

2. March 2021

“Exercising authority in the Spirit of the Lord”

Mt 23:1-12

Then addressing the crowds and his disciples Jesus said, 'The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do and observe what they tell you; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader headbands and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted respectfully in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi. 'You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.

Surely it must have been a great trial for the people of Israel, to be told that those who led them and were to be their example, were not fulfilling their task, so much so that the Lord had to warn them not to imitate them.

With what peace can one live, when those who have been instituted by the Lord, live as He wills! When this happens, things become orderly, everyone takes his place, and there is great harmony. Of course, this will always be under attack as long as we live on earth, but in this inner and outer order we can already feel a little bit of heaven.

Listening to these words of Jesus, our gaze is fixed on those who lead the Church. The Lord gives us a criterion for how to deal with the possible weaknesses of our shepherds: We must continue to obey them, even if their life does not seem to correspond to the gospel; as long as they continue to proclaim right doctrine.

Even those popes who have lived a life far removed from the Lord's teachings have never changed doctrine. We are all committed to the truth. Should one of the pastors stray from the truth of the doctrine, he cannot be followed at that point, even if his personal life is convincing.

The last part of today's gospel restores the character of relationships, in the Spirit of the Lord. We are all brothers, and shepherds too must understand their ministry in that sense, for we are all children of the same Father. Even though we have different tasks and some have been entrusted with the special mission of being pastors, teachers and fathers in the faith, for which they deserve our love and our respect, they too are our brothers. St. Augustine said to his faithful, quite rightly, in one of his sermons, *“With you I am a Christian; for you I am a bishop.”*

If the ministry or the various functions exercised for the Kingdom of God, bring with them an authority, this comes from God Himself, who makes man a sharer in His own authority.

Therefore, it would be paradoxical to build a false authority, based on one's own nature or on one's own person, and which easily generates dependence, lack of freedom or servility among its followers.

Let us remember that a St. Paul even opposed a St. Peter, and publicly corrected him (*cf. Gal 2:11-14*). In our Church we must understand authority well, without separating it from fraternity. All of us together owe obedience to God and to right doctrine; and, according to the established order, we owe obedience to one another. An atmosphere of fear and repression or the like cannot arise in the Church. If such an atmosphere exists, it cannot be the product of the Holy Spirit, but is dominated by human factors or even demonic influence. Under these circumstances, the fellowship that God has given us could not develop. Authority, yes, of course, because it is a gift. But true authority does not oppress or seek its own honour; it represents the authority of the Lord and seeks His glory.

There are also 'fathers' in Christ, and again the same criterion applies: they are not so because of their own authority, but because they have received their fatherhood from the Lord and to Himself it is to lead. Therefore, we can call our priests and bishops 'fathers', because in their ministry they represent Christ, and by calling them 'father', we are reminded of this.

If all these words are not enough to make clear what the authority the Lord wants looks like, let us quote the last words of today's Gospel, which say it all without needing to add anything more: *“The greatest among you must be your servant.*

Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.”