

A feast for the conversion of the heart

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Dear brothers, sisters and lay people,

I am writing to you on the eve of the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, a celebration associated with the fragile light of the candles. In many places this holy day is also associated with the feast of religious life. I would dare to say that it is a feast for the conversion of the heart. Not as a conversion that is already accomplished but as an unfinished and permanent task: "until our hearts rest in you", as Augustine, a tireless seeker of God and a good connoisseur of the human heart, reminds us.

We know from experience that conversion is not merely the fruit of a personal decision. It is a gift, an unexpected event that changes our heart and whose meaning we discover *a posteriori*, as a grace of the Lord. It often comes as a grace that costs us: an obedience where we did not want to go, an illness that wounds us like an unjust dart of fate, the sudden loss of people dear to us, failure where we had put

so much energy, the disillusionment of others and of ourselves, and not knowing what to say to those who live for years under conditions of threat and war wondering: "When, Lord, will it end? Each of us can recall in our own lives such moments that may have contributed to a conversion of heart.

The journey to the human heart is a long one. These moments of conversion bring us closer to the heart, which is both the source of what is most noble and at times most abject in the human person. "God protect me from myself" sings Chico César, a Brazilian singer.

However, the heart is also where God puts his light and waits for us. He knows our hearts better than we know them ourselves: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person

according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." (Jer 17:9-10). To ask for the grace for a conversion of heart is to ask the Lord, with confidence and without fear, to probe and scrutinise us. Discovering God's presence in our heart heals us. Only before his eyes will we know what our heart is really worth.

This is what Simeon announces to Mary in the temple: your son Jesus will be a stone of scandal and a sign of contradiction for Israel and a wound in your heart. This is the mysterious work of the healing of the heart. What is most genuine in the heart will appear in full light for those

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who are willing to let themselves be enlightened by the Lord, a light that reaches our abysses and which comes to us when we do not understand. We ourselves will be surprised by the depths of goodness, of justice, of self-giving, which emerge from the deepest part of ourselves.

In a recent interview on Italian TV, Pope Francis was asked: "What is the most urgent reform in the Church?" He replied: "The renewal of hearts... The heart must be renewed every day". Whilst it is true that structures can be adapted, updated or even abandoned over time, if they are not accompanied by a change of heart, they serve no use.

In this year in which we celebrate our General Chapters, let us ask the Lord to give each one of us, brothers, sisters and laity, the grace of a conversion of heart, that we may belong more and more to the Lord, welcoming one another with kindness, despairing of no one, and associating ourselves with others in the patient work for peace.

Faternally,

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