

15. April 2021

“Obedience to God comes before obedience to men”

Acts 5:27-33

When they had brought them in to face the Sanhedrin, the high priest demanded an explanation. 'We gave you a strong warning', he said, 'not to preach in this name, and what have you done? You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and seem determined to fix the guilt for this man's death on us.' In reply Peter and the apostles said, 'Obedience to God comes before obedience to men; it was the God of our ancestors who raised up Jesus, whom you executed by hanging on a tree. By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and Saviour, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel. We are witnesses to this, we and the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.' This so infuriated them that they wanted to put them to death.

“Obedience to God comes before obedience to men”. This is the central sentence of the Apostle Peter, which is very far-reaching and gives us Christians ultimate freedom and security! Our lives are before God as the final judge! We can trust Him unconditionally, while human beings, whoever they may be, can err!

That is why the apostles of that time were also able to oppose the High Priest, whom they otherwise surely met with due respect! But they had already recognised that the high priest was misguided. The apostles had recognised Jesus as the Messiah, had witnessed his resurrection and had received the Holy Spirit. It was therefore clear to them that God's commission was to be given more importance than the orders of an authority which, in this case, was not acting in accordance with its duty and was acting unjustly.

All submission and acceptance of authority in the world and in the Church, to which we are called, has certain limits! In the world we cannot follow when things are demanded of us that are against the commandments of God. I recall that St. Pope John Paul II exhorted politicians to follow the teaching of the Church and to confess publicly when legislation (e.g. abortion) is against the commandments of God. They are to bear witness to the truth! Thus he writes in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (n.73):

"There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws [those which legitimise abortion and euthanasia, for example]; instead there is a grave and clear

obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection. From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). "

This is a very important point. We Christians must reckon with “rough times” when our testimony will be in demand, even if that testimony may bring us disadvantages! May God then give us the courage that the holy apostles had after Pentecost (*cf. Acts 2:14-36*) and that we can gratefully perceive in the text today!

Unfortunately, it can also happen in extreme cases that we even have to contradict authorities within the Church and cannot follow them on certain points! That would be a very painful situation, because obedience in the Church is a "golden belt" which we put on to be armed against the temptations of the evil one! But if it were the case that pastors of the Church themselves no longer follow the authentic teaching of the Church, or if there were uncertainty on this point, then we may respectfully and lovingly draw their attention to this - which, by the way, is the Church's own provision¹ - and remain faithful to what the Church's teaching has always said up to now, and also continue to follow that practice as secured by doctrine and tradition.

As we see in today's text, the clear proclamation of the Gospel here so enrages the enemies of the truth that they decided to murder the apostles! Peter was aware of this! Nevertheless, he is not prepared to make any concessions to his proclamation.

This is another instructive hint for us! Nothing must be left out of the Gospel. It must not degenerate into a “soft gospel” which is worked on by us humans until it no longer challenges. The whole truth must be proclaimed. Certainly we can behave wisely and, guided by the Holy Spirit, notice when to emphasise which truth more strongly! But we must never deny the truth out of fear of man!

This is not always easy, for even Peter had denied the Lord out of fear (*cf. Mk 14:66-72*). But with the descent of the Holy Spirit, things changed. Today in the text we experience a Peter who testifies to the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit!

The key is the Holy Spirit, whom we cannot call upon often enough and to whom we can never listen enough! He will lead us to the complete truth (*cf. Jn 16:13*) and fortify us in it!

ⁱ CCL §3. According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess [meaning the faithful], they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.