

22. November 2021

The virtue of fortitude Part III

We had reflected on the virtue of fortitude in context with the readings from the book of Maccabees; those courageous men and women of the People of Israel. I also pointed out that we need this virtue for our Christian witness in the world, which, in an extreme case, can go as far as martyrdom. We can train ourselves in the virtue of fortitude, and we should not be discouraged if we are naturally fearful. The story of the novice Blanche de la Force (narrated in Gertud von Le Fort's novel "The Last One at the Scaffold") can encourage these fearful souls, showing them that they too can be capable of heroic deeds.

In this historical novel, the author describes the fate of the Carmelite nuns during the upheavals of the French Revolution. Because of the threats facing the religious communities, the novices were given the habit earlier than usual. After a revolutionary commission appeared at the convent, the mistress of novices at the convent of Compiègne, Marie de l'Incarnation, planned an act of consecration, giving a vow of heroic sacrifice. Sister Blanche, who was a very fearful novice, was not capable of this. So she fled from the convent, rushed to her father and had to witness him being killed by mobs. In the meantime, the Carmelites of Compiègne - the community to which she belonged - had also been arrested and condemned. Blanche saw with her own eyes how the sisters were led to the guillotine and how they went to their deaths singing the "Veni Creator Spiritus". With each execution of one of the nuns, the chant grows weaker and weaker, until, finally, it is completely extinguished. Then, in the midst of the crowd in the "Place de la Revolution", a soft voice rises up and finishes singing the "Veni Creator": "Deo patri sit gloria et Filio, qui a mortuis surrexit, ac Paraclito in saeculorum saecula". Yes, it is Blanche de la Force who sings these words. Instantly, she is killed by the angry market women.

It is a terrible story, considering the hatred of the people, incited against these innocent Carmelites. But in the midst of this horror, the testimony of the sisters and also that of Blanche shines through. Something of the power of the Risen One, who conquered death and Hades (cf. Rev 1:18), is revealed here. How these brave women must have been received in heaven! How they honoured God and the human race! Thus the dreadful event is transfigured from within, becoming an act of supreme love, which remains indelible before God and in the Church.

Certainly not all of us will have to suffer martyrdom. But the virtue of fortitude is also necessary in every authentic path of following Christ. I am referring to the firm decision

of our will to follow the Lord in everything and to put nothing before him. Indeed, this is the normal fruit of a sincere conversion (See: Conference on "The first conversion and the steps that follow" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBWDDbrMCUQ>).

Sometimes the path after the Lord can be frightening, especially when we are still at the beginning. Although God's grace certainly sustains us and often gives us that initial zeal, the road can be long. Then the virtue of fortitude will help us to overcome, with God's help, all the stages of this way.

St. John of the Cross tells us that, when one has made up one's mind to tread seriously the path of holiness, the Devil will look for a thousand ways to instil fear in us, to prevent us from moving forward and carrying out our purpose. In that sense, the Enemy can make use of all sorts of things, including the stories of the saints, with whose sufferings and torments he wants to frighten the soul. In fact, not infrequently in these stories it is neglected to say that, if God calls a person to such a way, He Himself takes care to give him all the graces and strength he needs to endure the sufferings.

So, it takes firm determination, fortitude and much perseverance to follow the Lord.

Tomorrow, to conclude this series of meditations on fortitude, I will describe how this virtue must work hand in hand with the spirit of fortitude, in order to face with God's grace all the challenges presented to us at every stage of this path.