September 21st: Feast of Saint Matthew, Apostle and evangelist

Gospel text (*Mt* 9:9-13): As Jesus passed by, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” He heard this and said, “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners”

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Today, we celebrate the Feast of St. Matthew, the Apostle and evangelist. He himself relates his conversion. He was sitting in the custom-house and Jesus invited him to follow Him. Matthew —continues in his Gospel— “got up and followed him” (Mt 9:9). With Matthew the group of the Twelve welcomes a different man altogether, both for his upbringing and for his social position and wealth. His father made him study economics so he would be able to fix the price of wheat and wine; of the fish Peter, Andrew and the Zebedee’s' sons would bring him, and of the precious pearls the Gospel speaks about.

His profession, as a tax collector, was frowned upon. Those practicing this profession were considered the same as publicans and sinners. He was at the service of King Herod, lord of Galilee, a king hated by the people and one who is depicted in the New Testament as adulterous, John the Baptist's murderer and who, on Good Friday, mocks Jesus. What would Matthew think when he was due to render accounts to King Herod? Matthew's conversion must have meant a true release for him, as proved by the banquet he organizes inviting publicans and sinners. It was his own way of showing his gratitude to the Master for being able to get rid himself of a most miserable position and find true happiness. Saint Bede the Venerable, while commenting on Matthew's conversion, writes: “This conversion of one tax collector gave many men, those from his own profession and other sinners, an example of repentance and pardon… No sooner was he converted than Matthew drew after him a whole crowd of sinners along the same road to salvation.”

In his conversion we can see God's mercy, as shown by Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' criticism: “I desire

mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." (Mt 9:13).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "The Lord, who called him on the outside with his voice, illuminated him in an interior and invisible way, so that he would understand that the one who here on earth invited him to leave his temporal business was capable of giving him in heaven an incorruptible treasure." (Saint Bede the Venerable)

- "Let us listen to St Matthew's message, meditating upon it ever anew also to learn to stand up and follow Jesus with determination." (Benedict XVI)

- "Since God could create everything out of nothing, he can also, through the Holy Spirit, give spiritual life to sinners by creating a pure heart in them... And since God was able to make light shine in darkness by his Word, he can also give the light of faith to those who do not yet know him (cf. 2 Cor 4:6)" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 298)