



18. January 2024

In the school of the Fathers of the desert (II): The combat in what we speak

In today's meditation, we continue the theme we had begun yesterday, in memory of Saint Anthony Abbot. Let us listen again to the words of this father of the desert, to continue to describe the combat that we Christians are called to wage:

"He who sits in the desert and seeks to be calm of heart, has been spared from three combats: the combat of listening, the combat of speech and the combat of sight. He has only one battle left to fight: the battle against impurity".

Yesterday we had reflected on listening; today we will meditate on the combat in speaking. St. Anthony, being in the desert, learned to be silent. But, according to his words, he also cultivated a calmness of heart, by which he means an inner recollection, a peace that grows as we live in trusting dialogue with God and focus totally on Him.

Speaking:

In us, who do not live in the desert and are everywhere confronted with a river of words, this excess of speaking has not yet subsided. The first question we must ask ourselves is whether we are at least aware that we can fail when we speak.

Holy Scripture describes this problem very accurately:

"The lips of gossips repeat the words of others, the words of the wise are carefully weighed. The heart of fools is in their mouth, but the mouth of the wise is in their heart" (Sir 21:25-26).

And so the Apostle James warns us in his letter:

"For we all trip up in many ways. Someone who does not trip up in speech has reached perfection and is able to keep the whole body on a tight rein. Once we put a bit in the horse's mouth, to make it do what we want, we have the whole animal under our control.

Or think of ships: no matter how big they are, even if a gale is driving them, they are directed by a tiny rudder wherever the whim of the helmsman decides. So the tongue is only a tiny part of the body, but its boasts are great. Think how small a flame can set fire to a huge forest. But nobody can tame the tongue - it is a pest that will not keep still, full of deadly poison. We use it to bless the Lord and Father, but we also use it to curse people who are made in God's image: the blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. My brothers, this must be wrong" (Jas 3:2-6,8-10).

We could go on quoting many other passages, but if we are sincere, we will be able to recognise how lightly we say inappropriate words and how often we speak ill of others. This attitude could not stand up to the test of love and truth! But it is not only evil words that disturb the peace and have been "ignited by hell". Also the excess of useless words trivialises the atmosphere and keeps man bound to the trifles of this world:

"The more we say, the more futile it is: what good can we derive from it?" (Eccl 6:11)

Let us look, for example, at the way that idle talk in the Church disturbs recollection and chases away the spirit of prayer!

We have to learn to restrain our words, and not to let loose whatever is on our tongue without first reflecting and praying. Our spiritual life can hardly grow and deepen if we do not learn to be silent. The word must edify and comfort the other person. For that to happen, it must come from deep within, where it can be formed by the Spirit of the Lord.

To perceive our unnecessary talk, we will have to pay close attention, for we are used to talking a lot and we are not accountable for how we expose ourselves in our excess of useless words.

And what does the devil get out of it? Well, he always sees to it that man remains in the superficial sphere of life, that he does not seek silence and does not learn to restrain himself inwardly. In these circumstances, the Christian becomes less dangerous for him, because his faith will hardly experience a deepening and his prayer will not be strengthened.

Let us remember that St. Anthony fought the great battles against demons precisely when he was in the desert. There, where the noise does not disturb us endlessly; there, where the tongue is silent and man goes deeper into himself; there, where the eyes turn away from what feeds his lust; there, where constant prayer becomes a habit... That is where the great battles are fought, for the devil loses ground and his allies disappear, with whom he can make use of and behind whom he can hide!

The victory will be the Lord's! And if we learn to bridle our tongue, we will be better equipped for the spiritual battles, because our vigilance will increase and our mouth will be able to speak more easily words of love and consolation.