

**Holy Mass on the Solemnity of the Patron Saint Mark the Evangelist  
(Venice, Patriarchal Basilica of Saint Mark – on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 2021)  
Homily of Patriarch Francesco Moraglia**

Esteemed authorities, dear confreres in the priesthood, dear brothers and sisters,

this year we have the joy to celebrate once again the solemnity of the patron saint, the Evangelist Mark, "face to face", with the participation, at least, of a certain number of the faithful.

The words of the Risen Jesus which the Gospel ends with and which we have just heard proclaimed, today, for every baptized person resound as a commitment and mission: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved "(Mk 16, 15-16).

This is the "target" that Mark entrusts to Christians of all times, together with the certainty of the living and active presence, among us, of the Risen One who will never fail (cf. Mk 16:20).

Bringing everyone the good news and the new life that comes from baptism is therefore the wish that - on the feast of the Evangelist Mark - I address, in particular, to the Christian denominations present in the Basilica today.

For the city of Venice and for the people of Veneto, having St. Mark as Patron is an honor and a responsibility. Mark was, in fact, a disciple and evangelist - he was the one who inaugurated this literary genre - and finally ended his life with martyrdom; ancient sources refer, in rough circumstances, to Alexandria in Egypt with his body which, after being tied up, was dragged through the city on a steep path; some remains are set, like relics, under the altar of this basilica named after him.

Mark leads us directly to Jesus, the Risen Lord, not only as the

author of the Gospel that bears his name but above all because he gave his life for Him.

Mark was an important figure of the early Church, in close contact with the apostles Peter and Paul; with the first he will have a privileged relationship - he will also be his secretary -, with the second the relationship will initially be problematic afterwards to become one of closeness, support, help.

Mark is traditionally identified with the young man wearing nothing but a linen cloth and the one who was running off when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane (Mk 14.50-52).

The Acts of the Apostles call him John Mark. His family must have been well-off, known in the early Christian community of Jerusalem; as matter of fact, he offered his own house for the meetings of the first disciples. By the way it is said, that Peter - after his prodigious release from prison - " he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, who is called Mark, where there were many of them gathered in prayer" (Acts 12,12).

Acts also tell us that Mark accompanies, as "assistant", Paul and Barnabas on their journey of apostolate (see Acts 12,25 and 13,5). But suddenly, in Perga (in Pamphylia), he leaves his companions and their mission to return back to Jerusalem because of a conflict that arose during the journey (see Acts 13,13). Later we understand that that disagreement must not have been slight if, after some time, when Paul and Barnabas are preparing a new missionary journey, they are unable to find an understanding precisely on the participation of Mark and even come to separate.

We read therefore: "Barnabas wanted to take with them also John, who was called Mark, but Paul insisted that they should not take with them someone who had deserted them, at Pamphylia, and who had not continued with them in their work. So sharp was their

disagreement that they separated. Barnabas, took Mark with him, and sailed to Cyprus. But Paul, on the other hand, chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord "(Acts 15, 37-40).

The story of Mark highlights the misunderstandings that can arise in the ecclesial relationship between evangelizers in the proclamation of the Gospel. This situation, already manifesting itself in the first century, does not necessarily happen again today two thousand years later; it is a warning to the disciples of all times.

At the same time, the story shows us the possibility of finding reconciliation and communion, characteristics of a true ecclesial community born from faith in the Risen Jesus and which places Him - not someone's particularities or protagonists - at the center of everything.

And, in this way, Mark will recover the relationship and collaboration with Paul (see Col 4,10 - 2Tm 4,11 - Phm 24), while for Peter he will be "my son", as we find written in the text proclaimed as the first reading ( 1 Pt 5,13).

The Gospel written by Mark is not only the first one to have been drawn up (shortly before 70 AD) - which makes our patron the beginner of the literary genre "Gospel" - but it carries within itself very unique specific characteristics that more and more they strike us: as matter of fact it is a text of indisputable immediacy, vivacity and drama, made up of a few words (it is the shortest Gospel), with close and direct dialogues, while the events that have taken place emerge in a clear and "dramatic" way .

If, for short, we want to know how the events of Jesus of Nazareth happened, it is above all the Gospel of Mark that we must mainly look for , together with that of John (written, moreover, at the end of the first century); these two, even in a different way and under

different circumstances, are the Gospels of the "eyewitnesses", of the people closest to Jesus.

