

Pope Francis and the Reform of Spiritual Worldliness in the Church and in the Priesthood

- Spiritual Worldliness
 - On this first day of the retreat, I'd like to spend a little time considering what Cardinal Bergoglio called during his pre-conclave intervention "the worst evil that can come upon the Church," what most "deforms" priests and faithful and what therefore most needs to be reformed. It's spiritual worldliness. If there's going to be a reform of the Church and the priesthood, we must confront this straight on.
 - At the Pentecost Vigil on May 18, he described what spiritual worldliness leads to: "There is one problem that can afflict Christians: the spirit of the world, the worldly spirit, spiritual worldliness. This leads to self-sufficiency, to living by the spirit of the world rather than by the spirit of Jesus."
 - Spiritual worldliness is when we place our faith, hope and love in mammon, in the things of this world, rather than in God. We seek our own glory, rather than God's.
 - In his apostolic exhortation, the Joy of the Gospel, he gave a lengthy description of how the cancer of spiritual worldliness metastasizes.
 - EG 93: "Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. ... It is a subtle way of seeking one's "own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (*Phil* 2:21). It takes on many forms. ... Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, 'it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral.'
 - EG 95: "This insidious worldliness is evident in a number of attitudes that appear opposed, yet all have the same pretense of "taking over the space of the Church". In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few. In others, this spiritual worldliness lurks behind a fascination with social and political gain, or pride in their ability to manage practical affairs, or an obsession with programs of self-help and self-realization. It can also translate into a concern to be seen, into a social life full of appearances, meetings, dinners and receptions. It can also lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations whose principal beneficiary is not God's people but the Church as an institution. The mark of Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen, is not present; closed and elite groups are formed, and no effort is made to go forth and seek out those who are distant or the immense multitudes who thirst for Christ. Evangelical fervor is replaced by the empty pleasure of complacency and self-indulgence.
 - In his retreat for Spanish bishops prior to his election, he meditated on spiritual worldliness in their presence. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, in all that he's written about the discernment of spirits, being able to distinguish the spirit that comes from God versus the spirit of the world is one of the most important things that should happen during the spiritual exercises of a retreat. It's also one of the most important skills a priest needs to have in leading others to God.
 - He gave a conference entitled "The spirit of the world or the 'anti-kingdom.'"
 - He began with St. John's first letter in which he tells us, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life is not of the Father but is of the world."

- He tells us, “St. John exhorts us not to love the world, this world that seeks autonomy from God, this world that is an object of possession in every sense of the word. This world, which was created to lead us to God, has turned in upon itself, turning away from the Lordship of Christ, and thus turning into an evil ‘world.’ Such degradation is the daughter of lust: when ‘desire’ turns into lust, then, indeed, we can speak of the ‘spirit of the world.’”
- Jesus, Cardinal Bergoglio tells us, warns us against the spirit of the world, defining it as a spirit that chokes the Word (Mt 13:22), like the father whose sons are much more cunning than the sons of light (Lk 16:8). This spirit of the world turns our lustful heart after the flesh, and our eyes toward prideful confidence in the things of the world . The spirit of the world is the father of incredulity and all impiety. It is precisely the god of this world that has blinded its heart (2 Cor 4:4). This is why St. Paul urges us not to conform ourselves to this age (Rom 12:2).
- The spirit of the world shows seeks to make us vain. A vain heart is a “safe haven for ‘ecclesiastical’ forms of indiscipline and disobedience that disfigure the face of our holy Mother the Church. Look behind any episcopal posture of moralism, naïve optimism or irenicism and you’re sure to find a vain heart, which deep down attempts to minimize the leadership responsibilities that have been entrusted to him by God. These attitudes lead to the all too familiar fragmentation of the Church, resulting in a Gospel witness that is “rent by doctrinal disputes, ideological polarizations or mutual condemnation.” ... And it is in these same postures, daughters of vanity, that uselessly give scandal to others, above all those who are weak in the faith. ... At the very heart of the Church, ... we witness disrespect and criticism, division among Christians, the risk of secularism, the politicization of the Gospel, rampant disorientation, the loss of the very identity of the consecrated life, the danger of breaking the unity in doctrine and discipline. And all this is [supposedly] done in the name of Jesus Christ and out of fidelity to his Gospel.
- He describes how sometimes this disunity is preached from the pulpits when the Church herself is criticized, when the Church’s outward manifestations, her hierarchy, her signs are rejected, leading people to question their own membership in the Church, convinced that their own project takes precedence over that of our Mother the Church. They decide to implant their own idea of the Church, not the Church itself.
- He says we need to be aware of the lure toward spiritual worldliness and that many times we have succumbed, encouraging us to “ask pardon for the many times in our task as pastors we have sinned in this area.”
- He concluded by saying, “My attitude toward the world [toward spiritual worldliness] should be fundamentally the same as toward my own sins, toward the disordered and sinful roots in myself: keen awareness and aversion! From this attitude alone springs the desire for conversion. Which, in turn, over time, forges in us the faculty that is so solidly Christian: the capacity to judge. The ‘yes, yes... no, no’ that Jesus teaches us implies a spiritual maturity that rescues us from the superficiality of the foolish heart. A Christian needs to know what can be accepted and what must be condemned. We cannot sit down and ‘dialogue’ with the enemy of our salvation: we need to meet him head on, ready to combat his every intention.”
- There are two outgrowths of spiritual worldliness
 - The first is to turn the Church’s work into an NGO
 - During his first homily as Pope, at the Mass with the Cardinals who elected him on March 14 in the Sistine Chapel, he declared, “We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord.
 - The process of going from bride to business occurs when the Church focuses too much on herself rather than on God and others. He told the Bishops of CELAM on July 28 in Rio: “The Church is an institution, but when she makes herself a “center”, she becomes merely functional, and slowly but surely turns into a kind of NGO. The Church then claims to have a light of her own, and she stops being that *mysterium*

