

12. July 2023

The Expulsion of unclean spirits

Mt 10:1-7

'Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits with power to drive them out and to cure all kinds of disease and all kinds of illness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon who is known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who was also his betrayer. These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them as follows: 'Do not make your way to gentile territory, and do not enter any Samaritan town; go instead to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. And as you go, proclaim that the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.

The power to cast out demons and to heal all kinds of sickness and disease is not a gift that the Lord would have given exclusively to the disciples of that time; it is part of the "equipment" of all those who follow Him. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that the gifts have been distributed in various ways:

"And those whom God has appointed in the Church are, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers; after them, miraculous powers, then gifts of healing, helpful acts, guidance, various kinds of tongues. Are all of them apostles? Or all prophets? Or all teachers? Or all miracle-workers? Do all have the gifts of healing? Do all of them speak in tongues and all interpret them?" (1 Cor 12:28-30)

It is therefore of great importance that we discover which gifts have been entrusted to us and that we put them at the service of building up the Kingdom of God, for they constitute a spiritual masterpiece that makes the Church shine in all its beauty and fruitfulness.

When we speak of the expulsion of unclean spirits, we might have the impression that we are treading on somewhat hidden ground. Perhaps we remember those passages in the New Testament which describe how these spirits came out of the possessed with loud cries (cf. Mk 1:26), or that story in which the demons enter the pigs, with the

Lord's own permission, and hurl the whole herd into the abyss (cf. Mt 8:30-32).... Or perhaps we ourselves have been at a prayer meeting where similar things happened. All this might be unpleasant for us and perhaps we prefer to avoid these topics. On a personal level, at least, I can say that this is my first reaction when touching this field of faith.

But we cannot stop there! There are also illnesses that seem repugnant; however, this reaction can be overcome by an act of love towards the sick person. We must also bear in mind that unclean spirits torture and confuse people. We can have compassion for those who are under their influence, who certainly did not always consecrate themselves to the Devil with full awareness and freedom.

Without in any way denying the real existence of such spirits, we can say that they spread something like spiritual diseases, so that their expulsion can be regarded as a work of mercy.

Now, certainly not all of us can perform exorcisms to free the possessed, for in the Catholic Church it is certain priests who are entrusted with this ministry in apostolic authority. However, there are many prayers explicitly aimed at combating impure spirits, which all the faithful can pray. For example, Pope Leo XIII left us the recommendation to pray after each Holy Mass this prayer to St. Michael the Archangel: "St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls."

In view of the growing darkness and confusion in the world, which is unfortunately creeping into our Church as well, it would behoove Christians to consciously put this dimension of faith into practice in order to counteract the darkness. Every prayer uttered with this intention will weaken the unclean spirits, and thus we will take responsibility for those who are under their influence. On a personal level we may not be able to perceive the effectiveness of this prayer, but faith assures us that our prayer is a weapon in the Lord's hands, which He will use as He sees fit.

Today's Gospel tells us that the Lord gave the apostles the power to cast out demons; that is, He made them sharers in His own authority. From this perspective, we could

say that every exorcistic prayer is an exercise of Christ's authority over the powers of darkness.

If we internalise these reflections, we will realise that our hands are not tied and simply at the mercy of those unhealthy tendencies that are clearly anti-Christian and satanic in character. Prayer in the authority of Christ can bring down illegitimate strongholds and power structures: *“He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly”* (Lk 1:52).

The expulsion of unclean spirits is directly related to the coming of the Kingdom of Christ, which is to spread over the whole earth. By faith we know that the heavens have already been purified from the presence of such spirits (cf. Rev 12:7-8), and now they, by seducing men, are trying to establish the “Kingdom of the beast” on earth. This means that Satan wants to take over the dominion of the world.

We can offer resistance to the plans of evil through our way of following Christ, through conscious acceptance of spiritual combat, through works of charity and, of course, through prayer. In this way, we serve the Lord, who wants to redeem and deliver this world from the power of Evil.