

16. December 2019

“The question of authority”

*Mt 21,23-27*

*He had gone into the Temple and was teaching, when the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and said, 'What authority have you for acting like this? And who gave you this authority?' In reply Jesus said to them, 'And I will ask you a question, just one; if you tell me the answer to it, then I will tell you my authority for acting like this. John's baptism: what was its origin, heavenly or human?' And they argued this way among themselves, 'If we say heavenly, he will retort to us, "Then why did you refuse to believe him?"; but if we say human, we have the people to fear, for they all hold that John was a prophet.' So their reply to Jesus was, 'We do not know.' And he retorted to them, 'Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this.'*

Everything Jesus does is done with divine right and authority. With this right John also baptised the people. That would have been the right answer for the chief priests and elders if they had been willing to receive the truth. Then they would have been given a deeper knowledge of the Lord, and thus a deliverance from the spiritual prison in which they were.

But the scribes and elders who asked Jesus a question did not want to know the truth. One can see it in their reflections. They did not ask for the truth, but considered the disadvantage they would suffer from their answer to Jesus' question.

It was this insincere attitude as to why Jesus did not give them an answer. And yet the counter-question of Jesus opened up for them to find the right answer, for if they had confessed - what was known to all - that John was a man sent by God, they would have come to the right conclusion that the authority of the Lord must also come from God. His works were even greater than those of John and John himself testified Jesus as the Lord (cf. Jn 1,36).

But the Lord does not give them an answer in this situation, since they were not ready to recognize the divine authority shown in the works of the Baptist and in the proclamation of Jesus. Questions that are not sincere or even a trap need to be corrected. When questions are asked from this disingenuous background, there is a danger that no matter what answer one gives, it will be abused.

Silence, or not to give an answer, was the good response of the Lord. Of course, this attitude of the Lord can also be abused and hearts can harden further. The latter must be seen in those religious authorities of that time, who became increasingly entangled in hostility to Jesus.

The question of the authority is not in itself of little importance, both in the affairs of the Church and in the affairs of the state. For example, we know very well that only a true priest can celebrate a valid Eucharist. If it were done by someone who has not received a legitimate consecration, it would be an arrogation and an abuse.

According to the church's teachings, the rights of the state at the civil level are also given by God, and the Christian is called to observe them as long as he is not obliged to do things that threaten his conscience. There may be cases where there is a legitimate refusal of obedience.

This means that divine law is above civil law. A concrete example would be if a state were to force priests to reveal, for example, the secrecy of confession. The priest cannot follow here, for he is bound by his divine mission and obliged to remain silent.

Another example is the testimony of St. Thomas More, who opposed his king when he wanted to marry another woman, even though his first marriage had not been annulled. Thomas More preferred to suffer death rather than violate the Divine Law.

We could give many other examples illustrating this conflict. Since we, as Christians, are called to support the legitimate authority of the state, the representatives of the state can count on Christians as a stabilizing force in the state. But if a state itself were to come into conflict with divine law, then the Lord's disciples would not support such a path.