

Author Unpacks What Pope Francis Means by the Term

By Marie Meaney

ROME, December 05, 2013 (Zenit.org) - In his homily during his daily Mass the other day, Pope Francis warned against the spirit of worldliness. He
called it
"a fruit of the devil who makes his way forward with the spirit of secular worldliness". These are strong words, and we have seen so far that Pope Francis is not afraid of calling the devil by his name nor speaking about the momentous choices each one of us has to make.

But is the "world" really that dangerous?

What about being open to the world as Vatican II proposed? Should we be afraid of "the world" and retire to our little Catholic islands, where we can keep its lures as much at bay from our families as possible? (space forbids answering these two questions here, but clarifying the concept should help with those issues as well). And what exactly is worldliness? Is it wrong to seek the good things in life, i.e. a beautiful house, a rewarding job (which, yes, is well-paid), mingling with people who are movers and shakers in our times, going to social events etc.? When does this become worldly and *mondain* to do these things, to use a French word that goes beyond the English "mundane"?

To state the obvious: it is not the world in and of itself which is the problem, but when a spirit of worldliness sets in which draws us away from the *unum necessarium*, namely God. This is the

fruit of the devil, as the Pope says, the archetype of rebellion, who wants us to abandon God in order to set something else above Him. This rejection need not happen in an explicit way; most of the time it doesn't, which makes it all the more dangerous. Hence people can be calling out "Lord, Lord" without having put Him first or really meaning it.

Apart from specific religious vocations, most of us should be in the world but not of the world. Worldly thinking means using the principles and values of the world as the final measure for ourselves and others. Man becomes the measure of all things instead of God. In contrast, adopting a supernatural perspective means seeing things in the light of eternity where the goods of this world are seen as valuable, but not as having an absolute value. In theory the distinction is easy to make. It's in practice that one can fool oneself, for the slope is slippery, one gets sucked into worldly thinking and a fast-paced life acts like a drug, numbing one's conscience.

What are some of the warning signs? For let us make no mistake: the temptation is universal and even the most inveterate misanthrope is not immune to it. For example, to be dazzled by genius and talent more than by holiness is a sign. This is particularly tempting since holiness is often hidden and its bearer can be in many ways unattractive (sickly, lacking in culture and education, having only mediocre talents); not every saint has the genius and charisma of a John Paul II. It is hard to blame those who overlooked the greatness of a Saint Faustina or Saint Thérèse of Lisieux during their life-time, for we can in no way be sure that we would have spotted their sanctity either.

We can ask ourselves: in a social gathering, do we only flock around those who are funny, attractive and smart or do we also go towards those who are standing apart, a bit boring and lacking sparkle? How important are our achievements to us, of whatever kind (family, education, job)? Do we rub them into other people's faces? Do we feel slighted, when the other fails to notice our "greatness"? Or how frustrated are we not to have a great job, salary, achievement etc. to show? Is our heart set on these things – and therefore suffers unduly when foiled in achieving them – or do we simply see them as relative goods? Worldliness is something we have to battle with in some form or other all our lives, and if we're lucky, we will be free of it on our death-bed. So it's not something we can ever feel safe from, even if we are for all accounts and purposes an outsider. What others think about us can come to haunt us in any state of life.

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, distinguished between "three orders" in his *Pensées*: the first is the order of power, the second that of genius and the third that of sanctity. The distance between them is infinite, particularly between sanctity and the others. For they are different in kind; no amount of the one will get one the other.

Caritas
and humility are of a supernatural order, and cannot be explained in natural terms. They have the capacity to melt our hearts of stone and speak of a world beyond, which is further away from the values of this world than the sun is from the earth (thus protecting us from the spirit of worldliness). Yet we tend to prefer to live among shadows and give prizes to those who recognize some of the shadows and their patterns better than others, as Plato already described in his allegory of the cave.

Because of the difference in kind between these three orders, as Pascal points out, it would have made no sense for Christ to come in the guise of human glory; it would merely have confused people and drawn them to Him for the wrong reasons. It is precisely in His poverty and in His passion that God's humility shines forth in its greatest glory.

Worldliness has life and death implications: it closes the eyes of the heart to what really matters and hardens it. The Pope spoke of the dangers of today's particular form of worldliness which seems innocent enough, but is ultimately murderous. He called it an "adolescent progressivism" leading to human sacrifices. The latter are therefore not a thing of the past, of a barbarian age when people were not yet enlightened, but a fruit of the very spirit which calls itself tolerant, enlightened and progressive.

Don't get me wrong. The Holy Father is not speaking against progress, but against a kind of ideology which naively thinks that humanity is ever progressing. One would have thought that the 20th century would have cured people from this particular belief, but not so. It is all too tempting to see oneself on a crest moving forward, while looking down on those poor fools in the past who were not yet the lucky inheritors of the post-modern age. Yet one only has to think of the 45 million children aborted worldwide every year to know that this is a lie, and recognize the blinding power of this ideology. Worldliness is potentially murderous, and the Pope is therefore right to call it a fruit of the devil.

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