

29. October 2023

True conversion

1 Thess 1:5c-10

Brothers: You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedo'nia and in Acha'ia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedo'nia and Acha'ia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

St Paul speaks of an exemplary Christian community in Thessalonica, whose witness was known far and wide.

What had happened to them?

The reading tells us that they turned away from idols and turned to the living God; that they imitated the Apostles and the Lord; and that, even in the midst of many tribulations, they embraced the Word with the joy that the Holy Spirit gave them.

We can reflect on some elements of this text:

First, the importance of true conversion.

The conversion of a person is perhaps one of the greatest miracles, because it implies that we respond with our free will to the offer of grace. Called and attracted by grace, we leave behind our idols, that is, everything that stands between us and God, everything that absorbs our capacity to love and thus usurps God's place in our heart.

Idols are not only those figures that man creates for himself and then prostrates himself before the work of his hands, as we know from the Old Testament stories. The term "idol" encompasses much more than that... Anything to which our hearts are attached and which takes the place of God alone becomes an idol. St Paul tells us that demons

hide behind idols (cf. 1 Cor 10:20). He was certainly referring to the worship and sacrifices offered to these figures. So it is easy to understand that the demons hide behind them because they want to be worshipped as God.

And what about the other "idols" that occupy a part of our heart and attention? For example, if we have an inordinate love for temporary things, this is a disordered human inclination. However, the demons will know how to exploit this tendency and will take advantage of it, trying again and again to distract us from God and to foster this disordered attachment.

Just as the Holy Spirit always wants to bring us back to the essentials so that we do not lose the "thread of God", so the devil will always try to draw our attention to the disordered things in our lives so that we do not find the "thread of God".

When a true conversion takes place, we will strive, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to leave behind us all that separates us from God or hinders us on our way. But our own efforts will not suffice. If we allow ourselves to be guided by our "divine Friend", the Holy Spirit will show us what we still lack and help us to overcome it.

It is clear that in the Thessalonian community this true conversion had taken place, so that these Christians were able to endure even tribulation for the Lord's sake.

This is a second element to reflect on in today's reading: We must be aware that serious following of Christ can bring hardship, harm, persecution, slander and even violent death. The willingness to accept all this for the sake of Jesus, even to the point of martyrdom if necessary, is strengthened and sustained by the spirit of fortitude. This is part of an authentic witness for the Lord, if God wills it, because Jesus Himself suffered martyrdom.

If we do not take this possibility into account and prepare ourselves day by day to remain faithful to the Lord, we are not being realistic. Certainly, this is beyond our natural strength, but neither are they our main support, but the Lord is. In Him it is possible to be faithful even in persecution. But it is necessary to cooperate seriously in our conversion, which, although it is taking place at a certain moment, is not yet complete. Everything seems to indicate that we will find ourselves more and more in times of tribulation in our following of Christ. The shadows of an antichristian kingdom are spreading more and more...

The third point to meditate on is the joy that the Holy Spirit gives us when we receive

the Word and are converted. It is the joy of God Himself at work in us, for all heaven rejoices at the conversion of one sinner (cf. Lk 15:7), and certainly the joy is no less when a whole community is converted. It should be made clear that this is not so much an emotional joy as we know it. This does not mean that there are not moments of "bursting with joy" at having met the heavenly Father. In general, however, it is a quiet joy at the spiritual level of being able to live a life pleasing to God and to live in communion with Him; it is a joy in God and because of God.

If we listen to what St Paul says about the community of Thessalonica, we can understand that their witness was perceived by the people and became an example for them.

May the Lord grant that the Church may emerge purified and strengthened from the present tribulations and confusions! All idols must be cast out and we Christians, as truly converted and renewed people, are called to proclaim the Kingdom of God! In spite of all tribulations, the joy of God will be our strength (cf. Neh 8:10).