

The Glittering Deceit of Idols

Pope Francis

"Success, power and money". These are "the great idols", the "timeless temptations" that the Pope cautioned against at the General Audience held in the Paul VI Hall on Wednesday, 8 August [2018]. Continuing the series of catecheses on the Decalogue, the Pontiff delved once again into the theme of idolatry addressed in the first commandment, focusing in particular on the "idol 'par excellence', the golden calf". The following is a translation of the catechesis, which the Holy Father delivered in Italian.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Good morning!

Today let us continue to meditate on the Decalogue, and to look more closely at the theme of idolatry; we spoke about it last week. Now let us take up the theme again because it is very important to know about it. And, let us take our cue from the idol *par excellence*, the golden calf, which the Book of Exodus (32:1-8) describes — we have just heard a passage from it. This episode has a precise context: the desert where the people await Moses who has gone up the mountain to receive God's instructions.

What is *the desert*? It is a place where uncertainty and insecurity reign — there is nothing in the desert — where there is no water, no food and no shelter. The desert is an image of human life, whose condition is uncertain and has no inviolable guarantees. This insecurity creates a primal anxiety in mankind which Jesus mentions in the Gospel: "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?" (Mt 6:31). These are primal anxieties. And the desert causes these anxieties.

And something occurs in that desert which triggers idolatry. "Moses delayed to come down from the mountain" (Ex 32:1). He remained there for 40 days and the people grew impatient. The reference point was missing: Moses, the leader, the one in charge, the reassuring guide; and this became unbearable. Thus, the people called for a visible god — this is the snare into which the people fell — in order to identify and orient themselves. And they said to Aaron: "make us gods, who shall go before us" (v. 1); make us a leader, make us a chief. In order to escape uncertainty — the uncertainty is the desert — human nature seeks a do-it-yourself religion. If God does not show himself, then we custom-make one for ourselves. "Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols 'have mouths, but they cannot speak' (Ps 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands" (*Lumen Fidei*, 13).

Aaron is unable to refuse the people's request, and he makes a *golden calf*. The calf had a double meaning in the ancient Near East: on the one hand it represented fertility and abundance, and on the other, energy and strength. But first and foremost, it was golden, thus, a symbol of wealth, success, power and money. These are the great idols: success, power and money. They are timeless temptations! This is what the golden calf is: the symbol of all desires that give the illusion of freedom but instead enslave, because an idol always enslaves; it has charm and you succumb; the charm of the serpent who looks at the little bird and the bird is unable to move, and the serpent gets him. Aaron was unable to refuse.

But above all, everything stems from the inability to confide in God, to place our insecurities in him, to allow him to give true depth to the desires of our hearts. This also allows us to sustain weakness, uncertainty and precariousness. Referring to God makes us strong in weakness, in uncertainty and also in precariousness. Without God's primacy one can easily fall into idolatry and settle for poor reassurances. But this is a temptation which we always read about in the Bible. And consider this carefully: it did not cost God much effort to free the people from Egypt: he did so with signs of power, of love. But God's great work was to remove Egypt from the hearts of the people, that is, to remove idolatry from the people's hearts. And again, God continues to work to remove it from our hearts. This is God's great work: to remove "that Egypt" which we carry within us, which is the attraction of idolatry.

When we welcome the God of Jesus Christ who was rich and became poor for us (cf. 2 Cor 8:9), then we discover that recognizing one's weaknesses is not a disgrace of human life, but the condition necessary to open up to the One

who is truly strong. Thus, God's salvation enters through the door of weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:10). It is due to man's own inadequacies that he opens up to the paternity of God. Mankind's freedom comes from allowing the true God to be the only Lord, and this allows one to accept one's fragility and reject the idols in one's heart.

We Christians turn our gaze to Christ crucified (cf. Jn 19:37) who was weak, insulted and stripped of all his possessions. But the face of the true God is revealed in him, the true glory of love and not that of glittering deceit. Isaiah says: "he was wounded by our transgressions" (Is 53:5). We were healed by the very weakness of a man who was God, by his wounds. And through our weaknesses, we can open up to God's salvation. Our healing comes from the One who became poor, who welcomed failure, who undertook to bear our insecurity until the end, in order to fill it with love and strength. He comes to reveal God's paternity to us. In Christ our fragility is no longer a curse but a place of encounter with the Father and the wellspring of a new strength from above.

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