

60th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Saint Peter's Basilica

Tuesday, 11 October 2022

Memorial of Saint John XXIII, Pope

“Do you love me?” These are the first words that Jesus speaks to Peter in the Gospel that we have just heard (*Jn* 21:15). His final words are: “Feed my sheep” (v. 17). On the anniversary of the opening of the [Second Vatican Council](#), we can sense that those same words of the Lord are also addressed to us, to us as Church: *Do you love me? Feed my sheep.*

First: *Do you love me?* It is a question, for Jesus' style is not so much to offer answers as to ask questions, questions that challenge our lives. The Lord, who “from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends and lives among them” ([Dei Verbum](#), 2), continues to ask the Church, his Bride: “Do you love me?” The [Second Vatican Council](#) was one great response to this question. To rekindle her love for the Lord, the Church, for the first time in her history, devoted a Council to examining herself and reflecting on her nature and mission. She saw herself once more as a mystery of grace generated by love; she saw herself anew as the People of God, the Body of Christ, the living temple of the Holy Spirit!

This is the first way to look at the Church: *from above*. Indeed, the Church needs first to be viewed from on high, with God's eyes, eyes full of love. Let us ask ourselves if we, in the Church, start with God and his loving gaze upon us. We are always tempted to start from ourselves rather than from God, to put our own agendas before the Gospel, to let ourselves be caught up in the winds of worldliness in order to chase after the fashions of the moment or to turn our back on the time that Providence has granted us, in order to retrace our steps. Yet let us be careful: both the “progressivism” that lines up behind the world and the “traditionalism” – or “looking backwards” – that longs for a bygone world are not evidence of love, but of infidelity. They are forms of a Pelagian selfishness that puts our own tastes and plans above the love that pleases God, the simple, humble and faithful love that Jesus asked of Peter.

Do you love me? Let us rediscover the Council in order to restore primacy to God, to what is essential: to a Church madly in love with its Lord and with all the men and women whom he loves; to a Church that is rich in Jesus and poor in assets; to a Church that is free and freeing. This was the path that the Council pointed out to the Church. It led her to return, like Peter in the Gospel, to Galilee, to the sources of her first love; to rediscover God's holiness in her own poverty (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 8c; chapter 5. Each one of us also has his or her own Galilee, the Galilee of our first love, and certainly today we are all called to return to our own Galilee in order to hear the voice of the Lord: "Follow me". And there, to find once more in the gaze of the crucified and risen Lord a joy that had faded; to focus upon Jesus. To rediscover our joy, for a Church that has lost its joy has lost its love. Towards the end of his life, Pope John wrote: "This life of mine, now nearing its sunset, could find no better end than in the concentration of all my thoughts in Jesus, the Son of Mary... a great and constant friendship with Jesus, contemplated as a Child and upon the Cross, and adored in the Blessed Sacrament" (*Journal of a Soul*). This is our view from on high; this is our ever-living source: Jesus, the Galilee of love, Jesus who calls us, Jesus who asks us: "Do you love me?"

Brothers and sisters, let us return to the Council's pure sources of love. Let us rediscover the Council's passion and renew our own passion for the Council! Immersed in the mystery of the Church, Mother and Bride, let us also say, with [Saint John XXIII](#): *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia!* (*Address at the Opening of the Council*, 11 October 1962). May the Church be overcome with joy. If she should fail to rejoice, she would deny her very self, for she would forget the love that begot her. Yet how many of us are unable to live the faith with joy, without grumbling and criticizing? A Church in love with Jesus has no time for quarrels, gossip and disputes. May God free us from being critical and intolerant, harsh and angry! This is not a matter of style but of love. For those who love, as the Apostle Paul teaches, do everything without murmuring (cf. *Phil 2:14*). Lord, teach us your own lofty gaze; teach us to look at the Church as you see her. And when we are critical and disgruntled, let us remember that to be Church means to bear witness to the beauty of your love, to live our lives as a response to your question: *Do you love me?* And not to act as if we were at a funeral wake.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. With that second verb, *feed*, Jesus expresses the kind of love that he desires from Peter. So let us now reflect on Peter. He was a fisherman whom Jesus made a fisher of men (cf. *Lk 5:10*). Jesus assigns

him a new role, that of a shepherd, something entirely new to him. This was in fact a turning point in Peter's life, for while fishermen are concerned with hauling a catch to *themselves*, shepherds are concerned with *others*, with feeding others. Shepherds live with their flocks; they feed the sheep and come to love them. A shepherd is not "above" the nets – like a fisherman – but "in the midst of" his sheep. A shepherd stands in front of the people to mark the way, in the midst of the people as one of them, and behind the people in order to be close to the stragglers. A shepherd is not above, like a fisherman, but in the midst.

