

30. April 2022

“Feed my sheep”

Jn 21:1,15-17

Reading for the memorial of St. Pius V

*Later on, Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples. It was by the Sea of Tiberias. When they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs. 'A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He replied, 'Yes, Lord, you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Look after my sheep.' Then he said to him a third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time, 'Do you love me?' and said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'*

For today's meditation, I chose the gospel provided by the Church for the memorial of Pope St. Pius V.

It is worth taking a look at this holy pontiff, a tireless worker in the Lord's vineyard and a true shepherd of God's flock. It is said that some of his contemporaries were afraid of him, in response to which Pius V is reported to have said the following phrase: "With God's help, I hope to rule in such a way that the mourning will be greater when I die than when I was chosen Pope." And indeed it was so!

Antonio Ghislieri (that was his given name) was born in 1504 in Bosco, Piedmont, into a poor family. When he was only 14 years old, he entered the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), taking the name "Michele". He was ordained a priest and later elected prior. It was a time when Protestantism was spreading. Father Michele was appointed inquisitor of the dioceses of Como and Bergamo. He was then called to Rome, where he was elected commissariat of the Holy Office. All his activity was focused on preserving the purity of faith and morals.

Father Michele was subsequently ordained bishop and, shortly afterwards, appointed cardinal and Grand Inquisitor. However, his opposition to Pope Pius IV for acts of nepotism caused him to be transferred from Rome to the see of Modovì. As bishop of that diocese, he devoted himself to its reform. On 7 January 1566 he was elected Supreme Pontiff.

The new Pope, who had taken the name Pius V, led the life of a poor and simple Dominican, thus distinguishing himself from many of his predecessors, the Popes of the Renaissance and humanism.

What, then, must have been the reason that his contemporaries feared him? Probably it was the fact that Pius V proceeded resolutely against false doctrines and their representatives, as well as the ascetic life he led and expected of the whole Church. Certainly this aroused suspicion in certain circles?

Nevertheless, Pius V proved to be a Pope who truly loved God and the Church, and who cared for his sheep. It was precisely this love that moved him to watch over the purity of Catholic doctrine and to take decisive action against heresies. Nor did he close his eyes to irregularities among the clergy and the Christian people.

Pius V, the Pope of the Tridentine reforms, was convinced that every genuine reform must begin "in one's own house", so to speak. Therefore, he only appointed cardinals to his closest circle of collaborators who were trustworthy men. He was committed to correcting abuses. He was especially concerned to promote the religious and moral life of the Roman faithful, to improve the situation of the clergy, to establish seminaries for priestly formation, as prescribed by the Council of Trent, to ensure the observance of celibacy and the enclosure of religious orders, as well as many other matters in the life of the Church, to which he devoted himself with courage and determination.

In 1570 the "Missale Romanum" (containing all the prayers and texts for the celebration of Holy Mass) was established as binding for the liturgy of the entire Catholic Church, in order to avoid abuses and Protestant influences. This rite, commonly called the "Tridentine Mass", was to be observed "for the perpetuity of time", according to the words of Pius V; and it was forbidden ever to be modified. The Church adhered to this until the Second Vatican Council. In our own day, some priests and faithful who want to preserve Tradition appeal to this decree, then promulgated by

Pius V, to protect the Tridentine Mass, which after the liturgical reform of 1970 was often viewed with suspicion and even persecuted.

It was Pope Benedict XVI who took the necessary steps to give the Traditional Mass its place in the life of the Catholic Church, on an "equal footing" with the so-called "Novus Ordo". Unfortunately, in today's episcopate and clergy, often marked by modernism, the extraordinary form of the Roman rite finds little favour, so that recently the present Pope again placed considerable restrictions on its celebration.

In the face of the Turkish Muslim threat to Europe, Pope Pius V renewed the "Holy League" with Spain and Venice. This alliance had been established by Pope Julius II in 1511. In 1571 the famous Battle of Lepanto took place, which, despite the superiority of the Turkish fleets, ended in victory for the "Holy League". This triumph was attributed to the Virgin Mary and to the efforts of Pope Pius V, who called on the whole of Christendom to pray the Holy Rosary to ask for divine intervention in that desperate situation.

As a Dominican, Pius V enriched his pontificate with a profound life of prayer, which was fruitful for the whole Church. A true reform, driven by the Holy Spirit, will always have in view the deepening of spiritual and ecclesial life. It is certainly appropriate to improve structures from time to time, but if these efforts do not go hand in hand with the struggle for the holiness of all the members of the Church, they will not bring about a real improvement.

We Catholics have a great treasure, which we must care for and protect. This is as important in our day as it was in Pius V's time. The renewal of the Church, which is so necessary, cannot come about with an eye to the world and by adapting to its spirit. It must come from God and strengthen the contemplative, apostolic and charitable dimension of the Church.

We cannot tire of thanking the Lord for Pope St. Pius V, who led the sheep entrusted to him to the good pastures and left us an extraordinary example.