

29 May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“The witness of the apostles and the present crisis of mission” (I)

In the chapters of the Acts of the Apostles that we have gone through so far, we have clearly seen how the Holy Spirit, in co-operation with the apostles, brought the Gospel to both the Jewish and Gentile world. At the risk of their lives and under all kinds of persecution and mistreatment, the apostles did not cease to proclaim the Gospel wherever the Spirit of God led them. Initially they focused primarily on the Jews, but, thanks to divine guidance, it became increasingly clear to them that the Good News had to be spread to the whole world, in accordance with the command the Risen Lord had given to His disciples: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."* (Mk 16:15-16).

One difficulty they had to face again and again was the stubborn and merciless resistance of the Jews, who even persecuted the apostles in the other cities where they went to preach the Gospel, inciting the authorities and the people against their teachings. How often they had to flee! Nevertheless, the Word of God continued to spread and to reach the Gentiles.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he *'was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.'* (Acts 18:5). But once again he met with the persistent resistance of the hostile Jews, which moved him to exclaim these strong words: *"when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'"* (v. 6). A far-reaching decision of the Apostle!

Although no physical or psychological coercion or disloyal means may be used in evangelisation, it is still of crucial importance whether people accept the faith or not. It is about truth, and each person is called to live by it. If they do not, they are outside the grace of God. Their life lacks the essentials and they remain under the dominion of sin. The apostles were aware of this. That is why they were ready to take on any fatigue. In

his Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul testifies to all that he had to suffer for the sake of the mission (2 Cor 11:23-28).

I have already mentioned this on several occasions, but in this context I would like to emphasise it again: the mission of the Church is currently in a serious crisis. While the apostles and the missionaries who followed them through the centuries were convinced that the Gospel must be brought to all people so that they might be saved, in recent decades we have had to listen with increasing frequency to a different tenor. Until now, the following words of St. Augustine were in force and the Church had always maintained this certainty:

"This is the religion which possesses the universal way for delivering the soul; for except by this way, none can be delivered. This is a kind of royal way, which alone leads to a kingdom which does not totter like all temporal dignities, but stands firm on eternal foundations. (De civitate Dei, 10, 32,1).

In recent decades, the theory of the so-called 'anonymous Christians' has developed, which is also accepted by representatives of the Church hierarchy. According to this theory, the mission is to awaken people's awareness of their salvation in Christ and thus of their divine filiation. In this sense, neither conversion nor holy baptism would be indispensable for salvation.

Whereas in the past, the Church had maintained that other religions contained errors, the relationship with them took a different turn after the Second Vatican Council's declaration 'Nostra Aetate'. Among other things, this document stated: *'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions'*. The positive elements of the other religions were to be highlighted. Thus began the so-called 'interreligious dialogue'.

In the last pontificate, the Abu Dhabi Declaration was published on 4 February 2019, which went a step further by affirming that *'The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.'*

This statement rightly met with considerable resistance from within the Church, as it emphasised the equality of all religions. The then pontiff expressed this view again at an inter-religious meeting in Singapore on 13 September 2024:

"All religions are paths to reach God. They are—to make a comparison—like different languages, different dialects, to get there. But God is God for everyone."

The contradiction between these statements and the preaching of the apostles and the Church over the centuries is obvious. Tomorrow we will return to this theme and address its implications. In a third meditation, we will consider whether there are signs to suggest that in the new pontificate these tendencies will be corrected in accordance with the traditional doctrine and practice of the Church.