Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

Gospel text (*Lk* 18:9-14): Jesus then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. “Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity —greedy, dishonest, adulterous— or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.’ But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’ I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

“I tell you, the latter went home justified”

Fr. Gavan JENNINGS
(Dublín, Ireland)

Today, Christ presents us with two men who, to a casual observer, might appear almost identical for they are in the same place doing the same thing, as both “went up to the Temple to pray” (Lk 18:10). But beyond appearances, at the deepest level of their personal consciences, both men differ radically: one, the Pharisee, has an easy conscience while the other, the tax collector, is racked by feelings of guilt.

Nowadays we tend to see guilt feelings as close to a psychological aberration: ‘beating oneself up over something’. Nevertheless the ‘guilt-racked’ tax-collector leaves the Temple in the better state for, “the latter went home justified, not the former” (Lk 18:14). “This feeling of guilt”, wrote Benedict XVI when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger ("Conscience and truth"), “disturbs the false calm of conscience and could be called conscience's complaint against my self-satisfied existence. It is as necessary for man as the physical pain which signifies disturbances of normal bodily functioning.”

Jesus doesn’t lead us to believe that the Pharisee is not telling the truth when he says that he is not “greedy, dishonest, adulterous” (Lk 18:11) and that he fasts and gives money to the Temple, nor that the tax-collector is delusional in thinking himself a sinner. This is not the question. Rather it is that “the Pharisee no longer knows that he too has guilt. He has a completely clear conscience. But this silence of conscience makes him impenetrable to God and men, while the cry of conscience which plagues the tax collector makes him capable of truth and love. Jesus can move sinners” (Benedict XVI).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “The heart has to be crushed. Why be afraid it will be destroyed if you crush it? There you have the answer: Create a clean heart in me, O God (Ps 51:10). For a clean heart to be created, let the unclean heart be crushed.” (Saint Augustine)

- “We are always ready to play innocent. Like this, we don’t go forward in the Christian life... Before and after confession, in your life, in your prayer, are you able to blame yourself? Or is it easier to blame others?.” (Francis)

- “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Nº 1458)

Other comments

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Fr. David COMPTE i Verdaguer
(Manlleu, Barcelona, Spain)

Today, in the midst of an image centered culture, this Gospel has a profound meaning. But let's take it one step at a time.

In the passage we are contemplating we see that in each person we can find a knot made of three strings. These three strings cannot be untangled unless each is taken into consideration at the same time. The first string relates to God; the second one to our fellowmen; and the third one to ourselves. Let us look carefully: those Jesus was addressing were “those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else” (Lk 18:9) but who, therefore, were not praying rightly. The three strings are always related to each other!

How can we properly put these relations into the right perspective? Which is the secret of untying that knot? The final conclusion of the sharp parable reveals it: humility. Saint Therese of Avila said it too: “Humility is truth.”

It is true, though: humility allows us to recognize our own truth. Neither to swell with pride and vainglory nor to belittle us. Humility allows us to accept the gifts we receive from God as such, and to present Him

with our daily chores. Humility also allows us to recognize the qualities of our fellowmen. And even to be happy to discover them.

Last but not least, a sense of humility must also be fundamental in our personal relationship with God. We must remember that, in Jesus' parable, the Pharisee lived a most righteous life; with his weekly religious practices and acts of charity! But he is not humble and that spoils all his other acts.

We are getting close to Holy Week. Soon we shall contemplate — once more! — Christ on the Cross: “Our Lord crucified is an unsurpassable testimony of patient loving and of humble meekness” (Saint John Paul II). There, we shall see how, before Dismas' pleading “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42) —the Lord responds with a “sudden canonization” without any precedent: “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Lk 23:43). That personage was a murderer who, before dying, was finally canonized by the very same Christ. It was a case hitherto unheard, for us, a consolation...: sanctity is not “manufactured” by us, but granted by God, if He finds our heart to be humble and converted.