

16. November 2021

“Faithful till the death”

*2 Macc 6:18-31*

*Eleazar, one of the foremost teachers of the Law, a man already advanced in years and of most noble appearance, had his mouth forced open, to make him eat a piece of pork. But he, resolving to die with honour rather than to live disgraced, walked of his own accord to the torture of the wheel, having spat the stuff out, as befits those with the courage to reject what is not lawful to taste, rather than live. The people supervising the ritual meal, forbidden by the Law, because of the length of time for which they had known him, took him aside and privately urged him to have meat brought of a kind he could properly use, prepared by himself, and only pretend to eat the portions of sacrificial meat as prescribed by the king; this action would enable him to escape death, by availing himself of an act of kindness prompted by their long friendship. But having taken a noble decision worthy of his years and the dignity of his great age and the well-earned distinction of his grey hairs, worthy too of his impeccable conduct from boyhood, and above all of the holy legislation established by God himself, he answered accordingly, telling them to send him at once to Hades. 'Pretence', he said, 'does not befit our time of life; many young people would suppose that Eleazar at the age of ninety had conformed to the foreigners' way of life and, because I had played this part for the sake of a paltry brief spell of life, might themselves be led astray on my account; I should only bring defilement and disgrace on my old age. Even though for the moment I avoid execution by man, I can never, living or dead, elude the grasp of the Almighty. Therefore if I am man enough to quit this life here and now, I shall prove myself worthy of my old age, and I shall have left the young a noble example of how to make a good death, eagerly and generously, for the venerable and holy laws.' So saying, he walked straight to the wheel, while those who were escorting him, recently so well disposed towards him, turned against him after this declaration, which they regarded as sheer madness. He for his part, just before he died under the blows, gave a sigh and said, 'The Lord whose knowledge is holy sees clearly that, though I might have escaped death, from awe of him I gladly endure these agonies of body under the lash, and that in my soul I am glad to suffer.' This was how he died, leaving his death as an example of nobility and a record of virtue not only for the young but for the greater part of the nation.*

Today the Church presents us with the extraordinary testimony of an elderly and truly faithful Israelite. His testimony is all the more reliable because he could have escaped the death that threatened him. But the sincerity of his character did not allow him to accept the pretence proposed to him, which would have obscured his public testimony in favour of the commandments of God.

It is very edifying to see how this respected elder of Israel assumed his responsibility before God and man. God sees into the hidden and no one can deceive him. He looks into the depths of the heart. Eleazar was aware of this and, out of love for God, did not tolerate even a trace of falsehood.

Those who pretended to be his "old friends" wanted to make him an accomplice, because they themselves were in charge of this unlawful sacrifice. Indeed, it is part of evil to want to drag others into the darkness. Perhaps this is intended to ease one's own conscience. When Eleazar makes the truth clear by refusing the pretence and stating his motives, the supposed friends become enemies, because their transgressions against the law are made even more evident by Eleazar's attitude. This story brings to mind the words of the book of Wisdom (2:12-16):

*"Let us lay traps for the upright man, since he annoys us and opposes our way of life, reproaches us for our sins against the Law, and accuses us of sins against our upbringing. He claims to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. We see him as a reproof to our way of thinking, the very sight of him weighs our spirits down; for his kind of life is not like other people's, and his ways are quite different. In his opinion we are counterfeit; he avoids our ways as he would filth; he proclaims the final end of the upright as blessed and boasts of having God for his father."*

Apart from his responsibility before God, Eleazar also assumes his responsibility before other believers and especially before the youth. This attitude of his is exemplary and should clearly remind us of our responsibility to give a Christian witness. This honourable elder of the people of Israel exhorts us to carefully examine all our words and actions in the light of God. Eleazar is willing to go to the point of death in order not to cause confusion and to demonstrate that faithfulness and obedience to God are the supreme values. This is the example he wants to leave as a legacy to the generations, so that they too will learn to resist those powers that oppose God's precepts.

At this point, let us move to the present... What is the witness required of us today? What is it that we can leave as a legacy to young people or to future generations?

Undoubtedly, we have a duty to pass on the wonderful and redemptive message of Christ, and to bear witness to it through our lives, as well as to the authentic doctrine of the Church, even if this means being rejected and repudiated by others.

Above all, it is important to cultivate a relationship with God, because people need to know that they have a loving Father. Precisely to bear witness to God's love for us and our love for Him seems to be an urgent need for this time. The inner hunger of mankind cannot be satisfied with "bread and games", leaving the soul empty and unsatisfied.

Nor can the direct relationship with God be replaced by the horizontal dimension, being more concerned with people's earthly well-being than with their eternal salvation.

The authentic proclamation of the Lord is both a commission from God and an obligation towards people. If Jesus affirms that "*No one can come to the Father except through me.*" (Jn 14:6), he means it. The proclamation of the Redemption in Christ is the primary mission of the Church, for no one can come to God without the forgiveness of sins which the Lord obtained for us.