

4. October 2023

Saint Francis of Assisi and the radicality of the call

Lk 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But he said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

St Francis obeyed these words of the Lord and placed his whole life in God's hands. Some may be frightened by this radical attitude; others will be attracted by it. It is a question of vocation and response.

What does the Lord want to teach us in this Gospel? All these exhortations of Jesus are the concrete application of the first commandment: "You shall love God above all things". When He calls, one must be ready to leave one's home and family behind for His sake, and to find oneself at home from then on only in the fulfilment of God's will and the mission He entrusts to us.

One might be tempted to think that these requirements apply only to certain very specific vocations. Certainly, this call is particularly realised in forms of life such as monasticism or hermitry. But these words of Jesus are also addressed to those lay Christians who do not leave the world outwardly.

St Paul, referring to the end of time, advises: *"Those who have wives, let them live as if they had none (...); and those who buy as though they had no goods..."* (1 Cor 7:29b-30).

Human relationships, important as they are, are not the ultimate goal of our existence; they are part of its earthly dimension. If we are willing to draw the right conclusion,

God shows us this reality in various ways. Indeed, everything earthly is subject to the shadow of death and imperfection, and therefore calls us to grasp the imperishable and to seek and find in God alone the ultimate security of our existence.

It is from our relationship with God that all the other areas of our life are ordered and given their proper place. In today's Gospel the Lord shows us this "hierarchy of values" in all its radicalness. Even the closest family ties and the most honourable earthly duties (like burying one's father) must take second place to God's call.

He introduces us to a greater reality and leads us to find our home in God alone. Following Christ is our first and foremost task.

St Francis of Assisi, whom many have called "another Christ", understood this call in its full dimension. He knew that in this radical vocation, renunciation is not an end in itself; love is. Some people are scandalised by the radicality of such a call; they look more to what they love and what gives them security, and fear to leave it behind. They have not understood that Jesus does not emphasise sacrifice and renunciation, but shows us the urgency of God's call, which comes from His burning love, the love that penetrated the whole being of the seraphic Francis. Submitting everything to this call is a consequence of love.

It is true that not all of us are called to imitate the life of a Saint Francis in the same way. But those who, like him, have responded fully to God's call are a challenge for us. In what aspect of our lives does today's Gospel challenge us? Where does it ask for our concrete response? What do we need to leave behind or put aside in order to fully respond to God's love? What are we attached to and unable to detach ourselves from? What needs to be purified in us so that God's spiritual order can be fully realised in our lives? Is the Lord inviting us to do a "somersault" and throw ourselves unconditionally into His arms?

We cannot simply pass by such passages in the Gospel. Every word of God wants to teach us, to call us and to strengthen us. On this day when we remember St Francis of Assisi, he asks us this concrete question: Are you ready to leave everything behind for the love of God? If you have not already done so, do so now. His love will be your reward, and then you will find that it is not as difficult as you thought. You can ask the Lord for the gift of fortitude to enable you to take this step.