

13. May 2023

Different ways in which the Holy Spirit works

Act 16:1-10

From there Paul went to Derbe, and then on to Lystra, where there was a disciple called Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and had become a believer; but his father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him, and Paul, who wanted to have him as a travelling companion, had him circumcised. This was on account of the Jews in the locality where everyone knew his father was a Greek. As they visited one town after another, they passed on the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, with instructions to observe them. So the churches grew strong in the faith, as well as growing daily in numbers. They travelled through Phrygia and the Galatian country, because they had been told by the Holy Spirit not to preach the word in Asia. When they reached the frontier of Mysia they tried to go into Bithynia, but as the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them, they went through Mysia and came down to Troas. One night Paul had a vision: a Macedonian appeared and kept urging him in these words, 'Come across to Macedonia and help us.' Once he had seen this vision we lost no time in arranging a passage to Macedonia, convinced that God had called us to bring them the good news.

In this reading, we can again witness how the Holy Spirit guided the apostles' ways. Paul and Timothy had planned another route for their mission but the Holy Spirit prevented them from going where they wanted to go. Later, thanks to a vision, it became clear to them that they should set out for Macedonia. This indication of the Spirit of God would be significant for the whole of Europe!

We see, then, that the Holy Spirit can, on the one hand, prevent us from certain ways, and, on the other hand, open up other ways and guide us along them. It is important for us to be aware of these two ways in which the Spirit speaks to us, so that we can recognise and follow His guidance in our lives. Of course, the condition for this is that we ask Him to lead us and that we are willing to distinguish His guidance from our own ideas and plans. In this regard, it must be borne in mind that the supernatural light of the Holy Spirit, i.e. the light of God Himself, is not identical with our human capacity to know and reason. Rather, our understanding is to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit. This was one of the great themes of Benedict XVI's pontificate.

How, then, can we recognise when the Holy Spirit prevents or does not permit something? In this meditation, I will limit myself to mentioning a few points, without going into the aspect of seeking advice from a spiritual guide or counselor.

An indispensable first step is to place everything at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, i.e. to entrust my plans to Him so that He can evaluate them: "Is this the way you want to lead me? Is this the right decision? Is the intention I have in the depths of my being right and pure?"

These questions must not proceed from a tormenting insecurity; they must lead us to a serene openness before the Holy Spirit... In this sense, it is also good to say to the Lord: "If these are not your ways, put a hindrance in my way."

It may happen, then, that we notice the obstacles in various ways: concrete difficulties and complications may arise, which make us realise that the doors are not really open. We can then re-examine our intentions.

Inner difficulties may also arise, which do not allow us to move freely along the path we had chosen, so that we are left in doubt as to whether it is really the right step. Of course, all this requires a spirit of discernment, because we should not give in to those obstacles that always exist, but rather must be overcome. Nor should we allow ourselves to be held back by our fears. The hindrances that come from the Holy Spirit are those that point us to another way.

The opposite happens when the Holy Spirit shows us the right path or the right decision... It is usually accompanied by security and strength; doubts are dispelled and inner peace is restored.