Ash Wednesday

Gospel text (*Mt* 6:1-6.16-18): Jesus said to his disciples: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.

«Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them»

Pbro. D. Luis A. GALA Rodríguez
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Today we start our itinerary towards Easter, and the Gospel reminds us of the fundamental Christian duties, not only as a preparation for the liturgical time, but also as a preparation for the Eternal Easter: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father” (Mt 6:1). The righteousness Jesus speaks about is made up of our living according to the evangelic convictions, without forgetting that “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven”. (Mt 5:20).

Righteousness leads us to love, expressed through our charity and mercy: “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing” (Mt 6:3). It does not mean that good deeds should be concealed, but we ought not to think of human praise when doing them, nor should we be looking forward to other superior and heavenly benefits. In other words, when I give alms I should not be thinking

I am doing anything special that deserves a reward from God and applause from men.

Benedict XVI claimed that helping the needy is a duty of justice, even before an act of charity: “Charity goes beyond justice (…); but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his”, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting”. We should never forget that we are not the absolute owners of the goods we possess, but only their administrators. Jesus Christ has shown us that the true charity is not that which is limited to “giving” alms, but that which also “offers” our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (cf. Rom 12:1); this would be the true act of Christian righteousness and charity, “and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” (Mt 6:4).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “What the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion, so that the Lenten fast enjoined by the apostles may be fulfilled.” (Saint Leo the Great)

- “We know that this increasingly artificial world would have us live in a culture of “doing”, of the “useful”, where we exclude God from our horizon without realizing it. Lent beckons us to “rouse ourselves”, to remind ourselves that, simply, we are not God.” (Francis)

- “The New Law practices the acts of religion: almsgiving, prayer and fasting, directing them to the "Father who sees in secret," in contrast with the desire to ‘be seen by men’.” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, № 1969)

Other comments

“Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them"

Fr. Manel VALLS i Serra
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Today is the first day of Lent: “Now is the day of salvation” (2Cor 6:2). The application of ashes reminds us of two ideals; the ancient one: “Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you will return”; and the one which the Council's renewed liturgy has introduced: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel”. Both thoughts are an invitation to look at our own life in a different way —normally, so superficial. Pope Saint Clement I reminds us that “our Lord wants all whom He loves to become converts.”

In the Gospel, Jesus is asking us to give to the needy, to fast and to pray far from any hypocrisy: “do not blow a trumpet before you” (Mt 6:2). Hypocrites, strongly condemned by Jesus Christ, are characterized by

their heart's falsehood. However, today, Jesus warns us not only against subjective hypocrisy but also against the objective one: that is, to fulfill, even in good faith, all that God's Law and the Scriptures command, but doing it in such a way that it remains a mere external practice, without the corresponding intimate conversion.

It is then, when alms —reduced to “a mere tip”— are no longer a fraternal act but they are limited to a soothing gesture that does not modify the way we look at our brother nor let us experience the charity of paying to him the attention he deserves. Fasting, on the other hand, remains as the formal compliance of an obligation, which no longer reminds us of the need to restrain our compulsive consumerism or of the necessity to be cured of our “spiritual bulimia”. Finally, praying —reduced to a sterile monologue— is no more the authentic Spiritual overture, the intimate dialogue with the Father, the attentive listening to the Gospel of the Son.

The religion of the hypocrites is sad, legalist and moralist, with a big narrow-mindedness of spirit. Alternatively, our Christian Lent is the Church's invitation every year to a more intimate deepening, to a demanding conversion, to a humble penance, so that, while producing the pertinent fruits our Lord expects from us, we may fully live Easter’s joy and spiritual pleasure.