

Homily on the feast of Saint John of the Cross

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Greetings to you all,

The Word of God, we have listened to in this liturgical celebration, helps us to enter into the spirit of the saint we celebrate today, our father and brother John of the Cross, and at the same time, to understand the gift of the solemn profession of religious vows, which these five brothers of ours are about to make.

Before all, God's Word speaks to us all of our dignity as human beings: "because you are precious in my eyes and glorious, and because I love you" as the Lord has said to us by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading. As well, the apostle Paul echoed this by stating that we are not slaves, but sons and heirs of God, called to share in his glory. God's glory is a mysterious goal that we can only glimpse at from afar as in a mirror, because it is beyond our capacity of understanding and even our desires. Finally, in the Gospel, Jesus asks for us from the Father the greatest and even more inconceivable thing: that we may all be one in him as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus in the Father. In this way, Jesus clearly reveals to us that he is the glory of God: he is the mystery of unity, of communion, of finally overcoming solitude and division.

How beautiful and consoling is all this! We should often look towards this horizon, otherwise the journey will seem to us too hard, too long and too demanding. I believe that one of the secrets on the road to holiness, particularly that of St John of the Cross, is to nourish this call in the heart, to keep alight the desire for great things, without limiting either the heart or the mind with tiny projects, with tiny earthly satisfactions.

This is what our brothers are about to promise solemnly before the Church: they are committing themselves to remain in this unceasing tension, in this unsatisfied desire, in this openness and docility to God's designs. It is for this reason they are making to God vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, because they desire to be men of a measure that is full, high, that which God has thought of for his sons.

The Word of God, however, if we have listened to it with attention, speaks to us as well of another dimension of the human condition, darker and uncomfortable: our weakness, our ignorance. "We do not even know what we should ask", writes Paul. Fears and desires at war among themselves, drag us, confuse us, make us lose the way. As Isaiah says in his poetic language, we

fear that we have to cross rivers and walk through fire. However, there is no contradiction between the glory for which we are destined and the recognition of this frailty and poverty. On the contrary: only by accepting totally our own nothingness, can we arrive at everything. Only by descending into the dark depths of our human being, can we encounter God who lifts us up to himself on eagle's wings. So the meaning of the vows that our brothers now are going to make is also this: be prepared to experience their own weakness, their being miserable and sinners, without being frightened, without escaping, but humbly remaining in their own nothingness, trusting in the merciful love of God. Sometimes I meet proud religious, whose only preoccupation seem to be to defend their own rights, or to glorify themselves through their own merits. This scares me, not because it is a sin, but because it is a living contradiction, a total loss of meaning. If we are not disposed to take a road of abasement and nakedness, it is better to seek a different way than that of the religious life.

There is a third topic about which the Word of God speaks to us this evening, which was fundamental for John of the Cross as well as for Teresa and the other saints of Carmel; that of the truth: "Holy Father, consecrate us in the truth. Your word is truth". As for ourselves, do we still believe in the truth? Is it still important for us to accept the truth of facts, the truth of who we really are? Are we capable of telling the truth? We live in an era of *post-truth*: what influences the decisions of persons are not facts, but impressions, feelings, The "I like it-I don't like it" of social networks. Thus the circle closes in on itself and, as well, *verum* is devoured by the culture of "post" (post-modern, post-Christian, post-human, etc.).

We are Discalced Carmelites, sons of Teresa and John of the Cross. It appears that our speciality is spirituality. According to my way of thinking, the spiritual life, by its radicality, can and ought to be the last defensive line of the truth. Often, however, it comes to grief by the fog of tastes and emotions. I advise everyone, and especially our brothers who are about to commit their lives to a way of spiritual life, to re-read the letter John of the Cross wrote to a Carmelite religious in 1589: it is a prophetic text, which strikes us by its timeliness and logical rigour by which it distinguishes between feelings and love. God is reached through love, which is God himself in his being and is the love by which God loves us. Our feelings, happiness and sadness, pleasures and disgust, are not without value: they are "motives for loving", but they are not love. If they are transformed into ends in themselves, the soul shrinks into itself and becomes closed to God.

Dear brothers, we need to listen again to these words, meditate upon them often; they are words from a person who has carried out in depth the experience of vocation and, because of this, is capable of forming us. If there is something I would like to wish you on the day of your solemn profession, it is precisely this: that your training be not limited to these first years of religious life.

Continue reading the writings of our saints, continue drawing from them the words of love and light which open out your hearts and make them capable of God.