

8. February 2023

A way to a pure heart
Part 1

Mk 7:14-23

He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean. Anyone who has ears for listening should listen!' When he had gone into the house, away from the crowd, his disciples questioned him about the parable. He said to them, 'Even you - don't you understand? Can't you see that nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean, because it goes not into the heart but into the stomach and passes into the sewer? And he went on, 'It is what comes out of someone that makes that person unclean. For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean.'

For any spiritual advancement, it will be indispensable to interiorise this Gospel passage. No matter how many practices and sacrifices we impose on ourselves, no matter how many rules we follow, no matter how many important apostolic works we carry out, if we do not work on our hearts, it will be difficult for the love of God to grow in us. Here the well-known words of St. Paul can very well be applied: If we did not have love, everything would be like sounding brass (cf. 1 Cor 13:1). Indeed, the purification of our heart means to grow in love.

The interiorisation of this text consists, first of all, in becoming aware that in our heart there really dwells that evil of which the Lord speaks here. This awareness should make us vigilant and free us from all illusions about ourselves. At first, it may hurt us to discover all this within ourselves. However, if the Lord makes us see it so clearly, it is because it is very important to Him that we are not blind and do not overlook our own abysses: "*Listen to me, all of you, and understand*", says the Lord.

This healthy realism of recognising ourselves as persons inclined to evil, as Catholic doctrine teaches us (Catechism, n. 402-403), must not lead us to fatalism or resignation.

On the contrary, it prevents us from falling into illusions about ourselves and from a kind of a "self-produced holiness".

Instead, true self-knowledge is a call to turn to the One who can give us a new heart (cf. Ezek 36:26). With His help, we can cooperate so that God's grace can make us into men modelled on His image.

Let us take the first of the evils that Jesus mentions in today's Gospel: evil thoughts. And to these we could also add the corresponding feelings.

How can we overcome evil thoughts?

Some people think they have discovered a method by trying to "think positively". There may be a good intention here to keep out the dark and negative, but in one way or another it will remain artificial and will hardly be able to cleanse the source of the bad thoughts.

In the first instance, it is necessary to identify the evil thoughts as such. For a person who follows the Lord, this should not be so difficult. Here too the Gospel is a strong light in which we can recognise what is going on inside us; so is the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, who reminds us of the Words of the Lord (cf. Jn 14:26) and becomes our teacher in the process of the purification of the heart.

However, already in the first stage a big obstacle can arise, which does not allow us to really embark on this path. It is pride, which does not want to admit that we have bad thoughts and can even justify them. Especially from a spiritual point of view, this becomes a serious problem, which gradually blinds the person. Pride stands at the entrance of the heart like an inflexible guard, which does not even allow self-knowledge.

What such pride represents would be a different topic. It can be simply a self-exaltation; or, at worst, a luciferic presumption. Or it can also be a great wall of protection, which wants to safeguard one's own insecurity, because perhaps, deep down, there are deep-rooted inferiority complexes. If this were the case, the false security that one has erected to protect oneself would collapse the moment one is confronted with the evil in one's heart. And this is what we want to avoid, because we believe that we will not be able to bear it and that we will fall into nothingness. Unfortunately, this shows a lack of trust

in a loving God, who does not make us see our darkness in order to humble us, but to penetrate it with His presence.

For today let us keep the following: An essential first step in obtaining a pure heart is to be willing to perceive without fear or repression our own shadow; that is, to recognise and admit the evil that comes from within. We must always keep in mind that this happens in the presence of a loving Father, who wants to lead us out of darkness and into His light (cf. 1 Pet 2:9).

Tomorrow we will return to this theme...