Pope on Palm Sunday: God’s mercy calls us to compassion

Argentinian Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Vice Dean of the College of Cardinals, presided over the Palm Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Passion in Saint Peter’s Square on behalf of Pope Francis who is limiting his exposure to the elements in order to continue recovery from his respiratory conditions. An estimated forty thousand faithful gathered in the Square.

Cardinal Sandri read **Pope Francis’s homily** for the Mass marking the beginning of Holy Week celebrations that commemorate the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. Pope Francis recalled how on Palm Sunday, we remember the crowds who greeted Jesus with festive joy as he entered Jerusalem, and then only a few days later when Jesus would leave the city condemned, bearing the cross on a path of pain and sorrow.

Simon of Cyrene

Reflecting on the person of Simon of Cyrene in today’s Gospel account who was seized by the Roman soldiers and forced to carry Jesus’ cross for a time, the Pope looked at how this person became personally involved in the Lord’s passion, even if he did not choose to be. “Jesus’ cross becomes Simon’s cross”, he noted. He said Simon’s actions appear to be ambivalent. He was forced to carry the cross of Jesus on the way to Calvary, thus becoming personally involved the Lord’s passion even if that would not have been his intention. He observed how Simon of Cyrene acts, but does not speak, and that there is no dialogue between him and Jesus, just “the wood of the cross.”

To understand Simon of Cyrene’s heart, whether he had compassion or not for Jesus in being forced to share in His suffering, we need to look into his heart, the Pope suggested. And “while God’s heart is ever open, pierced by a pain that reveals his mercy, the human heart remains closed.” Would Simon have felt anger, pity, compassion or annoyance, the Pope pondered, but we do knot know. At the same time, we do know that he bore the cross of Christ who took upon Himself the sins of all humanity, the Pope continued.

“Jesus bore them for love of us, in obedience to the Father; he suffered with us and for us. In this unexpected and astonishing way, Simon of Cyrene becomes part of the history of salvation, in which no one is a stranger, no one a foreigner.”

Helping carry each other’s crosses

The Pope then suggested we in our own lives look at how we can follow in Simon’s footsteps who teaches us that “Jesus comes to meet everyone, in every situation.” All we have to do is look around us, he observed, “the great crowds of men and women whom hatred and violence are compelling to walk the road to Calvary” in our world, a road “God has made…a place of redemption” since He walked it himself, “giving his life for us.”

“How many Simons of Cyrene are there in our own day, bearing the cross of Christ on their shoulders! Can we recognize them? Can we see the Lord in their faces, marred by the burden of war and deprivation? Faced with the appalling injustice of evil, we never carry the cross of Christ in vain; on the contrary, it is the most tangible way for us to share in his redemptive love.”

How Jesus’ passion becomes compassion

In conclusion, the Pope explained how when we hold out our own hands to those who are suffering, lifting up those who have fallen, embracing those who are discouraged, we manifest how “Jesus’ passion becomes compassion” expressed today. During Holy Week, he suggested we look at our own lives, how in order to experience God’s “great miracle of mercy” we can carry our own cross, “but also the cross of those who suffer all around us”, even that of some unknown person we find along on our way, and so become “for one another, a Simon of Cyrene.”

* *Article published in Vatican News. By: Thaddeus Jones. Photo: Vatican Media.*