Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis uses incense as he celebrates Mass after attending the meeting, "Mediterranean, Frontier of Peace, in Bari, Italy, Feb. 23, 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Cindy Wooden

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — February 24, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The only acceptable form of extremism for a Christian is an "extremism of love," Pope Francis said, concelebrating Mass with bishops from throughout the Mediterranean basin.

"'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' This is the Christian innovation. It is the Christian difference," the pope said Feb. 23 as he celebrated an outdoor Mass in central Bari, a city on the southern Italian coast.

The Mass, concelebrated by 60 bishops from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, marked the conclusion of a five-day meeting to address common concerns, including the need for peace, the care of migrants and refugees, the defense of religious freedom and the promotion of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

Francis' homily did not directly address the themes of the meeting but focused on the day's Gospel reading from St. Matthew in which Jesus tells his followers not to retaliate against those who harm them and to love and pray for their enemies.

"Pray and love: this is what we must do," Francis said. "The love of Jesus knows no boundaries or barriers. The Lord demands of us the courage to have a love that does not count the cost, because the measure of Jesus is love without measure."

Jesus' commandment of love is not just a suggestion or even a challenge, the pope said. "It is the very heart of the Gospel."

"Where the command of universal love is concerned, let us not accept excuses or preach prudent caution," he said. "The Lord was not cautious; he did not yield to compromises. He asks of us the extremism of charity. It is the only legitimate kind of Christian extremism: the extremism of love."

Francis said he knew some people would object and say, "That is not how life really is! If I love and forgive, I will not survive in this world, where the logic of power prevails, and people seem to be concerned only with themselves."

"So is Jesus' logic, his way of seeing things, the logic of losers?" the pope asked. "In the eyes of the world, it is, but in the eyes of God it is the logic of winners."

In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the pope said, God proved that "evil can only be conquered by goodness. That is how he saved us: not by the sword, but by the cross. To love and forgive is to live as a conqueror. We will lose if we defend the faith by force."

Of course, he said, Jesus "raises the bar" to a level that seems humanly impossible, but that is where prayer comes in.

"Ask God for the strength to love," he said. "Say to him: 'Lord, help me to love, teach me to forgive. I cannot do it alone, I need you.'"

"Today let us choose love, whatever the cost, even if it means going against the tide," Francis said. "Let us not yield to the thinking of this world, or content ourselves with half measures. Let us accept the challenge of Jesus, the challenge of charity."

Advertisement