

16. August 2023

Fraternal correction

Mt 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples: "if thy brother shall offend against thee, go, and rebuke him between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou shalt gain thy brother. And if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more: that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may stand. And if he will not hear them: tell the church. And if he will not hear the church, let him be to thee as the heathen and publican. Amen I say to you, whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you shall consent upon earth, concerning any thing whatsoever they shall ask, it shall be done to them by my Father who is in heaven. For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

In this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord gives us clear instruction on how to deal with a brother who sins. We are not dealing here with minor irregularities or faults that we should bring to our brother's attention in order to help him overcome certain behaviours that could affect unity, or so that he can, for example, better comply with the rules of his community. Rather, today's Gospel refers to those sins that endanger our brother's eternal salvation if he does not renounce them. So, this is a serious matter...

As we hear these instructions from the Lord today, we may wonder whether they are still being heeded; or whether we simply allow sins to be committed before our eyes and say nothing.

Recently, a woman confided to me something that troubled her heart. She told me that she observed people receiving communion unworthily, and that it was a burden on her conscience. She also gave me to understand that, from her point of view, fewer and fewer priests are openly announcing the conditions for receiving Holy Communion in the right way.

Indeed, a real confusion has arisen in the Church on this point. Whereas the conditions for approaching communion used to be clear - i.e. that one must be in the grace of God and believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist - today there is a widespread tendency in many places to leave this decision to the conscience of the individual. This tendency has increased considerably since the post-synodal exhortation "Amoris Laetitia".

It can even happen that what was once considered and treated as sin is now no longer seen as such. Consequently, a fraternal correction as described by the Lord here will not be made either: first alone, then in the presence of witnesses, and finally before the whole community of the faithful, in case the sinner does not want to listen and give up his evil ways.

If it is no longer clear what sin is and if there is no unanimity among the faithful in these matters, then the process of correction that Jesus points out to us is hardly feasible. Today, it would perhaps even be considered unmerciful to take the ultimate step in the correction of the sinner, which is to exclude him or her from the community of the faithful. Such a position would lead us to a dead end.

How then can we deal with a situation such as the one described by the Lord in this Gospel?

What we can be certain of is that Holy Scripture and the authentic doctrine of the Church will never change. And if the spirit of the world penetrates more and more into the Church and begins to obscure the faithful and the ministers, then a clear decision must be made: I want to remain faithful to the teachings of Holy Scripture and of the Church, and I want to be governed by them! We are accountable to God alone, and we cannot allow errors and moral laxity to influence us in such a way that we are afraid to stand up for the truth.

Certainly we must do so with prudence and with a good sense of the situation at hand. It must be borne in mind that, in fact, on certain issues there is no longer a universal consensus in the Church, which is very painful. But this should not corrupt us from within. We can ask the Holy Spirit for advice on how to deal with situations such as the one presented to us by the Lord in today's Gospel. And then we will find the appropriate way to offer help to the erring brother, so that he can recognise his evil ways and

abandon them. If he listens to us, we will have won our brother. And if he does not listen to us the first time, the Holy Spirit will indicate to us the next step to take. In this way, we will follow Jesus' advice and be able to put it into practice even in a time of increasing confusion.