

Dear Friends,

Are you and I truly reading a Christian life, or are we just “armchair Christians”? This is a question that Pope Francis himself posed to us in a homily on May 28, 2015.

What do I mean by armchair Christians? The name refers back to a time when the centre of social life was the “Gentlemen’s Club”. These were the days of Colonialism, when the elite of society prided themselves on not getting involved in the struggles of day-to-day life. Rich men would gather together in their favorite armchairs, smoking cigars with drinks in hand, arrogantly discussing the issues of the day. They argued, philosophized and critiqued everything: politics, religion, war, family...each person showing off their intellectual opinions and making their cases for why the world was revolving and how problems (according to them) could be solved. For them, this was more satisfying than actually doing anything to solve the problems.

An “Armchair Christian” therefore is one who likes to discuss religion without getting involved. He or she claims to be a Christian, but it is more as a status symbol or a cultural tag, rather than an actual mark of following Christ’s teachings through involvement in personal growth and social and religious issues.

Christians must ask themselves whether they help people in need of salvation or whether they just keep Jesus for themselves and are deaf or indifferent to others, Pope Francis said in his homily. “It would be good for us to have an examination of conscience” and see if we are Christians who bring people to Christ or push them away”.

Preaching on the Gospel story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, the Pope classified Christians into three categories: the indifferent, the worldly and the consistent.

Bartimaeus was a blind beggar at the entrance to Jericho. As Jesus was passing by with his disciples, he began to cry out to Jesus. The crowd around him and the disciples told him to be silent and not disturb the peace, but he continued crying. Jesus asked him to come near, and spoke to him with respect, asking him what he needed. When the man pleaded to receive his sight, Jesus healed him, and Bartimaeus began following Jesus.

Christians who are indifferent “do not hear. They believe life is there in their little group. They’re content. They’re deaf to the clamor of so many people who need salvation, who need Jesus’ help, who need the church,” the Pope said. Like those who did not show any concern for Bartimaeus, the indifferent do not mind discussing Christianity, but will never lift a finger to help people who are suffering. Such Christians are “self-centered, living for themselves. They are unable to hear the voice of Jesus,” said Pope Francis.

The second category of Christians includes those who hear people crying for help, “but want them to be quiet,” like in the Gospel reading when the disciples rebuked Bartimaeus, the blind man, who cried out for Jesus, or when the disciples shooed away the children so they would not disturb their master. These are the worldly. They want Jesus for themselves, but they do not want to share their blessings with others. People who exploit the church or religion for their own benefit or purposes also fit into this category, the Pope said. “They are Christians in name only, armchair Christians,” he said, “but their inner life is not Christian, it is worldly.”

The third category of Christians, however, are “those who help [people] get closer to Jesus.” They are living a life “consistent with what they believe,” and they help those who are crying out for salvation, grace and spiritual healing.

The Pope ended his homily by asking people to reflect on what kind of Christian they are and whether they bring others closer to Jesus or distance them from him.

Each of us should ask ourselves whether we are faithful to the Lord in our thoughts, words and actions, and especially in our relationships. We can look at several categories of relationships that are covered by this Gospel: our relationship to ourselves, our relationship to Jesus, our relationship to people of other faiths, and our relationship to those who are poor or suffering. With regard to ourselves, the Gospel asks us whether we believe ourselves to be superior to everyone; whether we realise that we ourselves are in need of grace and salvation; and whether we are aware of our own spiritual blindness at times. With regard to our relationship with Jesus, we need to know whether we are just companions or disciples. Are we merely walking with him or are we listening to him and hearing his call in our hearts. Remember that an armchair Christian does not hate Jesus, but for him Jesus has become a theory, something that helps him to impress his fellow-humans but does not change his life.

Third, we need to ask ourselves how we relate to people of other faiths. Many people have a thirst for God, and a thirst for Jesus in their hearts. They cannot see this Jesus because there is a veil over their eyes. But do we try to help them or do we further block Jesus from the people? Do we realise that people are crying for God's love and mercy? Do we take steps to make sure that they come to him and receive the spiritual healing that can change their destiny? In other words, how am I presenting Jesus to people of other faiths? This month, as we celebrate Catholic Enquiry Sunday, we have to sincerely appreciate the hard work of all those priests, religious and lay faithful who hear the cry of the people and introduce them to Christ who alone can meet all their needs.

Lastly, the Gospel truly challenges us as regards the way we look upon the poor, the disabled, the sick and those in distress of any kind. As long as my neighbour is in misery, can I truly sit in my armchair and be comfortable as a Christian? St James says in his epistle, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." A Christian who does not act according to the example set by Jesus, is deceiving himself. Such Christianity will get us nowhere. We need to be concerned for all who are poor and suffering, and only then can we truly reflect on the Gospel in a meaningful manner. without that, we are just armchair Christians.

My prayer for each of us is that we may get out of our armchairs, go into the real world, and bring light to our fellow human beings who live in different forms of darkness such as spiritual blindness, emotional turmoil, physical disability, financial insecurity, and social marginalisation.