

10. November 2023

Encourage and correct

Rom 15:14-21

*'My brothers, I am quite sure that you, in particular, are full of goodness, fully instructed and capable of correcting each other. But I have special confidence in writing on some points to you, to refresh your memories, because of the grace that was given to me by God. I was given grace to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles, dedicated to offer them the gospel of God, so that gentiles might become an acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. So I can be proud, in Christ Jesus, of what I have done for God. Of course I can dare to speak only of the things which Christ has done through me to win the allegiance of the gentiles, using what I have said and done, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God. In this way, from Jerusalem and all round, even as far as Illyricum, I have fully carried out the preaching of the gospel of Christ; and what is more, it has been my rule to preach the gospel only where the name of Christ has not already been heard, for I do not build on another's foundations; in accordance with scripture: Those who have never been told about him will see him, and those who have never heard about him will understand'*

Authentic pastoral service requires speaking to the community about its positive as well as its negative sides. This can be seen, for example, in the letters that the glorified Lord addresses to the churches of Asia Minor in the first chapters of Revelation (2 and 3). Also in the passage from the Letter to the Romans that we have heard today, we recognise that St. Paul assumes this responsibility. On the one hand, he praises the community and is convinced that they too can admonish one another in the so-called "correctio fraterna". On the other hand, in some passages of the letter he wrote to them "with a certain boldness", to remind them of what may have been forgotten or overlooked. In any case, the congregation of Rome knew that the Apostle cared for them and was showing them his love. It would be a "false love" to overlook problems just to avoid conflict and to be loved by all. A shepherd who acts like this will hardly be able to chase away a wolf that breaks into the flock.

St. Paul makes clear to us the motivation of his work: *"That gentiles might become an acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit"*.

The Apostle is well aware that we must persevere in doing good, and he knows that we easily fall into the temptation to neglect over time what we had set out to do in the way of

following Christ. With each neglect, the vivid memory of the resolutions we have made fades and the fervour to put them into practice diminishes more and more.

Let us take as an example a regular prayer life, which is so important for our spiritual growth. Certainly we all agree that it is a good and necessary purpose to take time for God on a regular basis, to deepen our relationship with Him. But then come various circumstances, our laziness, lack of constancy, etc., so that our prayer life cannot become an all-pervading torrent of grace; rather, over time, it is even in danger of drying up. How important it is that someone then reminds us that prayer is the soul of the spiritual life and that without it we will not make progress!

So we see that both aspects are important: encouraging and correcting.

Correcting in the right way, as the Apostle Paul does in this letter, is a real "spiritual work of art", because it is easy to get carried away by negative feelings, such as anger, and then to pass them on when correcting. This creates unnecessary tension. Therefore, before making a correction, one should examine whether one is at peace within oneself and whether the intention of correcting is truly to help the other person in his or her journey with God.

On the other hand, we should also not be afraid to point out important things, even if we are not yet perfect. We should strive to say them with love and to appease our passions, so that the other person will find it easier to accept our correction.

So we can be very grateful when there are good pastors who remind us of what is essential to persevere in following Christ and grow spiritually; and when they confirm us in the authentic Catholic faith and warn us of errors. The latter is an essential part of a pastor's service, even if we believe that the People of God should be able to distinguish the voice of the Lord from other voices.