lunae [mystery of the moon reflecting the light of the sun, representing Christ] of which the Church Fathers spoke. She becomes increasingly self-referential and loses her need to be missionary. From an “institution” she becomes a “enterprise”. She stops being a bride and ends up being an administrator; from being a servant, she becomes an “inspector”. Aparecida wanted a Church which is bride, mother and servant, more a facilitator of faith than an inspector of faith”

- A Church that has become an NGO is worthless, like salt that has lost its flavor, he told new movements on May 18: “The Church is neither a political movement nor a well-organized structure. That is not what she is. We are not an NGO, and when the Church becomes an NGO she loses her salt, she has no savor, she is only an empty organization.”
- The Church has to avoid this loss of a supernatural sense by focusing mainly on efficiency. He told the bishops of CELAM on July 28 in Rio: “Functionalism. Its effect on the Church is paralyzing. More than being interested in the road itself, it is concerned with fixing holes in the road. A functionalist approach has no room for mystery; it aims at efficiency. It reduces the reality of the Church to the structure of an NGO. What counts are quantifiable results and statistics. The Church ends up being run like any other business organization. It applies a sort of “theology of prosperity” to the organization of pastoral work.”
- All Church institutions, he said, need to make sure they do not succumb to this hyper-institutionalization of the Church. He told young Argentines in Rome on July 25: “Parishes, schools, and institutions are made for going out ... if they don’t, they become an NGO, and the Church cannot be an NGO.”
- Hence, when people think about the reform Pope Francis was elected to bring about, it’s never going to be merely one of flow-charts and efficiencies, but one to overcome this spiritual worldliness and the temptation toward functionalism. True reforms is going to help the Church become an ever more faithful, loving, fruitful bride.
- The second is to reduce the message of the Gospel to an ideology
 - On October 17, at his daily Mass homily at the Domus Sanctae Marthae, he described how many of the Scribes and the Pharisees basically made the Mosaic Law an ideology by focusing on the law itself as a rigid set of principles to be imposed on others rather than on the Legislator and how the law is meant to bring us and others into a life changing relationship with him. Ideological religion becomes an obstacle to true faith. He said, “The faith passes, so to speak, through a distiller and becomes ideology. And ideology does not bring people together. In ideologies Jesus isn’t present, in his tenderness, his love, his meekness. And ideologies are rigid, always, in every way. And when a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith: he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, he is a disciple of this attitude of thought... For this reason Jesus said to [the Pharisees]: ‘You have taken away the key of knowledge.’ The knowledge of Jesus is transformed into an ideological and also moralistic knowledge, because these close the door with many requirements. ... The faith becomes ideology and ideology frightens, ideology chases away the people, distances the people and distances of the Church of the people. But this is a serious illness, ideological Christians. It is an illness, but it is not new. Already the Apostle John, in his first Letter, spoke of this [with the gnostics]. Christians who lose the faith and prefer ideologies. They become rigid, moralistic, ethical, and without kindness. But how is it that a Christian can become like this? Just one thing: this Christian does not pray,” who doesn’t have a living relationship with God that changes him to become sensitive to what wills, which is something that can happen even when someone is “saying prayers” but not truly praying them.

- When he met with the bishops of CELAM assembled in Rio on July 28, he said that ideologized Christianity is a real danger: “Making the Gospel message an ideology. This is a temptation that has been present in the Church from the beginning: the attempt to interpret the Gospel apart from the Gospel itself and apart from the Church. An example: Aparecida, at one particular moment, felt this temptation. It employed, and rightly so, the method of “see, judge and act” (cf. No. 19). The temptation, though, was to opt for a way of “seeing” which was completely “antiseptic”, detached and unengaged, which is impossible [prescinding from faith] The way we “see” is always affected by the way we direct our gaze. There is no such thing as an “antiseptic” hermeneutics. The question was, rather: How are we going to look at reality in order to see it? Aparecida replied: With the eyes of discipleship.” He described different forms of Christian ideologies: sociological reductionism (just studying the phenomenon of religion or comparative religions), psychologizing [reducing spirituality to psychology], gnostic solution [making Christianity too much a thing of the head and knowledge rather than a way of life], and the pelagian solution [focusing too much on ourselves and our work and not on God.]
- This is one of the reasons why Pope Francis says that the Church’s proclamation must always begin with Christ, with the kerygma, because sometimes there is a “degrading reductionism” of the faith to an ideology advancing some type of cause, even a good cause, as the end of the Christian faith rather than as a part.
- Conclusion
 - The essential corruption of the Church, according to Pope Francis, is this spiritual worldliness and therefore the reform of the Church involves turning our back on spiritual worldliness in all its forms and turning toward the spirit of the Kingdom. We’re all called to help lead that reform by ourselves turning away from the vanity of spiritual worldliness and seeking God’s glory, not our own, with all we’ve got.