

16. December 2024

The question of authority

Mt 21:23-27

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Everything Jesus does is done with divine right and authority. John had baptised people with the same right. This would have been the right answer from the high priests and elders if they had been willing to give it. Then they would have received a deeper enlightenment to recognise Jesus and thus be able to free themselves from the spiritual prison in which they found themselves.

But these high priests and elders who question Him are not even interested in knowing the truth. This is also reflected in their thinking, as they wondered how they could answer Jesus' question without being harmed. They were not seeking the truth!

This dishonest attitude was the reason why the Lord did not give them an answer. But Jesus' counter-question had opened up the possibility of finding the right answer, for if they had confessed that John was a man sent from God, which was obvious to all, they would more easily have concluded that Jesus' authority was also from God. His works were even greater than John's, and the Baptist himself had testified that Jesus was the Lord (cf. Jn 1:36).

But in this situation the Lord did not give them an answer, because they were not ready to acknowledge the divine right and authority that was manifested both in the preaching of the Baptist and in the teaching of Jesus. Questions that are not asked with sincerity, or that are even intended as a trap, require correction rather than an answer. In fact, if

the question has a false undertone, it can always be misunderstood and misused, whatever the answer.

Silence, or rather not answering, was the Lord's correct response. Of course, even His refusal to answer can be misinterpreted and hearts can become even more hardened. The latter was the case with the religious authorities of Israel at the time, whose hostility to Jesus was growing.

The question of one's authority to do this or that action is not irrelevant in both ecclesial and state affairs. For example, we know very well that only a true priest can celebrate a valid Eucharist. If someone who has not received legitimate priestly ordination were to do so, it would be an abuse and an arrogation.

According to the Church's teaching, even the rights of the State in the civil sphere are given by God, and the Christian is called to respect them as long as he is not obliged to do things that go against his conscience. In this sense, there may be cases where one can legitimately refuse to obey.

This means that divine law is above civil law. A concrete example of this would be if a state wanted to force priests to reveal what they have been told under the seal of confession. Here the priest cannot obey because he is bound by a divine commission and obliged to silence.

Another historical example is the testimony of St Thomas More, who opposed King Henry VIII when he wanted to remarry another woman without his first marriage having been declared null and void. Thomas More preferred death to breaking the divine law.

We could cite many other examples of this conflict. Since as Christians we are called to support the legitimate authority of the state, its representatives can count on Christians as a stabilising force. But when a state violates divine law, the disciples of the Lord cannot support that course.