

8. October 2024

True and false zeal

Gal 1:3-24

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

As we have heard in today's reading, there can also be a false zeal that is blind. Paul was a very pious man and, as he himself testifies, he surpassed many of his contemporaries in defending with great zeal the traditions of his ancestors.

But it was with the same zeal that he rejected the nascent Church, considering it a danger to the Jewish faith, and consequently persecuted it fiercely.

We see, then, that zeal in itself is no guarantee that what is being done is right and inspired by God. It is therefore necessary to examine carefully with the discernment of the spirits what is the motivation of our zeal, for it may be mixed with a certain ambition and driven by the desire for glory, greed, hunger for power, etc., so that it can have a destructive effect.

On the other hand, zeal can be a powerful impulse to do good. We know, for example, the zeal to help others; the zeal to proclaim the Gospel; the zeal to practise the virtues, to fulfil one's duties; the zeal to make amends for what has been done wrong.

There are some criteria that could indicate whether it is a good zeal or, on the contrary, too much motivated by personal interests. It would be best if we could know ourselves in the light of God, so that we can see if our zeal is pure. This is especially important in the religious field. But since we often do not know ourselves so well, the following criteria apply:

True zeal should never lead to an inner hardening that becomes rigid rather than flexible. Zeal must not become blind, ignoring everything that could restrain it or, rather, command it, "running over" people and the situation in which they find themselves.

On the contrary, we can say that a good and enlightened zeal is able to recognise limits, remains flexible, non-judgmental and attractive, while a dark zeal is repulsive and often ruthless.

Another aspect of today's reading worth considering is that St Paul, after his encounter with the Son of God, did not first consult or seek advice from anyone. Only after a long time did he go to Jerusalem to meet the other Apostles.

In our journey of following Christ, we too are called to seek advice from the Lord Himself. There is no doubt that it is good to have a good spiritual director or counsellor. But there are too few of them, so that our inner journey demands of us a deep relationship with God, but always within the framework of Scripture and the teaching of the Church as boundaries that we cannot cross. God has not left us orphans, but has sent us the Holy Spirit. He is our counsellor if we cultivate an intimate relationship with Him. We just have to learn to ask Him concretely, and not allow our thinking to be based only on our natural abilities. It is always necessary to turn to the Lord, because often our minds do not grasp God's supernatural perspective; they remain trapped in their own reflections.

A close relationship with the Holy Spirit is not reserved for a few special souls; it is the measure of every interior life. Why should God deprive us of knowing His will if we ask Him persistently? Why should He keep us in the dark about important matters? If He did, He would give us the strength to persevere even in the dark.

Of course, we must be careful not to confuse our own thoughts and feelings with the Spirit of God, and for this we must be somewhat self-critical. But the Holy Spirit Himself will teach us what is of Him and what is not.

So let us turn to the Holy Spirit, who is our reliable counsellor.