

18. November 2021

## Obey God rather than men

1 Macc 2:15-29

*'The king's commissioners who were enforcing the apostasy came to the town of Modein for the sacrifices. Many Israelites gathered round them, but Mattathias and his sons drew apart. The king's commissioners then addressed Mattathias as follows, 'You are a respected leader, a great man in this town; you have sons and brothers to support you. Be the first to step forward and conform to the king's decree, as all the nations have done, and the leaders of Judah and the survivors in Jerusalem; you and your sons shall be reckoned among the Friends of the King, you and your sons will be honoured with gold and silver and many presents.' Raising his voice, Mattathias retorted, 'Even if every nation living in the king's dominions obeys him, each forsaking its ancestral religion to conform to his decrees, I, my sons and my brothers will still follow the covenant of our ancestors. May Heaven preserve us from forsaking the Law and its observances. As for the king's orders, we will not follow them: we shall not swerve from our own religion either to right or to left. As he finished speaking, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein as the royal edict required. When Mattathias saw this, he was fired with zeal; stirred to the depth of his being, he gave vent to his legitimate anger, threw himself on the man and slaughtered him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's commissioner who was there to enforce the sacrifice, and tore down the altar. In his zeal for the Law he acted as Phinehas had against Zimri son of Salu. Then Mattathias went through the town, shouting at the top of his voice, 'Let everyone who has any zeal for the Law and takes his stand on the covenant come out and follow me.' Then he fled with his sons into the hills, leaving all their possessions behind in the town. Many people who were concerned for virtue and justice went down to the desert and stayed there. '*

In these days we are accompanied by the story of the Maccabees, and we hear about the heroic resistance against the orders of the Greek king; but we also have to note the apostasy of many Israelites. These are questions of true faith and obedience to God. The given circumstances bring people to a crossroads; to a situation of decision that they cannot avoid: either they remain faithful to God and His commandments, or they bend to the will of the king in order to preserve their lives.

In today's reading, Mattathias, one of the renowned men of Israel, is urged to set an example of apostasy to the rest of the population, so that the other inhabitants of Modin will be drawn into idolatry. In yesterday's reading, we saw how a mother was intended to persuade her youngest son to sin against the Law of God.

However, in Eleazar, in the mother of the seven sons and in the brave Mattathias, we find brave and zealous servants of God, who refuse to obey the king's command. In the face of all the inhabitants and the envoys who wanted to lead him into idolatry, Mattathias exclaimed: *"Even if every nation living in the king's dominions obeys him, each forsaking its ancestral religion to conform to his decrees, I, my sons and my brothers will still follow the covenant of our ancestors. May Heaven preserve us from forsaking the Law and its observances. As for the king's orders, we will not follow them: we shall not swerve from our own religion either to right or to left."*

Would we be able to adopt this attitude, if we were to find ourselves in a similar situation?

One might be tempted to say that this is hardly likely to happen to us. But I want to recall the Coptic martyrs in our time, who were forced by Muslim extremists to renounce their faith and accept Islam, under threat of death. They did not do so and were all beheaded. People who live in countries where extremist forms of Islam dominate can attest that there are many such excesses.

But how are things in Europe and in other parts of the world, and is it conceivable that such a situation of persecution could arise?

One should not feel too safe... We are more and more confronted with legislations that threaten life and thus explicitly oppose the morals of our faith. Think of abortion, euthanasia, so-called "homosexual marriages", among many other laws... It can easily happen - and, in fact, it already happens - that a doctor, for example, is forced to perform abortions, or nurses are asked to cooperate, or obstetricians are involved... In these cases, a situation of decision is already reached, which could make it impossible to continue practising the profession if one refuses to cooperate. There would be many other examples... Let us not be naïve, believing that things could not get much worse.

Therefore, one cannot obey state authorities when they demand things that oppose the faith, because *"Obedience to God comes before obedience to men"* (Acts 5:29). Neither the UN nor the European Union nor any government has the right to demand anything from us that is opposed to our faith. We can only obey them when what is asked of us is justified. It is precisely with regard to these political institutions that we must be very vigilant, because the anti-Christian influences are becoming more and more noticeable.

I would like to adapt this topic to the current situation in which we find ourselves as a result of the coronavirus. Suppose a person does not want to be vaccinated because of a strong conviction. In her conscience, she is sure that it is wrong before God to accept such a vaccine because embryonic cell lines were used in its production, development or in the testing phase. If this person lives in Costa Rica, she would be forced by the state to be inoculated, because compulsory vaccination has been introduced there. How will she continue to live? Apart from the fact that she can rely on God to open a door for her, all the normal possibilities of civilian life have been closed to her. She becomes a prisoner in her own country, if she can no longer leave and escape to another country.

This is already a form of martyrdom. She is also likely that she will have to face reproaches, accusations and even hatred for not submitting to the general rule. Nor will she be able to find moral support in a Church that has become complicit in government directives. The opposite may even be true! If you approach your bishop or a priest with this concern, they might tell you that the Pope himself is vaccinated, that it is an "act of love for one's neighbour" and that there is no other option. Perhaps it might occur to a well-meaning friend that she could simply "vaccinate" with another substance and pretend to have complied with the government's mandate. This idea reminds us of the story we heard two days ago, when Eleazar's "friends" proposed a similar simulation. (2 Macc 6:21)

These days, a very good friend from Austria wrote to me, telling me that she now has to resign from her job because she will not be vaccinated. In her country, compulsory vaccination has been introduced. For her, it is a matter of conscience to refuse.

You have to obey God rather than men! This is what the examples we have heard in recent days teach us, showing us the courage and fortitude of the faithful in the People of Israel. May they be for us a shining example when things get serious! And that time has already come... What kind of desert awaits those who do not deny their faith?