

19. November 2019

“Faithful till the death”

2 Macc 6, 18-31

Eleazar, one of the foremost teachers of the Law, a man already advanced in years and of most noble appearance, had his mouth forced open, to make him eat a piece of pork. But he, resolving to die with honour rather than to live disgraced, walked of his own accord to the torture of the wheel, having spat the stuff out, as befits those with the courage to reject what is not lawful to taste, rather than live. The people supervising the ritual meal, forbidden by the Law, because of the length of time for which they had known him, took him aside and privately urged him to have meat brought of a kind he could properly use, prepared by himself, and only pretend to eat the portions of sacrificial meat as prescribed by the king; this action would enable him to escape death, by availing himself of an act of kindness prompted by their long friendship. But having taken a noble decision worthy of his years and the dignity of his great age and the well-earned distinction of his grey hairs, worthy too of his impeccable conduct from boyhood, and above all of the holy legislation established by God himself, he answered accordingly, telling them to send him at once to Hades. 'Pretence', he said, 'does not befit our time of life; many young people would suppose that Eleazar at the age of ninety had conformed to the foreigners' way of life and, because I had played this part for the sake of a paltry brief spell of life, might themselves be led astray on my account; I should only bring defilement and disgrace on my old age. Even though for the moment I avoid execution by man, I can never, living or dead, elude the grasp of the Almighty. Therefore if I am man enough to quit this life here and now, I shall prove myself worthy of my old age, and I shall have left the young a noble example of how to make a good death, eagerly and generously, for the venerable and holy laws.' So saying, he walked straight to the wheel, while those who were escorting him, recently so well disposed towards him, turned against him after this declaration, which they regarded as sheer madness. He for his part, just before he died under the blows, gave a sigh and said, 'The Lord whose knowledge is holy sees clearly that, though I might have escaped death, from awe of him I gladly endure these agonies of body under the lash, and that in my soul I am glad to suffer.' This was how he died, leaving his death as an example of nobility and a record of virtue not only for the young but for the greater part of the nation.

Today the Church presents to us the witness of an old and truly faithful Israelite. His testimony becomes all the more credible because he would have had the opportunity to escape the impending death. But the integrity of his character did not allow him to follow the proposed deception and thus obscure his public witness to the commandments of God.

It is very uplifting to see how the respected Old exercised his responsibility before God and man. God sees in the hidden and no one can deceive him. He looks to the depths of the heart. Eleazar knew this and, out of love for God, did not tolerate the trace of falsehood.

Those who pretended to be his "old friends" wanted him to be an accomplice to them, for they themselves even served at the unlawful sacrificial meal. It is part of the evil that one tries to draw others into the darkness. Perhaps one would like to calm one's conscience, which is still a sign of it, along the way.

When Eleazar revealed the truth by refusing the deception the friends turned out to be enemies, for their own failures against the law were made even more obvious by Eleazar's behaviour. This process reminds us of a word of the book of Wisdom:

Let us lay traps for the upright man, since he annoys us and opposes our way of life, reproaches us for our sins against the Law, and accuses us of sins against our upbringing. He claims to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. We see him as a reproof to our way of thinking, the very sight of him weighs our spirits down; for his kind of life is not like other people's, and his ways are quite different. In his opinion we are counterfeit; he avoids our ways as he would filth; he proclaims the final end of the upright as blessed and boasts of having God for his father (Wis 2,12-16).

In addition to the responsibility before God, Eleazar also takes his responsibility before the other believers and before the youth. This is exemplary for us and should remind us clearly of our responsibility for our Christian witness. This venerable old man reminds us to reconsider all our words and actions in the light of God. He is ready to go to death so as not to cause confusion and to show that fidelity and obedience to God is the highest value. He wants to teach the descendants that they will learn by his example also to resist the powers that are contrary to God's instructions.

From here we have to take a step towards today!

What testimony is required of us today? What can we leave to those who are young or who come later?

We are certainly obliged to carry on the wonderful and redeeming message of Christ and to testify as Catholics - together with the true doctrine of the Church - through our lives the truth of our faith, even if this means rejection and persecution.

Above all, it is important to deepen the relationship with God, because people should know that they have a wonderful father. To testify God's love for us and our love for Him is precisely a special commandment of the hour. The inner hunger of man cannot be satisfied by bread and games, and the soul remains empty and unfilled. Nor can the relationship to God be replaced by a primarily horizontal relationship to man that focuses more on the earthly goods than on eternal salvation.

The right proclamation of the Lord is both: a mission of God and an obligation to men. When Jesus says, "*No one comes to the Father but through me*" (Jn 14,6b), then the Lord means so. The proclamation of salvation through Christ is the main task of the Church, for without the forgiveness of sins that the Lord is offering, no one can come to God.