

15. April 2023

Saturday of the Easter Octave
Frankness and true obedience

Acts 4:13-21

They were astonished at the fearlessness shown by Peter and John, considering that they were uneducated laymen; and they recognised them as associates of Jesus; but when they saw the man who had been cured standing by their side, they could find no answer. So they ordered them to stand outside while the Sanhedrin had a private discussion. 'What are we going to do with these men?' they asked. 'It is obvious to everybody in Jerusalem that a notable miracle has been worked through them, and we cannot deny it. But to stop the whole thing spreading any further among the people, let us threaten them against ever speaking to anyone in this name again.' So they called them in and gave them a warning on no account to make statements or to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John retorted, 'You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God. We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard.' The court repeated the threats and then released them; they could not think of any way to punish them, since all the people were giving glory to God for what had happened.

We have already reflected on the fearlessness of St. Peter on several occasions. Today's passage also mentions the Lord's beloved disciple, St. John.

Peter had already learned his hard lesson when, for fear of death or imprisonment, he denied the Lord three times. Once he recognised this, how much his triple denial must have pained him, since he truly loved Jesus. However, at that time Peter was not yet strong enough; he lacked the fearlessness that now characterises him. Now Peter can atone for his cowardice, just as he atoned for his triple denial by answering Jesus three times that he loved Him, when the Risen One appeared to them on the shores of the Lake of Galilee. It was then that he was entrusted by the Lord to feed His flock (cf. Jn 21:15-19).

Now we see a fearless Peter, because the spirit of fortitude is at work in him. He has left

behind his fear of the Sanhedrin, because he knows that, in the first instance, he owes obedience to the One whom the Sanhedrin should also have listened to and followed. But since they did not, Peter could not obey them, because religious obedience has a limit which must not be crossed.

God alone possesses the fullness of authority in Himself. All human authority, including religious authority, is conferred by God and is legitimate only to the extent that it does not contradict divine authority. This gives the Apostle the freedom to act according to God's will. This is also an important message for us.

Peter, like his Lord and speaking in the same Spirit, was even capable of questioning the Sanhedrin's way of proceeding: *"You must judge whether in God's eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God"*. And he continues clearly: *"We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard"*.

Let us take another close look at the situation, in order to draw the relevant conclusions. Jesus, the Son of God Himself, had entrusted His Apostles with the mission of proclaiming the gospel. Their proclamation is accompanied by signs and miracles, which certify the divine origin of this mission. Now, a religious authority, previously instituted by God, wants to prevent the Name of Jesus from being made known to the people; that Name which - as we saw yesterday - is the only one in whom salvation is to be found. They were the same ones who had put the Redeemer to death, and now they wanted to prevent everything that happened in His Name. In this way, they opposed the plan of salvation.

The motivations of the leaders of the people may have varied. Perhaps some of them actually believed that they were dealing with a dangerous sect spreading a pernicious doctrine. Let us remember that the Lord Himself had told His disciples that those who kill them will think they are doing God a favour (cf. Jn 16:2). In any case, these leaders, who want to hinder the proclamation of the Apostles, of those uneducated men, are blind. They have become *"blind leading the blind"* (Lk 6:39) and have hardened their hearts against the Lord.

Therefore, their authority no longer has a legitimate basis; it is even directed against the action of God Himself.

This teaches us to take a close look at whether an authority is legitimate and also whether it acts legitimately. So it is not only a question of examining whether the authority has been legitimately instituted - which was certainly the case with the high priests - but also of assessing whether it acts in conformity with God and does not abuse its authority.

I am not referring here to the mistakes that anyone can make. In order to question obedience to a legitimate authority, there must be very strong reasons, which concern God Himself and fall within the realm of conscience. As long as this is not the case, obedience cannot simply be withheld, because then everyone would do what they think is right and chaos would ensue.

But today's example shows us that there can indeed be a conflict with authority. Nor can this be ruled out in today's time, because religious obedience is not blind obedience to a human authority. If obedience were to be demanded in this way, it would lose its proper dignity.

The Apostle Peter remained faithful to his Lord's command until his death. May the Lord grant that His followers may not be intimidated by any authority that would prevent them from fulfilling their mission and living their vocation!