

4. September 2024

To live spiritually

1 Cor 3:1-9

*And so, brothers, I was not able to talk to you as spiritual people; I had to talk to you as people still living by your natural inclinations, still infants in Christ; I fed you with milk and not solid food, for you were not yet able to take it - and even now, you are still not able to, for you are still living by your natural inclinations. As long as there are jealousy and rivalry among you, that surely means that you are still living by your natural inclinations and by merely human principles. While there is one that says, 'I belong to Paul' and another that says, 'I belong to Apollos' are you not being only too human? For what is Apollos and what is Paul? The servants through whom you came to believe, and each has only what the Lord has given him. I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but God gave growth. In this, neither the planter nor the waterer counts for anything; only God, who gives growth. It is all one who does the planting and who does the watering, and each will have the proper pay for the work that he has done. After all, we do share in God's work; you are God's farm, God's building.*

We need to advance in the spiritual life, otherwise we will remain immature children. And the Lord cannot trust immature children with much, because they do not yet know how to handle the gifts they have received responsibly. Consequently, He cannot entrust them with difficult tasks. Children need milk, as St. Paul says here, i.e. they can only bear and digest what is easy to tolerate. But how will they be able to cope with the crosses of a mission and the resistances on the way of following? How can they grow spiritually if they are left with only milk?

This shows us the need to take seriously the path of following Christ and to work on all those things where we do not yet react according to the Spirit of God, but according to our fallen human nature. It is here that we must be vigilant with regard to ourselves, and not close our eyes when we still perceive too much "human thinking" in us, to put it in St. Paul's terminology. It is the Holy Spirit who wants to transform us, teaching us to think and act in God's way. But all too often His work is hindered by our own self-interest, which manifests itself in envy and discord.

It seems that in the Corinthian community there was a kind of division: some claimed to belong to Paul and others to Apollos. But in this way they had forgotten the essentials, dwelling on totally insignificant matters. Both Paul and Apollos were in the service of the same Lord, whose glorification was the aim of their efforts.

This is how we should see the different ministries in the Church: we all work together in God's field, each in the place where He has placed him. This is how we complement each other! Any envy, jealousy and competitiveness do not come from the Spirit of the Lord, but from our own twisted hearts, and not infrequently the devil reinforces such feelings.

So we need to look at our hearts.

How should we deal, for example, with jealousy and envy? With jealousy, we enter into competition with another person and, by comparing ourselves with them, we believe that we fall short and that they have received something that we should also have. I am not referring here to jealousy that has a just reason to be, but to jealousy that is destructive, that cannot simply accept the good that the other person has and receives, and that makes us always dissatisfied with what we have. These feelings can corrode us from the inside, and do not allow us to treat the other person freely or to look them openly in the eye.

As an antidote, we should start thanking God for all that this person has received from Him. Perhaps this runs counter to our feelings, which make us consider ourselves precisely as the wronged or disadvantaged. But it is here that our will must come into play, which obeys what the understanding has recognised as right and thus submits to the truth. This inner impression that we ourselves do not receive enough must also be countered by gratitude for our own gifts, and by invoking the Holy Spirit we can cope with the tormenting feeling of jealousy. It is worth clarifying that, as a prerequisite, we must be willing to consider jealousy as an evil to be overcome, and be aware of the times when we allow ourselves to be carried away by it, or even express it outwardly or act out of it.

Even more damaging to the soul is envy, which is a true work of the devil in our heart. Envy goes beyond jealousy at not having what the other possesses, and goes to the point of not being able to bear that he has it and wanting to ruin it for him. This is why envy

is often depicted in caricatures as extremely ugly. If a man does not fight it, envy will eventually devour him.

This is why, on the path of following, we must resist even the smallest manifestations of envy, in a similar way to what we said about jealousy. Here, too, it is necessary to do concrete acts that directly oppose envy: for example, practising generosity and cultivating sharing. Envy does not only affect material goods, but also spiritual goods. It can happen, for example, that one cannot stand that another person has the gift of convincing others, and so tries to ridicule or disavow him...

How, then, can God entrust us with tasks of great trust if we are still dominated by envy and discord? If we want to prove ourselves worthy of God's greater graces, we will have to overcome our earthly attitude, still so focused on our own self and not centred on God's glory.