

26. February 2020

“A Holy Fasting”

Jl 2,12-18

“But now –declares Yahweh– come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning.” Tear your hearts and not your clothes, and come back to Yahweh your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and he relents about inflicting disaster. Who knows if he will not come back, relent and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a libation to be presented to Yahweh your God? Blow the ram's-horn in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children, even infants at the breast! Call the bridegroom from his bedroom and the bride from her bower! Let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, stand weeping between portico and altar, saying, “Spare your people, Yahweh! Do not expose your heritage to the contempt, to the sarcasm of the nations! Why give the peoples cause to say, ‘Where is their God?’” Then, becoming jealous over his country, Yahweh took pity on his people.

“A holy time” – this is how we can rightly call the Lent before Easter. It should prepare us for the great Feast of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ! “Order a holy fast...” – as today's reading tells us!

We all know that the forty days covered by this time are related to the forty years in which the People of Israel wandered through the desert, and, even more, to the forty days Our Lord spent in fasting and prayer in the desert, at the end of which He rejected for our sake the presumptuous attacks of the Devil (cf. Mt 4,1-11).

So how can we benefit of this holy time?

In the first place, the biblical text speaks of an existential conversion; a conversion “with all our heart, with fasting, with tears and with mourning”. It symbolizes the whole turning away from false ways, the turning away from imperfect ways, the turning away from all that separates us from God!

What is, in this context, the function of fasting? The prophet refers to a bodily fasting; something that unfortunately is hardly practiced in our Catholic Church anymore. A “holy fast”, the text says... Certainly it must be done in the right attitude; that is, it must not be merely an exercise of self-control or a merely ascetic practice. We know that the prophets criticize that fasting which does not produce the fruits

that should come from it; a simply ritual fast, which could become sterile on a spiritual level (cf. Is 58:4-7).

The voluntary and conscious renunciation of the pleasures of the table, often served with, abundance and opulence, opens up in us a new dimension in the encounter with God, if we do it for the Lord's sake and with joy!

It is something similar to what happens when we carry a cross for Jesus' sake. When the natural joys of life, which often go hand in hand with the well-being and delight of the senses, are reduced, awakens in us more the desire for the spiritual world. That is why fasting must be accompanied by prayer. Our soul, which itself tends to focus on its mental and sensual sphere, can more easily concentrate on the supernatural when it is not so busy with the sensual things. To this is added the sacrifice implied by fasting, inviting us to share with the poor those material goods we ourselves are dispensing with.

In this way, sacrifice acquires a higher and more noble meaning. Fasting, as a sacrifice made for love, becomes a means to implore the Lord's compassion, to be reconciled with Him.

Let us think of the sacrifice which our priests offer every day on the altars of the churches: Our Lord himself! to obtain the redemption of mankind. In this way, the Lord's sacrifice of love, his life for the fulfilment of the Father's will and thus for the redemption of mankind, is brought to the highest meaning: God grants him the forgiveness of sins for us and delivers us from guilt!

Let us think of the Holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist, which our priests offer every day on the altars of the churches: it is the Son of God who gives himself for the Redemption of mankind! The Sacrifice of Christ, offering for love His own life to fulfil the Father's Will and to save mankind, reaches its highest meaning... The Father accepts it, and, in virtue of it, grants us the forgiveness of sins and delivers us from guilt.

Every voluntary sacrifice has something of this dimension... Let us take, for example, the evangelical counsels, which are normally professed when entering religious life: poverty, chastity and obedience. Each of them implies sacrifice. But, even more, they have a positive dimension: in poverty one can better discover the richness of God; chastity invites one to cultivate a more spiritual love; obedience allows one to fulfil more attentively the Will of God.

Now, returning to the "holy fast". There is, for example, in our Church the tradition of fasting on bread and water on Wednesdays and Fridays. This voluntary deprivation can be used by the Lord in the fight against the powers of Evil: *"This is the kind (of demons) that can be driven out only by prayer"* -we had heard a few days ago in the Gospel (Mk 9,29).

Just as every true prayer that we offer to the Lord does not go unheard, but is accepted by the Lord as an act of love, so it is with the sacrifice of fasting, which He integrates into his plan of salvation.

In this way, voluntary fasting, practised for God's sake, becomes a powerful weapon of love, which serves not only to deepen our own conversion, but is also an instrument in the Lord's hands to counteract the darkness in this world.

A holy fast is therefore in itself a precious act, and moreover, God the Holy One lets a fruit grow out of it!

Perhaps these thoughts will help us to discover the meaning of bodily fasting and to reintegrate it into our spiritual life in a meaningful way, according to the possibilities given to us! The Lord will know how to make it most fruitful.