

18. November 2024

## To the angel of the church in Ephesus

Rev 1:1-4;2:1-5

*A revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him so that he could tell his servants what is now to take place very soon; he sent his angel to make it known to his servant John, and John has borne witness to the Word of God and to the witness of Jesus Christ, everything that he saw. Blessed is anyone who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed those who hear them, if they treasure the content, because the Time is near. John, to the seven churches of Asia: grace and peace to you from him who is, who was, and who is to come, from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 'Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus and say, "Here is the message of the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who lives among the seven golden lamp-stands: I know your activities, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot stand wicked people, and how you put to the test those who were self-styled apostles, and found them false. I know too that you have perseverance, and have suffered for my name without growing tired. Nevertheless, I have this complaint to make: you have less love now than formerly. Think where you were before you fell; repent, and behave as you did at first, or else, if you will not repent, I shall come to you and take your lamp-stand from its place.*

With the Revelation of St. John, there is linked a special promise, as we heard in today's reading, "Blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and heed what is written in it, for the Time is near."

The time is near! If this statement was already made so long ago, it means that now the time of the consummation of the whole history of salvation is even nearer.

In today's reading, we have heard the words that the glorified Lord addresses to the church of Ephesus, a Christian community in which St. Paul carried out his missionary work for two years. Many suppose that the Apostle John also lived in Ephesus together with the Virgin Mary. In fact, the historian Eusebius mentions that John, after having been on the island of Patmos, died in Ephesus during the rule of Emperor Trajan (between 98 and 117 AD).

Initially, we hear the eulogy that highlights the positive aspects of this church. While the words are addressed to the so-called "angel" of each church -which some exegetes have identified with the bishops of the respective community- they extend to the community in general.

The Lord praises the church of Ephesus for all its good works and mentions many aspects worthy of imitation... We might wonder what else such a community could lack, and how it is that after such praise comes such a strong reproach from the Lord, to the point of warning it that, if it does not repent, He will remove its lampstand (v. 5b). Some exegetes suppose that the church of Ephesus would have been a model to follow for the other communities of Asia Minor; that is to say, that it possessed a certain primacy at the spiritual level.

Then, what could have happened? After the praise it receives in the first part, it is impossible to believe that the community would have relapsed into the cult of the goddess Artemis, which was common in Ephesus. What does it mean, then, that they lost the first love?

When we speak of "first love", we usually relate it to that special fire that burns in the heart for another person; a fire that can envelope someone entirely. In this case, it refers to the fire of love for God, perhaps the fervor of the first conversion, the ardor of this love.... It has a special radiance, which not only strengthens the will to do good, but penetrates all things. The first love arouses an extraordinary attention of the heart, which then has to lead to a lasting and constant love; a love that maintains an attentive attitude, despite the possibility that it may take on different expressions along the way...

In this context, the concept of the "attention of the heart" is important, which means that it is particularly captivated...

Now, it can happen that this "attention of the heart" - from which the good works of faith spring - begins to diminish with the passage of time, when love is not cultivated as it should be. Then, even if those good works and attitudes mentioned in the Lord's praise continue to be practiced, that special fire of the first love no longer burns in the heart. The works no longer radiate that warmth proper to love. Perhaps the fervor for the path of holiness has diminished; that zeal which, day by day, strives to grow in love...

A religious or priestly vocation could serve as an example. The first love had taken hold of the person to such an extent that he was ready to leave everything behind in order to follow the Lord alone. The ardor of that love was so burning that he was ready to overcome every impediment, to really abandon the world and belong entirely to God. In this first love, he lived "up to" his calling and thus became a beacon of light.

But, along the way, he was not vigilant enough and began to be careless. The path of holiness seemed too demanding. He settled back into the earthly realities of this life, yielding to the desires of his human nature and neglecting the path of prudent asceticism. He complied with prayer only to the extent of his obligations and began to give more and more space to unnecessary things... It is not that he had abandoned the way, much less apostatized from the faith. He continued to fulfill his obligations; but the heart was no longer totally involved. Thus, the splendor of such a path faded and the ardor in the heart waned.

This could be the state to which the Lord refers in His reproach: it is the loss of the first love, to which it is necessary to return so that the path of following may once again have that brilliance and nobility that are proper to the first love. The words of the glorified Lord show us that it is possible to recover it!

Therefore, in sincere self-reflection, we must recognize where our love may have diminished; what we can do to reawaken it fully; how we can recover zeal for the Lord and His Kingdom... This is possible! Perhaps initially we have to "catch up", that is, to recover what has been lost... Thus, today's text becomes an invitation for us to turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, presenting to Him that heart that has perhaps grown cold, so that He may touch it with the Holy Spirit. Even the laziness and indifference of our heart must be touched by the "fire of love," which is the Holy Spirit Himself.

We see that the glorified Lord, who will return at the End of Time, has His own in view. It is His love that makes us see not only what we do well, but also what we lack and where we are in danger. But He is not only the Teacher who forms us with wisdom; He is also the One who gives us the strength to correspond better to His call. He is the Lord, and not only a human teacher!