

Reflect, rebuild en see

23 September 2021

Mass with the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe: homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

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Today the word of God presents us with three words that challenge us as Christians and Bishops in Europe: reflect, rebuild and see.

Reflect. So the Lord tells us, through the prophet Haggai. Twice he says to the people: "Reflect on your ways!" (Hag 1:5.7). Which "ways" should God's people reflect on? Let us hear what the Lord has to say: "Is it time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (v. 4). The people, upon returning from exile, had been concerned about rebuilding their homes; now, they are comfortably ensconced at home, while the house of God lies in ruins, with no one to rebuild it. Those words – "Reflect on your ways!" – are challenging because today, in Europe, we Christians can be tempted to remain comfortably ensconced in our structures, our homes and our churches, in the security provided by our traditions, content with a certain degree of consensus, while all around us churches are emptying and Jesus is increasingly forgotten.

Consider how many people no longer hunger and thirst for God! Not because they are evil, but because there is no one to awaken in them a hunger for faith and to satisfy that thirst in the human heart, that "innate and perpetual thirst" of which Dante speaks (*Par.*, II, 19) and which the dictatorship of consumerism gently but insistently tries to suppress. So many people are induced to feel only material needs, and not a need for God. Certainly, we are "preoccupied" by this, but are we really "occupied" with responding to it? It is easy, but ultimately pointless, to judge those who do not believe or to list the reasons for secularization. The word of God challenges us to look to ourselves. Do we feel concern and compassion for those who have not had the joy of encountering Jesus or who have lost that joy? Are we comfortable because deep down our lives go on as usual, or are we troubled by seeing so many of our brothers and sisters far from the joy of Jesus?

Through the prophet Haggai, the Lord asks his people to reflect on another thing: "You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves but no one is warm" (v. 6). The people, in a word, had everything they wanted, but they were not happy. What did they lack? Jesus suggests the answer in words that seem to echo those of Haggai: "I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, naked and you did not give me clothing" (Mt 25:42-43). Lack of charity causes unhappiness, because love alone satisfies the human heart. Concerned only with their own affairs, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had lost the savour of gratuity. This can also be our own problem: concentrating on various positions in the Church, on discussions, agendas and strategies, and losing sight of the real programme, that of the Gospel: the impulse of charity, the fervour of gratuity. The solution to problems and self-absorption is always that of gratuitous gift. There is no other. This is something to reflect on.

After reflection, there is another step: rebuilding. "Build my house", God says through the prophet (Hag 1:8), and the people rebuild the Temple. They stop being content with a peaceful present and start working for the future. Yet since some were opposed to this, the Book of Chronicles tells us that the people worked with one hand on stones, in order to build, and the other hand on the sword, in order to defend this rebuilding process. It was no easy thing to rebuild the temple. This is what is required to build the European common house: to leave behind short-term expedience and to return to that farsighted vision of the founding fathers, what I would dare to call a prophetic vision of the whole. They did not seek a fleeting consensus, but dreamt of a future for all. This is how the walls of the European house were erected, and only in this way can they be consolidated. The same is true for the Church, the house of God. To make her beautiful and welcoming, we need, together, to look to the future, not to restore the past. Sadly, a certain "restorationism" of the past is currently in fashion, one that kills us all. Certainly, we must begin from the foundations, yes truly from our roots, because that is where rebuilding starts: from the Church's living tradition, which is based on what is essential, the Good News, closeness and witness. We need to rebuild from her foundations the Church of every time and place, from worship of God and love of neighbour, and not from our own tastes, not from any alliances or negotiations that we might make for defending the Church or Christianity.

Dear brothers, I would like to thank you for this work of rebuilding that you are pursuing by God's grace; it is not easy. Thank you for these first fifty years in the service of the Church and of Europe. Let us encourage one another, without ever becoming discouraged or yielding to resignation. The Lord is calling us to a splendid work, the work of making his house ever more welcoming, so that everyone can enter and dwell there, so that the Church can have doors open to all and that no one will be tempted to think only of guarding the doors and

changing the locks, those simple temptations. No, change takes place elsewhere: it comes from the roots. It is from there that rebuilding comes.

The people of Israel rebuilt the Temple with their own hands. So did the great rebuilders of the faith on this continent. Let us look to its patrons. They did their small part, trusting in God. I think of saints like Martin, Francis, Dominic, Pio of Pietrelcina, whose feast we celebrate today; patrons like Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget, Catherine of Siena and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. They began with themselves, with changing their own lives by accepting God's grace. They were not concerned about dark times, hardships and those divisions that are always present. They did not waste time criticizing or laying blame. They lived the Gospel, without worrying about relevance or politics. Thus, with the gentle strength of God's love, they embodied his style of closeness, compassion and tenderness – for that is God's style. They built monasteries, reclaimed land, enlivened the spirit of individuals and countries. They did not have a “social” programme, but the Gospel alone. And they carried on with the Gospel.

Rebuild my house. Here the verb “rebuild” is in the plural. All rebuilding takes place together, in unity, with others. Visions may differ, but unity must always be preserved. For if we keep the grace of the whole, the Lord keeps building, even when we ourselves fall short. The grace of the whole. This is our call: to be Church, together, as one Body. This is our vocation as pastors: to gather the flock; not to scatter it or to keep it enclosed by fine fences, which would in fact kill it. Rebuilding means becoming artisans of communion, weavers of unity at every level: not by stratagems but by the Gospel.

If we rebuild in this way, we will enable our brothers and sisters to see. This is the third word, which comes at the end of today's Gospel. Herod tried to “see” Jesus (cf. Lk 9:9). Now as then, many people talk about Jesus. In those days, they said: “John is risen from the dead... Elijah has appeared... one of the ancient prophets has arisen” (Lk 9:7-8). All those people respected Jesus, but they didn't grasp his newness; they fit him into preconceived notions: John, Elijah, the prophets. Jesus, however, cannot be squeezed into the boxes of hearsay or *déjà vu*. Jesus is always new, always. The encounter with him always astonishes, and if you do not feel that astonishment in the encounter, you have not encountered Jesus.

So many people in Europe see the faith as *déjà vu*, a relic of the past. Why? Because they have not seen Jesus at work in their own lives. Often this is because we, by our lives, have not sufficiently shown him to them. God makes himself seen in the faces and actions of men and women transformed by his presence. If Christians, instead of radiating the contagious joy of the Gospel, keep speaking in an outworn intellectualistic and moralistic religious language, people will not be able to see the Good Shepherd. They will not recognize the One who loves each of his sheep, calls them by name, and bears them on his shoulders. They will not see the One whose incredible passion we preach: for it is a consuming passion, a passion for mankind. This divine, merciful and overpowering love is itself the perennial newness of the Gospel. It demands of us, dear brothers, wise and bold decisions, made in the name of the mad love with which Christ has saved us. Jesus does not ask us to make arguments for God, he asks us to show him, in the same way the saints did, not by words but by our lives. He calls us to prayer and poverty, creativity and gratuity. Let us help today's Europe – faint with a weariness that is Europe's current malady – to rediscover the ever youthful face of Jesus and his Bride. How can we fail to devote ourselves completely to making all people see this unfading beauty?