

19. June 2024

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving

Mt 6:1-6,16-18

At that time, Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be careful not to parade your uprightness in public to attract attention; otherwise you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win human admiration. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. 'And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. 'When you are fasting, do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they go about looking unsightly to let people know they are fasting. In truth I tell you, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put scent on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

Fasting was considered an important religious practice at the time of the Old Covenant and was highly regarded among the people of Israel. In the Catholic Church, too, fasting had this importance for many centuries, and in the Orthodox Church it remains so to this day. The term 'fasting' was specifically used to refer to corporal fasting, i.e. the voluntary renunciation of regular food.

Nowadays, corporal fasting has lost most of its significance in our Church. The fasting regulations for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are so lax that one can hardly speak of fasting, but only of a slight reduction in food consumption. What has remained of the practice of fasting for some of the faithful is abstinence from meat on Fridays and a sacrifice during Lent.

Otherwise, there has been a spiritualised interpretation of fasting and there is more talk of inner renunciation. In my opinion, this softening does not help the spiritual strength and endurance of the faithful, for fasting has many benefits. Certainly even today there are still some of the faithful who serve the Lord and the Church with their fasting in a hidden way.

As well as fasting, prayer and almsgiving were also very well-recognised religious practices in the times of the Old Covenant. Those who complied with all these were considered 'righteous'.

Jesus in no way criticises these valuable religious practices as such; rather, like the Old Testament prophets, He criticises the fact that they are performed in order to be recognised by others. In this way, the Lord touches on a deep problem that man has; a problem that can manifest itself especially in the spiritual realm.

Man wants to be somebody and, moreover, to be recognised as such by others. Often his self-esteem seems to depend on whether or not he receives this recognition. Thus, people easily become dependent on what others think of them and, as a result, they have to attract attention.

The same can be true on the religious level. When this happens, then the meaning of such valuable practices as prayer, fasting and almsgiving is not understood, or at least not deeply.

Prayer, which is an intimate encounter with God, takes place primarily between God and man. Of course, there is also liturgical prayer and other communal forms of prayer, but we do not pray to be seen by others. If a person is helped by our witness when he sees us praying, in that it leads him to remember God, then this is an indirect fruit, but not the primary purpose of prayer.

It is different when I pray to be seen, for here I am directly seeking the praise and attention of others, wanting to be recognised as a godly person. This does not necessarily have to be pure hypocrisy, because I may also pray when no one is watching me. However, it means that I am not looking only to God and that, in a way, I still seek reward and honour from people, rather than expecting it from God alone.

This is the attitude that today's Gospel refers to, and the same applies to the practices of fasting and almsgiving. If we look further into these words of the Lord, we will see that they extend to many situations in life. We can ask ourselves: Do we seek recognition when we talk to people? How much do we talk about ourselves? Do we always like to be seen as the good guys? Do we quickly turn the subject of conversations around and end up focusing on ourselves?

If we examine our conscience more closely, we can see whether we really have our eyes focused on God, and whether the good we do is truly for Him and from Him alone we expect the reward. We can also question whether in our conversations we seek first and foremost His glory and whether in our good deeds God's favour is enough for us. Jesus advises us to do good deeds with an eye to God and not to receive reward from men. If men discover good deeds in us, let them glorify God. This should be enough for us!