November 11th: St. Theodore the Studite, Abbot

Gospel text (*Mt* 11:25-30): At that time Jesus said in reply, “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

“Learn from me… and you will find rest for your selves”

Fr. Antoni CAROL i Hostench
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Today we commemorate - with the Eastern Christian churches - St. Theodore the Studite (759-826), monk and abbot of the Stoudios Monastery, Byzantine theologian and writer. He encourages us to direct our gaze to heaven through the images (icons), both of Christ and of the saints. In that gaze we will find rest for our souls (cf. Mt 11:29).

Saint Theodore lived through a rather turbulent period in the Byzantine Middle Ages. “With his usual energy, he became the leader of the resistance against the iconoclasm of Leo V, the Armenian who once again opposed the existence of images and icons in the Church” (Benedict XVI). Indeed, Theodore argued that icons are windows to the divine and essential tools for the spiritual education of the faithful: “Icons are to the eyes what the Scriptures are to the ears” and, logically, “he who venerates the icon, venerates in it the reality it represents”.

In the Old Testament, images of divinity were radically excluded from Jewish piety, because they led to idolatry: the Word of God had not yet been incarnated, so that the gaze directed at an image (statues, idols, calves…) did not lead beyond the image itself, and was immediately confused with divinities. They were gods who had eyes but did not see; ears but did not hear; a mouth but did not speak… (cf. Ps 115:4-8).

But with the incarnation of the Son of God, this changed radically. Christ is the visible face of the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). From that moment on, icons teach us to venerate and respect the image of the incarnate God and of the saints, constantly reminding us of their holiness and their example to follow.

Theodore affirmed that “the heart must be continually in prayer, even while we work or rest.” Well, for those of us who are called to be “contemplatives in the midst of the world,” a modern author who has contributed to promoting lay piety, recommends: “Make use of those holy 'human devices' that I suggested to help you keep presence of God: ejaculations, acts of love… 'glances' at a picture of our Lady” (St. Josemaría Escrivá).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "By venerating images of saints, we unite ourselves spiritually with them, seek their intercession, and strive to follow their example" (St. Theodore the Studite)

- "Theodore had realized that the issue of the veneration of icons was calling into question the truth of the Incarnation itself (…). He also argues: abolishing veneration of the icon of Christ would mean repudiating his redeeming work" (Benedict XVI)

- “Since the Word became flesh in assuming a true humanity, Christ's body was finite. Therefore the human face of Jesus can be portrayed; at the seventh ecumenical council (Nicaea II in 787) the Church recognized its representation in holy images to be legitimate" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 476)