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Francis speaks of church harmony, service to the poor

Thomas C. Fox | May. 19, 2013 NCR Today

Speaking before a packed St. Peter's Square on Pentecost, Pope Francis Sunday, once again stressed the need "to go out" of the church and to serve the poor.

He made his remarks in off the cuff [1]comments during a homily on always being prepared for the new, on living the faith in diversity and harmony with the church, and on going out to live and preach the faith. These, he said, are characteristics of a life of the Spirit.

Gospel preaching, with emphases on the church mission, founded in the Spirit and carried out by meeting the needs of those on the peripheries of life, in service to the poor, these have become the major pillars of this young pontificate.

"If we step outside of ourselves, we will find poverty," Francis said"Today, and it breaks my heart to say it, finding a homeless person who has died of cold, is not news. Today, the news is scandals, that is news, but the many children who don't have food - that's not news. This is grave. We can't rest easy while things are this way."

"We cannot become starched Christians, too polite, who speak of theology calmly over tea. We have to become courageous Christians and seek out those (who need help most)," he said.

Francis said the world was going through not just an economic crisis but a crisis of values.

"This is happening today. If investments in banks fall, it is a tragedy and people say 'what are we going to do?' but if people die of hunger, have nothing to eat or suffer from poor health, that's nothing. This is our crisis today. A Church that is poor and for the poor has to fight this mentality," he said.

Reflecting on a passage from Acts, Francis built his official remarks [2] on three words linked to the working of the Holy Spirit: newness, harmony and mission.

1. Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are the ones who build, program and plan our lives in accordance with our own ideas, our own comfort, our own preferences. This is also the case when it comes to God. Often we follow him, we accept him, but only up to a certain point. It is hard to abandon ourselves to him with complete trust, allowing the Holy Spirit to be the soul and guide of our lives in our every decision. We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to his own. Yet throughout the history of salvation, whenever God reveals himself, he brings newness and change, and demands our complete trust: ? Let us ask ourselves: Are we open to ?God?s surprises?? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths, which God?s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures, which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?

2. A second thought: the Holy Spirit would appear to create disorder in the Church, since he brings the diversity

of charisms and gifts; yet all this, by his working, is a great source of wealth, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which does not mean uniformity, but which leads everything back to harmony. In the Church, it is the Holy Spirit who creates harmony. One of the Fathers of the Church has an expression which I love: the Holy Spirit himself is harmony ? ?Ipse harmonia est?. Only the Spirit can awaken diversity, plurality and multiplicity, while at the same time building unity. Here too, when we are the ones who try to create diversity and close ourselves up in what makes us different and other, we bring division. When we are the ones who want to build unity in accordance with our human plans, we end up creating uniformity, standardization. But if instead we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit, richness, variety and diversity never become a source of conflict, because he impels us to experience variety within the communion of the Church. ...

Journeying together in the Church, under the guidance of her pastors who possess a special charism and ministry, is a sign of the working of the Holy Spirit. Having a sense of the Church is something fundamental for every Christian, every community and every movement. It is the Church which brings Christ to me, and me to Christ; parallel journeys are dangerous! When we venture beyond (proagon) the Church?s teaching and community, and do not remain in them, we are not one with the God of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Jn 9). So let us ask ourselves: Am I open to the harmony of the Holy Spirit, overcoming every form of exclusivity? Do I let myself be guided by him, living in the Church and with the Church?

3. The Holy Spirit draws us into the mystery of the living God and saves us from the threat of a Church which is gnostic and self-referential, closed in on herself; he impels us to open the doors and go forth to proclaim and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, to communicate the joy of faith, the encounter with Christ. The Holy Spirit is the soul of mission. ? The Holy Spirit makes us look to the horizon and drive us to the very outskirts of existence in order to proclaim life in Jesus Christ. Let us ask ourselves: do we tend to stay closed in on ourselves, on our group, or do we let the Holy Spirit open us to mission?

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