

Meditations: Monday of the Twenty-Third Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 23rd week of Ordinary Time.

- The formalism of some Pharisees
- A right intention
- Priority of the person

ON A SABBATH, “when Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation” (*Lk 6:6-7*). This Gospel scene makes clear why some Jewish authorities are following Jesus. They are not interested in his teachings, nor are they happy when they witness a miracle. Rather, they look for a good excuse to be able to discredit Him. “O Pharisee,” St. Cyril of Alexandria says, “you see the one who does miraculous deeds and heals the sick by virtue of a higher power, and you plan his death out of envy.”^[1]

Those who judge our Lord in this scene show that they are not concerned about the man with the withered hand. Their priority is not to show compassion for this person’s

illness and, if possible, to free him. Rather they are focused solely on the strict observance of the Sabbath law; all they are concerned about is accusing the one who fails to respect it – in this case Jesus, the very Author of the law. With their focus on external formalities, those Pharisees “leave no room for God’s grace.” They are trapped “in themselves, in their sadness, in their resentment,” thus being unable “to bring salvation, because they close the door to it.”^[2]

In the end, these people have turned the broad path of God’s mercy into a narrow trail of legalism; instead of being an encouraging help on this journey, they are an obstacle; in people, they see only deviations from the norm. In the face of this way of judging one’s neighbor, St. Josemaría warns us: “We cannot offer prefabricated formulas, nor rigid methods or regulations, to bring

souls closer to Christ. God's encounter with each person is ineffable and unrepeatable, and we must collaborate with Him to find – in each case – the opportune word and way, being docile and not trying to put limits on the always original action of the Holy Spirit.”^[3]

ST. LUKE tells us that Jesus knows the thoughts of these scribes and Pharisees (cf.*Lk 6:8*). Our Lord knows perfectly well that they are not there to listen to Him with humility and then follow his teachings. Although outwardly they behave like the others, their interior attitude contrasts with the simplicity of the rest of his listeners. They are accompanying our Lord not with the desire to change their lives and please God, but with the intention of finding something to accuse Him of.

“Rectitude of intention,” St. Josemaría said, “consists in seeking ‘only and in everything’ the glory of God,”^[4] rather than our personal glory or attachment to the criteria with which we judge the world. The Christian life is not reduced to “fulfilling” certain moral or religious standards or rules. Those Pharisees, in fact, were zealous fulfillers of the law: they gave alms, spent hours in the temple, fasted... But Jesus knew that their concern in doing so was not to give glory to his Father, and that therefore this effort didn’t bring them closer to others or to true happiness. “This people,” our Lord will tell them on another occasion, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (*Mt 15:8*).

Christian life is always accompanied by external works. However, it is crucial that these works be animated by the spirit of goodness and holiness

that we see in the life of our Lord, the apostles and the saints. Thus Christians can transform “into pure gold, like King Midas, everything they touch, by the rectitude of intention that, with God’s grace, leads them to make – out what is indifferent – something holy.”^[5]

AFTER asking the man with the withered hand to come forward, Jesus put this question to the scribes and Pharisees: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?” (*Lk 6:9*). Without waiting for an answer, our Lord worked the miracle and the man’s hand was healed.

Jesus did not understand being calculating when it came to doing good. He had come into the world to save mankind and dedicated his

whole life to this purpose. And therefore He also worked miracles on the Sabbath, because He wanted to show that the good of the person always comes first. In order to save someone, Jesus never hesitated to accompany public sinners (cf. *Mk* 2:16), to travel to as many town as necessary (cf. *Lk* 4:43), or to enter the homes of Gentiles (cf. *Mt* 8:7). In short, his redemptive mission had no limits or distinctions of any kind. Jesus was always available.

Therefore the effort to make God known leads us to rise above our own preconceptions and securities. The sense of mission proper to an apostle brings “the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary.”^[6] Our Lady’s heart was open to others in this way. During her years on

earth, Mary always put the good of Jesus first. And now her help is always available to all those who approach her, as good children, to ask for her motherly intercession.

^[1] Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*.

^[2] Francis, Homily, 1 April 2014.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *Letters* 11, no. 42.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 921.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Instruction for the Work of St. Gabriel*, no. 98.

^[6] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 272.

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