

PASTORAL LETTER

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CHOICES PLEASING TO THE LORD

“Rise and do not be afraid” (Mt 17, 7). These are the words that Jesus told his disciples – Peter, James and his brother John – following his experience on Mount Tabor. They witnessed his glory; they heard the voice of the Father about Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise and do not be afraid” (Mt 17, 5-7).

The words of Jesus are words of courage because it is not easy to look upon the Lord in his glory while at the same time looking upon him on the cross in his suffering and agony, and at the same time saying: “I will follow him”. This is what is expected of us as His disciples; it is not always easy to be disciples of Jesus. It demands of us a process of awareness, of truth, of humility, a process that we call discernment.

The choice between good and evil

Saint Paul The Apostle, writing to the Thessalonians said: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances ... Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5, 16-22). Many a time, we are faced with a choice between good and evil. John the apostle, writing to the first Christian community said: “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4, 1). Jesus himself said that the tree is recognized by its fruit. He also tells us: “No one can serve two masters; for either he hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Mt 6:24).

The Christian life is a continuous series of choices, and our prayer is that we choose that which is good. As Saint Paul teaches, the Spirit of the Lord leads us to the good fruit of love, patience, truth, and restraint, while the evil spirit sows division, hatred, lies, envy and everything else that creates havoc amongst us.

Choices that please the Lord

We, Bishops, would like to encourage Christians in Malta and Gozo, in their daily struggle, to make choices pleasing to the Lord. Pope Francis reminds us that the Christian life is one that commits us to a struggle with the wickedness in our hearts. The Pope writes: “We are not asked to be flawless, but to keep growing and wanting to grow as we advance along the path of the Gospel; our arms must never grow slack” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 151).

The Pope is echoing the words of Jesus: “Do not be afraid” (Mt 17, 7), but he is also preparing us for the struggle that we face when we discern the will of God for us. The Pope teaches us that when we are in the presence of the Lord, we need to ask ourselves: Lord, what are you telling me at this moment in time by this passage from your word? What is it about my life that you want to change by this passage? What troubles me about it? Why am I not interested in this? What do I find pleasant in this passage from your word? What is it about this word that encourages me? What is appealing to me? Why is it so? When we seek to serve the Lord, it is only natural that we experience temptation. One of these moments of temptation is when we simply feel troubled or burdened, and to turn away. Another common temptation is when we think that the word of God only applies to others, and so avoid applying it to our own life. It can also happen that we look for excuses to diminish the message of Jesus. Other times we think that God is demanding too much of us, asking for a decision which we are not yet prepared to make. The Pope writes that this leads many people to miss and lose the joy of the encounter with God’s word; but this would mean forgetting that no one is more patient than God our Father, that no one is more understanding and willing to wait. He always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. He simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before him, and that we be willing to continue to grow, asking from him what we ourselves cannot as yet achieve (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 153).

Assisting Christian couples

In the light of these words by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in English *The Joy of the Gospel*, we, Bishops, gave our priests a number of criteria to assist couples who find themselves in complex situations, either in their married life, or in their life together. We, Bishops, are not giving permission to a category of people to receive Communion without going through the necessary process of discernment. In no way do we want to lessen the power of the Lord’s Gospel on the family and marriage. At one with the heart of the Pope, we, Bishops, would like to draw the heart of the Church closer to each and every one of you, to each and every one of our brothers and sisters who are going through difficult situations. The priest, in our name and on behalf of the Church, does not hide the words of Jesus, nor does he fail to convey the merciful heart of the Lord.

As the Pope teaches, the temptations that we mentioned apply to everyone. They also apply to those who are preparing for marriage. As a Christian community, we are committed to announce marriage as it has been created by God: a permanent union between one man and one woman, open to the gift of life. The fact that we care for our brothers and sisters who have made different choices in their affective life, does not in any way detract from the beauty of the Gospel that has been from the very beginning the Gospel of the Joy of love between one man and one woman.

Choices faced by Maltese society

Maltese society, like every other society, must face important choices regarding its future, regarding the future of generations to come. Our prayer, as your Bishops, is that the people of Malta choose the way that leads to life and peace, and that our people will never be afraid to listen to the voice of the Lord Jesus that has appeared today in all his glory on Mount Tabor. “Rely on the power of God” (2 Tim 1, 8), St Paul writes to Timothy: Rely on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 1, 8-9).

We impart upon you our Pastoral Blessing.

Today, 1st March 2017, the beginning of Holy Lent.

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