

April 27, 2023

## Help from Heaven for the evangelization

Acts 8:26-40

*The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Set out at noon and go along the road that leads from Jerusalem down to Gaza, the desert road.' So he set off on his journey. Now an Ethiopian had been on pilgrimage to Jerusalem; he was a eunuch and an officer at the court of the kandake, or queen, of Ethiopia; he was her chief treasurer. He was now on his way home, and as he sat in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join that chariot.' When Philip ran up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How could I, unless I have someone to guide me?' So he urged Philip to get in and sit by his side. Now the passage of scripture he was reading was this: Like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse, like a sheep dumb in front of its shearers, he never opens his mouth. In his humiliation, fair judgment was denied him. Who will ever talk about his descendants, since his life on earth has been cut short? The eunuch addressed Philip and said, 'Tell me, is the prophet referring to himself or someone else?' Starting, therefore, with this text of scripture Philip proceeded to explain the good news of Jesus to him. Further along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, is some water; is there anything to prevent my being baptized?' He ordered the chariot to stop, then Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water and he baptized him. But after they had come up out of the water again Philip was taken away by the Spirit of the Lord, and the eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Philip appeared in Azotus and continued his journey, proclaiming the good news in every town as far as Caesarea.*

How can we understand God's guidance?

Today, in the West marked by rationalism, it is difficult for us to imagine that an angel gives us concrete indications or that the Spirit of God speaks to us directly. We prefer to have recourse to what our understanding tells us or to the general rules of following Christ. It may even happen that a priest is disturbed or even annoyed if one approaches him and says: "God told me such and such"; "The saints guided me"; "My guardian angel advised me to do this"; "Our Lady gave me a lesson"; or similar things...

Perhaps such a reaction on the part of the priest is understandable in the case of people who come all the time with messages and revelations from God, who even become insistent and think they know everything better. However, this rejection should not lead to the other extreme - as sometimes happens - of doubting or excluding in advance every extraordinary manifestation of God, whether through a word or other means. This same criterion also applies to Marian apparitions. From a spiritual perspective, it is equally erroneous and lacking in sobriety to fundamentally reject this supernatural dimension, as it is to overestimate it and focus too much on this area.

In today's reading, the fact that an angel gave Philip the indication to choose a certain route is mentioned as something very natural. The text does not specify whether the angel appeared to him or spoke to his inner self. Just as naturally, the text relates that the Spirit told Philip to approach the chariot of the Ethiopian official. At the end of the reading, it is stated that the apostle was taken away by the Spirit of the Lord. Likewise, there are many other passages that testify how the apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit and listened to Him; or how the angels were naturally involved in God's plan of salvation.

Evidently, there was a relationship of great familiarity and naturalness between the apostles and the heavenly Church. What is decisive is not whether that voice spoke to them from within or whether they heard it in an apparition. In any case, it is evident that they could understand very well the different ways in which God communicated to them. Throughout the history of the Church, God has also granted these aids to His own.

In the story told in today's text, we see clearly what the purpose of God's guidance is: it is evangelization. And here we should remember that the Holy Spirit is the first evangelizer. It is He who moves and guides Philip. In this particular case, He sends him to the officer of the queen of Ethiopia. This man, for his part, had already been prepared by the same Spirit, for he had gone to Jerusalem to worship God and read the prophet Isaiah. Precisely this reading served as a hook since the official did not understand it and Philip, by responding to his concerns, was able to announce to him the Good News of Jesus. Everything was ready! The eunuch embraced the faith and this step was sealed with baptism. The neophyte went on his way joyfully; while Philip, taken away by the Spirit, went through other cities proclaiming the Gospel.

This marvelous concatenation of events leads us to reflect: Can we still count on such guidance from the Holy Spirit today? Do we still have the assistance of angels and saints in our service of evangelization? Or is this a special grace for the nascent Church?

Undoubtedly, the first and great evangelization carried out by the apostles - especially St. Paul - was an extraordinary grace. But this work is not yet finished, even if the circumstances in today's world are different. Evangelization will last until the end of time! Perhaps we have been working in the Lord's vineyard for a long time, without seeing great results, and we are already exhausted, but the Holy Spirit and the Heavenly Church never get tired! We can lean on them at all times, for their great desire is for the world to know the Messiah.

We too can and should be attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the heavenly Church can manifest itself to us in various ways, especially when the Church militant encounters its own limitations. Certainly this requires a spirit of discernment, lest we mistake our own ideas or, at worst, the whisperings of Satan, for heavenly voices. In this sense, we should be self-critical. But neither can we fall into the attitude of no longer allowing ourselves to be moved by the Spirit of God and avoid the audacity of proclaiming the Gospel, for fear of the mistakes that might be made.

Today's reading should encourage us to serve correctly in the great task of evangelization, knowing that this is God's intention. The Lord's wisdom will guide us.

The truth is that He wants everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). The Holy Spirit does not grow weary! May He strengthen us, so that we too will not grow weary in the service of God, knowing how to accept gladly the help of the angels, if He offers it to us!