

Feast of St. Matthew
Homily of Bishop Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
September 21, 2021

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. The role of Apostles in the mission of the Catholic Church is well articulated in Preface II of the Apostles that we will hear later in this Mass: “For you have built your Church to stand firm on apostolic foundations, to be a lasting sign of your holiness on earth and offer all humanity your heavenly teaching.”

Many of us remember one of the initial interviews of Pope Francis when he reflected on Caravaggio’s painting, “The Calling of St. Matthew.” He said: “That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew...It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: he holds on to his money as if to say, ‘No not me! No this money is mine.’ Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.”

Jesus calls Matthew directly from his corrupt tax-collecting and there must have been some disbelief on the part of Matthew that he was being called and some initial resistance to the call.

But Jesus’ gaze is powerful and breaks through the hard-shelled sinfulness and resistance of the corrupt tax-collector as He breaks through our sinfulness and resistance.

It is beautiful, powerful and moving that our Holy Father would identify with the Caravaggio portrait and the public sinner Matthew.

In his April 13, 2016 General Audience in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis reflected on St. Matthew. He writes: “Like Matthew the tax collector, each of us trusts in the grace of the Lord regardless of our sins. We are all sinners, we have all sinned. By calling Matthew, Jesus shows sinners that he does not look at their past, at their social status, at external conventions, but rather, he opens a new future to them. I once heard a beautiful saying: ‘There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without

a future.’ This is what Jesus does. There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future. It is enough to respond to the call with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of perfect people, but of disciples on a journey, who follow the Lord because they know they are sinners and in need of his pardon. Thus, Christian life is a school of humility which opens us to grace.”

For anyone who would like to pray the Caravaggio “Call of Matthew” painting that has inspired Pope Francis so deeply or read and pray Pope Francis’ Audience on St. Matthew, please see the printed version of this homily available at drvc.org.

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 13 April 2016*

[Multimedia]

14. I desire mercy, and not sacrifice (Mt 9:13)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have heard the Gospel account of the call of Matthew. Matthew was a “publican”, namely, a tax collector on behalf of the Roman Empire, and for this reason was considered a public sinner. But Jesus calls Matthew to follow him and to become his disciple. Matthew accepts, and invites Jesus along with the disciples to have dinner at his house. Thus an argument arises between the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus over the fact that the latter sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners. “You cannot go to these people’s homes!”, they said. Jesus does not stay away from them, but instead goes to their houses and sits beside them; this means that they too can become his disciples. It is likewise true that being Christian does not render us flawless. Like Matthew the tax collector, each of us trusts in the grace of the Lord regardless of our sins. We are all sinners, we have all sinned. By calling Matthew, Jesus shows sinners that he does not look at their past, at their social status, at external conventions, but rather, he opens a new future to them. I once heard a beautiful saying: “There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future”. This is what Jesus does. There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future.

It is enough to respond to the call with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of perfect people, but of disciples on a journey, who follow the Lord because they know they are sinners and in need of his pardon. Thus, Christian life is a school of humility which opens us to grace.

Such behavior is not understood by those who have the arrogance to believe they are “just” and to believe they are better than others. Hubris and pride do not allow one to recognize him- or herself as in need of salvation, but rather prevent one from seeing the merciful face of God and from acting with mercy. They are a barrier. Hubris and pride are a barrier that prevents a relationship with God. Yet, this is precisely Jesus’ mission: coming in search of each of us, in order to heal our wounds and to call us to follow him with love. He says so explicitly: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (v. 12). Jesus presents himself as a good physician! He proclaims the Kingdom of God, and the signs of its coming are clear: He heals people from disease, frees them from fear, from death, and from the devil. Before Jesus, no sinner is excluded — no sinner is excluded! Because the healing power of God knows no infirmity that cannot be healed; and this must give us confidence and open our heart to the Lord, that he may come and heal us.

By calling sinners to his table, he heals them, restoring to them the vocation that they believed had been lost and which the Pharisees had forgotten: that of being guests at God’s banquet. According to the prophecy of Isaiah: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined.... It will be said on that day, ‘Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation’” (25:6, 9).

When the Pharisees see only sinners among the invited, and refuse to be seated with them, Jesus to the contrary reminds them that they too are guests at God’s table. Thus, sitting at the table with Jesus means being transformed and saved by him. In the Christian community the table of Jesus is twofold: there is the table of the Word and there is the table of the Eucharist (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 21). These are the medicines with which the Divine Physician heals us and nourishes us. With the first — the Word — He reveals himself and invites us to a dialogue among friends. Jesus was not afraid to dialogue with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes.... No, he was not afraid: he loved everyone! His Word permeates us and, like a scalpel, operates deep in the heart so as to free us from the evil lurking in our life. At times this Word is painful because it discloses deception, reveals false excuses, lays bare hidden truths; but at the same time it illuminates and purifies, gives strength and hope; it is an invaluable tonic on our journey of faith. The Eucharist, for its part, nourishes us with

the very life of Jesus, like an immensely powerful remedy and, in a mysterious way, it continuously renews the grace of our Baptism. By approaching the Eucharist we are nourished of the Body and Blood of Jesus, and by entering us, Jesus joins us to his Body!

Concluding that dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus reminds them of a word of the prophet Hosea (6:6): “Go and learn what this means, ‘*I desire mercy, and not sacrifice*’” (Mt 9:13). Addressing the people of Israel, the prophet reproaches them because the prayers they raised were but empty and incoherent words. Despite God’s covenant and mercy, the people often lived with a “façade-like” religiosity, without living in depth the command of the Lord. This is why the prophet emphasized: “I desire mercy”, namely the loyalty of a heart that recognizes its own sins, that mends its ways and returns to be faithful to the covenant with God. “And not sacrifice”: without a penitent heart, every religious action is ineffective! Jesus also applies this prophetic phrase to human relationships: the Pharisees were very religious in form, but were not willing to sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners; they did not recognize the opportunity for mending their ways and thus for healing; they did not place mercy in the first place: although being faithful guardians of the Law, they showed that they did not know the heart of God! It is as though you were given a parcel with a gift inside and, rather than going to open the gift, you look only at the paper it is wrapped in: only appearances, the form, and not the core of the grace, of the gift that is given!

Dear brothers and sisters, all of us are invited to the table of the Lord. Let us make our own this invitation and sit beside the Lord together with his disciples. Let us learn to look with mercy and to recognize each of them as fellow guests at the table. We are all disciples who need to experience and live the comforting word of Jesus. We all need to be nourished by the mercy of God, for it is from this source that our salvation flows. Thank you!