This is the second way of looking at the Church that we learn from the Council: looking *around*. In other words, being in the world with others without ever feeling superior to others, being servants of that higher realm which is the Kingdom of God (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 5); bringing the good news of the Gospel into people's lives and languages (cf. [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#), 36), sharing their joys and hopes (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1). Being *in the midst* of the people, not *above* the people, which is the bad sin of clericalism that kills the sheep rather than guiding them or helping them grow. How timely the Council remains! It helps us reject the temptation to enclose ourselves within the confines of our own comforts and convictions. The Council helps us imitate God's approach, which the prophet Ezekiel has described to us today: "Seek the lost sheep and lead back to the fold the stray, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak" (cf. *Ezek* 34:16).

Feed: the Church did not hold the Council in order to admire herself, but to give herself to others. Indeed, our holy and hierarchical Mother, springing from the heart of the Trinity, exists for the sake of love. She is a priestly people (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 10ff.), meant not to stand out in the eyes of the world, but to serve the world. Let us not forget that the People of God is born "extrovert" and renews its youth by self-giving, for it is a sacrament of love, "a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" ([Lumen Gentium](#), 1). Brothers and sisters, let us return to the Council, which rediscovered the living river of Tradition without remaining mired in traditions. The Council rediscovered the source of love, not to remain on mountain heights, but to cascade downwards as a channel of mercy for all. Let us return to the Council and move beyond ourselves, resisting the *temptation to self-absorption*, which is a way of being worldly. Once more, the Lord tells his Church: *feed!* And as she feeds, she leaves behind nostalgia for the past, regret at the passing of

former influence, and attachment to power. For you, the holy People of God, are a *pastoral people*. You are not here to shepherd yourselves, or to be on the climb, but to shepherd *others* – all others – with love. And if it is fitting to show a particular concern, it should be for those whom God loves most: the poor and the outcast (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 8; [Gaudium et Spes](#), 1). The Church is meant to be, as Pope John put it, “the Church of all, and particularly the Church of the poor” (*Radio Message to the faithful worldwide a month prior to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, 11 September 1962).

Do you love me? The Lord then says: “Feed *my sheep*”. He does not mean just some of the sheep, but all of them, for he loves them all, affectionately referring to them as “mine”. The Good Shepherd looks out and wants his flock to be united, under the guidance of the Pastors he has given them. He wants us – and this is the third way of looking at the Church – *to see the whole*, all of us together. The Council reminds us that the Church is a communion in the image of the Trinity (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 4.13). The devil, on the other hand, wants to sow the darnel of division. Let us not give in to his enticements or to the *temptation of polarization*. How often, in the wake of the Council, did Christians prefer to choose sides in the Church, not realizing that they were breaking their Mother’s heart! How many times did they prefer to cheer on their own party rather than being servants of all? To be progressive or conservative rather than being brothers and sisters? To be on the “right” or “left”, rather than with Jesus? To present themselves as “guardians of the truth” or “pioneers of innovation” rather than seeing themselves as humble and grateful children of Holy Mother Church. All of us are children of God, all brothers and sisters in the Church, all of us making up the Church, all of us. That is how the Lord wants us to be. We are *his sheep*, his flock, and we can only be so together and as one. Let us overcome all polarization and preserve our communion. May all of us increasingly “be one”, as Jesus prayed before sacrificing his life for us (cf. *Jn 17:21*). And may Mary, Mother of the Church, help us in this. May the yearning for unity grow within us, the desire to commit ourselves to full communion among all those who believe in Christ. Let us leave aside the “isms”, for God’s people do not like polarization. The people of God is the holy faithful people of God: this is the Church. It is good that today, as during the Council, representatives of other Christian communities are present with us. Thank you! Thank you for being here, thank you for your presence!

We thank you, Lord, for the gift of the Council. You who love us, free us from the presumption of self-sufficiency and from the spirit of worldly criticism. Prevent us from excluding ourselves from unity. You who lovingly feed us, lead us forth from the shadows of self-absorption. You who desire that we be a united flock, save us from the forms of polarization and the “isms” that are the devil’s handiwork. And we, your Church, with Peter and like Peter, now say to you: “Lord, you know everything; you know that we love you” (cf. *Jn* 21:17).

With thanks to [The Vatican](#).