

September 21st: Matthew, Apostle & Evangelist

Gospel text (Mt 9,9-13): As Jesus moved on, He saw a man named Matthew at his seat in the custom-house, and He said to him, «Follow me». And Matthew got up and followed him. Now it happened, while Jesus was at table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and other sinners joined Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this they said to his disciples, «Why is it that your master eats with those sinners and tax collectors?». When Jesus heard this he said, «Healthy people do not need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and find out what this means: What I want is 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 St. Matthew's festivity, the apostle and evangelist. He himself relates his conversion. He was sitting in the custom-house and Jesus invited him to follow Him. Matthew —goes on 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 as to be able to fix the price of wheat and wine; of the fish Peter and Andrew, and the Zebedeus' sons, would bring him, and of the precious pearls the Gospel speaks about.

His profession, as a tax collector, was frowned upon. Those practicing it were considered as publicans and sinners. He was at the service of king Herod, lord of Galilee, a king hated by the people and who is depicted in the New Testament as adulterous, John the Baptist's murderer and who, on Good Friday, bemocks 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 by inviting publicans and sinners. It was his own way of

showing his gratitude to the Master for having been able to get rid of a most miserable position and find the true happiness. St. 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: «What I want is mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners» (Mt 9:13).