

18. April 2023

The example of the first Christian community

Acts 24: 32-35

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need. There was a Levite of Cypriot origin called Joseph whom the apostles surnamed Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He owned a piece of land and he sold it and brought the money and presented it to the apostles.

Today's reading shows us a marvellous reality worked by the Holy Spirit. The faithful of the new Christian community were "*united, heart and soul*". This means that they were so united in their love for God and in their love for one another that they formed a deep communion in the Spirit, a unity that can only come from God. It is a community that does not arise from the bonds of blood, but from a common listening to the will of God, from the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God and from the readiness to do his will. Thus, that unity which exists between the three divine Persons extends also to the faithful, on whom grace is poured out in abundance. If we look at the first Christian community, we can get a small glimpse of that communion which will reach its perfection in heaven, when God, angels and mankind will form an indestructible unity in love, in which each serves the other with joy, and each passes on to the other all that he or she knows about God.

Love for God and love for one another moved them to share what they had, thus making the marvellous work of the Holy Spirit shine forth. The sharing, however, was entirely voluntary, and in this it differs from all later attempts to artificially create equity among men, which often resulted in great injustice, as was the case, for example, with communism. If you take an idea which is originally an inspiration of the Holy Spirit and take it out of its divine context and turn it into an ideology, then it becomes distorted and transformed into the opposite. It lacks precisely the divine

love, which is the force that sustains it. This love cannot be replaced by mere human will, even if it is directed towards the good. This way of proceeding has been repeated again and again throughout human history. If that which is originally inspired by the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by the pursuit of holiness, then man ends up yielding to the evil inclinations of his nature and in the long run cannot respond to the demands of such a lofty way of life.

In the early Christian community, which today's reading presents to us, a new form of righteousness emerged. The focus was no longer on securing one's own goods, but on each and every one of the members. And Christian simplicity makes such a way of life all the more radiant! Since the community was of one heart and one soul, it could recognise that the needs were not the same for each person, and that this difference did not come from selfishness but from the different circumstances of life.

What a great work of the Holy Spirit!

Throughout the history of Christianity, efforts have been made to imitate this way of life time and again, especially in religious and monastic communities. This is still the case today, even in some more recent communities. It is not always easy to live up to these high standards, because human nature tends to seek security in material possessions. That is why the pursuit of holiness must be the foundation to restrain the inclinations of our nature. But to this day community ownership, when it is voluntary and driven by love, continues to radiate that light which shone in the early Christian community.

In the midst of this new way of life of the spiritual family that had emerged, the apostles proclaimed the Resurrection of the Lord with force. It is not surprising, then, that so many people were attracted by their witness. On the one hand, they heard the authoritative word of the apostles, proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit; and on the other hand, they saw the example of Christian living in all the splendour of first love. In this case, there was total coherence between the word and the witness of life.

The example of the early community as a fruit of the Holy Spirit continues to act in various ways to this day. Where the Christian community has its eyes and heart open, both to the needs of the poor in its midst and to the needs of humanity as a whole, there the Holy Spirit can act, inviting us to share. If this happens, then the spirit of

the first Christian community is still alive and will give rise to ever new examples in which that voluntary sharing of goods is realised.