

26. March 2022

Remaining in humility

Lk 18:9-14

He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else, 'Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, "I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like everyone else, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get." The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This man, I tell you, went home again justified; the other did not. For everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, but anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.'

This passage of Holy Scripture is always a warning to beware of any form of self-righteousness. This is especially serious when expressed in religious life, and can even become one's attitude towards God. All forms of presumption, boasting and self-aggrandisement are a manifestation of human pride; and, at worst, of satanic pride. Pride closes the heart before God, and, as we can see in today's parable, it is also often associated with contempt for other people.

In the tax collector, on the other hand, not a hint of this pride can be detected. His position among the people of Israel was that of a 'persona non grata', so to speak. Evidently he was aware of his sins and approached the Lord in humility.

And once again the Lord turns around that natural order in which we men are often trapped and which deceives us: the humble were exalted; the proud, on the other hand, were sent away with nothing. From this example, Jesus establishes it as a general rule: *"everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, but anyone who humbles himself will be raised up."*

In this sentence, which is supported by many other passages of Holy Scripture, we find a key to our spiritual life. We must not boast of any privilege on the natural plane, whether real or supposed; much less feel superior because of spiritual gifts. Everything is a gift from God, entrusted to us to be used for the glorification of God and the expansion of His Kingdom.

Also in religious communities there can be a temptation to place natural qualities and talents above virtue and piety. This temptation, which probably does not only

affect religious orders, represents a kind of spiritual confusion, which does not take into account the true hierarchy of values.

In Eastern monasticism, a form of prayer is practised which is inspired by the attitude and words of the tax collector. It is the so-called 'prayer of the heart' or 'Jesus prayer', in the classical form of which these words are repeated over and over again: "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*".

This prayer is a genuinely Christian form of meditation. It may seem to us somewhat similar to an ejaculatory prayer. It is practised systematically in the East, and there are those who have already introduced it into our Catholic Church. It involves praying and repeating the same phrase over and over again in the heart, usually in silence. We in the Agnus Dei community have experienced the fruits of this form of prayer, and it has become part of our life. We usually pray it in times of silent Adoration; but, when one has been exercised for a while, one can continue to repeat the prayer in one's heart wherever one is.

To pray the so-called 'prayer of the heart', one can use a prayer chain, which the Orthodox call *chotki* or *komboskini*. But this is not absolutely necessary, as it can also be done with the rosary. The important thing is that the 'Jesus prayer' is prayed calmly and silently. You can start by practising it for a few minutes, but regularly. And when you get the taste for this form of prayer and it becomes a habit, the Lord will invite you to prolong it more and more, so that you can experience the recollection that this form of prayer can bring.

It is also a good way to keep in mind that we are sinners and in need of God's mercy. In addition, one can invoke God's compassion not only for oneself but also for other people, saying, "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.*"

NOTE:

- To learn more about the 'prayer of the heart', see the following lecture:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8NmWQ1W0Ks>
- Under the following link you will find a sung version of Jesus prayer by Harpa Dei in the classical Church Slavonic form:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfzXHDBSaIQ>