

15. May 2022

Comforting and encouraging the faithful

Acts 14:21-27

In those days, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, comforting the disciples, exhorting them to persevere in the faith and telling them: 'We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God.' In each of these churches they appointed elders, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. They passed through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia. Then after proclaiming the word at Perga they went down to Attalia and from there sailed for Antioch, where they had originally been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On their arrival they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith to the gentiles.

One of the fundamental tasks of the apostles is to comfort and encourage the disciples, exhorting them to persevere in the faith, because - as today's text says - the faithful must "*experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God*". This remains a permanent task of the successors of the apostles and of all those who are called to assist the faithful. Everyone can examine for himself whether this mission is still being fulfilled properly, whether the shepherds are striving intensely for the salvation of the flock entrusted to them, or whether they seem to be more devoted to the world and to other matters and interests. This shows the difference between true shepherds and those who neglect their flock!

Day by day this spiritual strengthening is necessary, especially when the first steps on the path of conversion are just being taken. Without this orientation, how can the attacks on the following of Christ, both from within and from without, be met? How can there be faith without preaching? -How will the disciples find the right way if they do not receive instruction?

It is not only a question of our knowing and professing the true faith, but we must also be instructed in how to walk the way after Christ... Tribulations and attacks do not only come from without; they also come from within: fears within us, temptations to impurity, evil thoughts, false images of God, so many distractions from the right way... How is the disciple to deal with all this?

Certainly the Holy Spirit can instruct him directly, or one could be formed through good spiritual reading... But the "normal" or "ordinary" way is for the disciple to receive help from spiritual persons. And such helpers should not only be versed in theology, but also trained in the inner way of following Christ and in proper asceticism.

Bishop Schneider, who is an auxiliary bishop in Kazakhstan and is one of the few who clearly sees and points out the current crisis in the Church, mentions as one of the four causes of the sexual abuse crisis in the clergy the fact that there is insufficient ascetic formation in the seminaries.

An experience I had a couple of years ago seems to confirm this... I met with some American seminarians and encouraged them to remain faithful to their priestly vocation. I told them that it is about us permeating the world with God's love, not about the Church being permeated by the world. Then I told them that they should also practise asceticism, but I had the impression that they didn't even know what I was talking about...

The soul of the disciples is strengthened in asceticism - that is, for example, fasting, simplicity in lifestyle and eating, prudent and conscious handling of the media, especially the internet and social networks, vigilance against temptations, facing them with prayer, asceticism of thoughts, self-control and so many other things that are indispensable for the following of Christ, and even more so for priests and all religious vocations.

Every pastor should have a minimum of experience and authentic spiritual formation, and if he is a bishop, he must ensure that his priests receive constant formation in this field. Seminaries cannot degenerate into mere worldly institutions; or, worse, be contaminated by impure, often homosexual, acts that may occur within them. A good spiritual formation will help to deal with the tribulations that come from within, so that it will also be better able to resist when tribulations from without arise.

Today many speak of a renewal of the Church. However, this cannot take place in the spirit of the world. It would be illusory! The primary task of the Church is not to pretend to set a global political course. Today's reading shows us what is essential! And this has not changed! The souls of the faithful need to be comforted, not only through the sacraments, but also through clear and unambiguous doctrine, with its wise application in concrete pastoral situations, as well as through sound spiritual formation.