

1. February 2021

“They were too good for the world”

Heb 11:32-40

What more shall I say? There is not time for me to give an account of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, or of David, Samuel and the prophets. These were men who through faith conquered kingdoms, did what was upright and earned the promises. They could keep a lion's mouth shut, put out blazing fires and emerge unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength to be brave in war and drive back foreign invaders. Some returned to their wives from the dead by resurrection; and others submitted to torture, refusing release so that they would rise again to a better life. Some had to bear being pilloried and flogged, or even chained up in prison. They were stoned, or sawn in half, or killed by the sword; they were homeless, and wore only the skins of sheep and goats; they were in want and hardship, and maltreated. They were too good for the world and they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and ravines. These all won acknowledgement through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection except with us.

What heroic testimonies of faith and suffering the apostle enumerates here.

“They were too good for the world”!

Here the apostle establishes the true order of precedence that counts before God. What use are the vanities of this world, its honours, its false glitter and glamour? Sheer futility, Qoheleth rightly comments on all the passing things (*cf. Ec 1:2*). One of these enumerated believers is worth more than the whole world that has fallen away from God. Yes, it is not worthy of such a believer.

We could also follow this well in the radio play about St. Agnes. How much the purity of this young girl outshone the whole Roman environment, which was not worthy of her.

What an immeasurable difference between her and those who were not even prepared to acknowledge the miracles that her hair protected her from the unchaste gaze and that the fire could not burn her! Not even clear signs could keep them from wanting to extinguish the testimony of Christ! What blindness!

St. Agnes also conquered a kingdom. Her innocence and her courage of faith expose a rule which only knew how to help itself with brute force, which closed its heart to the presence of God in Agnes, just as the Pharisees did to Jesus in their time.

Of course, the victory of Christ is different from the victories we know in the world. It is not physical strength that triumphs, but faith, as in the examples of the text or in St Agnes. It is faith that overcomes the world (*cf. 1 Jn 5:4b*). Often it is precisely the weakness, seen from the outside, that wins the true victory (*cf. 1 Cor 1:27*)!

Today we are more and more surrounded by an ambience foreign to faith and our witness needs more and more courage. Courage to confess Christ and all the values that define our faith. An environment hostile to faith will not give peace until it can call us Christians enemies of man and then persecute us.

The great, powerful Rome and the Virgin Agnes! The Maiden a threat to Rome? Yes, because she testifies that the works of the world are evil (*cf. Jn 7:7*). No, because she prays for her enemies, because in her shines the loving heart of God that wants to forgive.

Yes, the world is not worthy of God's witnesses! And yet God does not let people fall!

In the old rite of the Holy Mass we pray three times: "Lord, I am not worthy that you shall enter under my roof". It should sink in that we are not worthy of receiving the Lord out of ourselves. And again three times we underline with the words that it is he who makes our soul healthy. It is Jesus who renews our dignity, which we have so deeply violated through sin. In him we can rise up and conquer the world (*cf. Jn 16:33*), as our brothers in faith have done before us - as children of God!

No, the world is not worthy of the saints by itself!

It is therefore the incomparable love of our heavenly Father that does not turn away, but seeks those in this world, that they may change the stained garment of sin into a wedding garment in the blood of the Lamb (*cf. Rev 7:14*). The witnesses of faith show the way!