John, because (with Andrew) he is chronologically the first to meet Jesus; Mark, because he collects the preaching, memories and teachings of Peter, chosen by Jesus as the "rock" on which the Church is founded.

At the center of Mark's Gospel we find a paradigmatic episode (Mk 8, 27-31) - the so-called "confession of Peter" - which acts as a hinge, a real link between the first part (the initial eight chapters), of introduction and preparation, and the second part (up to the sixteenth chapter) where everything sums up till the events of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Right along the road at Caesarà of Philippi, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them: "Who do people say that I am? (...) But who do you say that I am?". After some different replies, Peter proclaims: "You are the Messiah". The episode then, as we know, ends with Jesus who "severely warned them not to tell anyone about Him".

In Mark's Gospel everything always leads us back to Jesus Christ to be confessed and announced: He is the good news, He is the only Savior, there are no others. But, at the same time, in this journey of Faith there is a progression, a development, a growth that the disciple must carry out, following the same path as Jesus, in order to really know and meet Him and to be able to announce and profess Him with truth and awareness, without there being any misunderstanding or the claim to "take possession" of Jesus and of the Gospel, which is His own Person.

Fatigue and difficulties, but also the beauty of being disciples of the Lord, the need for ever greater fidelity and authenticity, the offering of life for Jesus, the Risen Crucifix: this is what Mark

transmits to us, it is his treasure, it is the "Target" that he entrusts us.

The Evangelist, and our patron, tells us - men and women of the 21st century, in particular of this Venetian and Veneto's territory - that Jesus is not a character of the past nor a mythical figure, but is the Living One, the only Lord ; Mark reminds us that God's promises do not fail but they are brought to fulfillment for us and realized precisely in the Risen One (see Acts 13,32-33); at last, he reminds us that the Gospel is not first of all a book that it could be read but it is the living Jesus Christ Himself who must be witnessed always and in every field. Without fear and reticence.

All this has consequences for the Church that make it "other", even in a radical way, with respect to the human environment where we live in different times and in which, however, we are able to introduce - through the strength that derives from the Gospel - an energy, a novelty, a prospect of rebirth and salvation that the world does not possess.

The Gospel is a perennial source of new life that overcomes ideologies and personal thoughts as well as any kind of resignation. It knows how to go beyond the pessimism and fatalism of mankind as well as beyond any easy optimism which, erroneously, entrusts itself to an illusory natural goodness, confusing freedom with the externalization of one's own frailties or selfishness. And all of this involves each of us, starting from baptism which immerses us in the paschal mystery, in the life of the Risen Crucifix and it makes us capable of continuous and real regeneration (see Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam*, nn. 61-62) .

Totally pertinent, therefore, are the words of Tertullian: "Christ claimed to be the Truth, not custom" (*The Veiling of the Virgins* 1,1). Custom means "fashion", it means "politically correct", it means

giving in to the fact that "nowadays everyone does so".

Saint Mark was the first to experience all of this, till up to the highest testimony of a prolonged and cruel martyrdom that we mentioned before. And so, today, so many Christians continue to do in our time: it is estimated that around the world there are about 200 million persecuted Christians and in many (too many) parts - from Africa to Asia - the conditions of security and religious freedom tragically tend to worsen so much that, even today, as in the early days, there are places in the Church where the Lord's disciples know they are going to Holy Mass on Sunday, risking not to come back home.

The Faith of these brothers and sisters of ours who confess their belonging to Jesus Christ, till to martyrdom, testifies to the strength and energy that the "good news" - of which Saint Mark became the first herald - possesses. And it should shake our lukewarmness and laziness if we also "say" today, with words and life, who Jesus Christ is for us.

"Jesus Christ is the "eternal Gospel" (Rev 14,6), and He is "the same yesterday, today and forever"(Heb 13,8), but His richness and beauty are everlasting - Pope Francis reminded us in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* -. He is always young and a constant source of newness. With this newness, He is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus Christ can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose Him but He constantly amazes us by His divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise , new paths of creativity open up ,with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning

for today's world . Every form of authentic evangelization is always "new" "(Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* n . 11).

Let Saint Mark, holy Patron of Venice and protector of the Venetian people, intercede for us and let him give us courage, readiness and generosity to teach us the Gospel of Jesus - the Risen, the Living One - so that "we too may learn to faithfully follow Christ the Lord" (from the Colletta prayer of the Holy Mass).

Happy St. Mark's Day to all!