pains of the Passion” (LM XIII, 2). We thus know that Francis sought to know God's will also through solitude and through the Scriptures. We know that he experienced a similar divine closeness in the contemplation of creation, in encounters with his neighbour and particularly in the Eucharist.

More than the opposition between solitude and preaching, more than the opposition between contemplation and action, Francis saw the opposition between his own will and God's will. And to the latter he always wanted to give precedence.

In fact, when he heard the response of Br Sylvester and St Clare, “he immediately got up, girded his garments and, without the slightest delay, set out. He went with such fervour to carry out the divine command” (LM XII, 2). Once the will of God is known, Francis has no more time to wait. He must leave and obey.

Today, in the first reading, we heard the passage from the prophet Hosea, where God calls his people, like his bride, into the desert. Again, it is not about the will of the people, but the will of God. God takes the initiative. When we respond to such a call from God, which may be the call to life in a hermitage, but also the call to dedicate a half-hour to prayer today, it is then that God speaks to our heart. We must, however, open our ears for God's whisper, for his sweet and gentle word, like the whisper of the breeze in which the prophet Elijah recognised God. Francis, as Thomas of Celano tells us, was always careful not to miss moments of this divine grace. That is why “he spent all his time in holy recollection” (2Cel 94; FF 681). In this way, the doubt between contemplation and activity seems false: Francis' whole life, even when he walks among people, when he preaches, when he works, when he rests, is a contemplation. Because “to contemplate” means to observe God and he is always at work around us.

When the Lord invites us into the desert to speak to our hearts, let us respond according to his wish expressed in the Book of the Prophet Hosea: singing as in the days of our youth. In the desert, the people could remember the beginnings of their relationship with God, during the exodus from Egypt. We are always invited to remember that first moment of our calling, that moment when we understood God's will. We are called to remember and to sing.

If in this place, in the company of our sisters, we would like to take advice from Saint Mother Clare, let us listen to what she says to Saint Agnes: "Look, o most noble queen, at your spouse, the fairest of men, who for your salvation has become the vilest of men, despised, beaten, and scourged all over his body many times, dying in the very anguish of the cross: look at him, consider him, contemplate him, desiring to imitate him" (2Lag 20). In order to follow him, we must contemplate him, and we must allow him to contemplate us. We must look at him and we must allow his gaze to rest on us. His gaze is that gaze full of mercy, recognition, respect and love. It is that gaze with which the bridegroom looks upon his bride, and she, recognising herself in that gaze, cannot but say: 'Yes'.

Let us also try to contemplate our Lord every day and every moment of every day, while we pray, while we work, while we study, while we rest, and let us try to recognise his mercy and his love. And you will see that again you will have to say to him: "Yes, here I am!"