

## 2. Being a scandal on the way of Christ

Yesterday, I said that we are often tempted to want to follow Christ by dictating to Him where He should go, and what He should do and say or not do and say. The strongest example of this is what happened to Peter one day: “Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem [note: “He *had to*,” not “He *wanted to*”: it was an act of obedience to the will of the Father, the mission that the Father had asked of Him] and suffer greatly at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and rise again on the third day” (Matthew 16:21).

The entire program is set; everything is decided, everything is given, Jesus is aware of it. The vocation and mission of Christ and of His disciples is certainly not defined down to the details of circumstances and concrete forms through which He will have to pass. One thing, however, is clear, very clear: it is *paschal*, or rather it has a paschal form of death and resurrection. And for every Christian, this is defined at baptism itself. There is no Christian life, and there is no Christian vocation, that is not integrally defined by baptism, which is a being-immersed totally in Christ’s paschal form of life, of His death and resurrection which render us children of God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

And yet in response to this, like Peter, like the apostles during those three years even though they were following Jesus and with Him, we are always tempted to oppose it, to resist: “Peter took Him aside and began to reproach Him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord; this shall never happen to you!’” (Mt 16:22).

We should note, in passing, that Peter essentially says to Jesus, “Come away and rest awhile ...from your mission, from your passion, from obedience to the excessively hard demands of the Father...”

Jesus’ violent reaction tells Peter and us never to yield to a serious temptation: that of being unfaithful to one’s vocation not out of weakness or ignorance, but as a *plan*, so to speak, an alternative plan to that of God. In this moment, Peter was not face to face with Christ’s passion and death, much less his own, and so he did not oppose himself to Jesus out of weakness as he will do in the courtyard of the high priest. He found himself, however, before the revelation of God’s design, and he opposed it on principle, on account of his own plan which went against the plan of God. This is “satanic”; this is an opposition to God like that of Lucifer. “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me, for you do not think as God does, but as human beings do!” (Mt 16:23).

“You do not think as God does.” In Greek, the verb used here is *phronein*, in Latin *sapĕre*. It is a verb that is difficult to translate into English with one single word. To translate it merely as “to think” is a reduction, because the modern age, thanks to the Cartesian absolutizing of thought, has paradoxically limited the value of

thinking, its scope for us with respect to reality. *Phronein, sapĕre*, could be translated as to sense, perceive, taste, experience, judge, be wise about, have sense, etc.

Without doubt, Peter's reaction is instinctive, and he sentimentally wishes only good things for Jesus; but he betrays the origin, the meaning and the end of Christ's entire mission. And Jesus takes Peter back by throwing cold water on his suggestion, telling him to stop this about-face of not listening, to stop hearing only his own thought, his own judgments and instinctive sentiments. Because this is a scandal more for him, Peter, than it is for Jesus. In fact, Jesus immediately moves from the announcement of His paschal vocation to the description of the paschal vocation of the disciples who wish to follow Him: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If someone wishes to follow me, let him renounces himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Indeed, what does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world but lose his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man is coming in the glory of His Father, with His angels, and then He will render to each according to his deeds'" (Mt 16:24-27).

Our entire destiny is at stake here, in terms of our correspondence or lack thereof to the paschal mission of Christ, to whom we are likened and with whom we are identified in baptism, which is the substance, the center of every vocation and mission in the Church.

But let us also be shaken by Jesus' words to Peter, by the cold water thrown on Peter's suggestion, by the punch to the gut that floors him, as it surely did at that moment in his life. Because this happens immediately after the form of his vocation and mission had clearly come into focus even for Jesus Himself who, in the response of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), had received the sign that, at this moment, the time had come to announce to Peter his vocation to be the "rock" on which His Church would be built (Mt 16:17-19). In sum, everything is clear, defined, certain. It is like a solemn profession, a priestly ordination, an episcopal ordination— even a papal consecration! —or the celebration of matrimony. And no less than five minutes later, ten minutes at most, Peter receives word that he has not understood anything, that his thought, his way of thinking and judging, are totally opposed to his vocation, that he is living according to the ways of men and not God.

Mark notes that Jesus turned around to look at the other disciples while rebuking Peter (see Mk 8:33). This is because what he said to Simon held true for all of them; it was essentially a warning for all. For it is one thing to perceive a vocation, to see it confirmed by God and by the Church, to follow all the necessary steps of formation and all the prescribed curricula, to meet exceptional people who help us, perhaps persons with great charisma, even founders and saints... It is another thing simply to advance in the vocation one has chosen, "to make a career out of it," as people in

the world say, to move up to important responsibilities... Yet it is not in all these things that a vocation is achieved, accomplished, living, faithfully followed. Who received all this more than Peter? He encountered the Son of God! He was formed by Him! And from Him, in accord with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he was elected to be the “rock” on which Christ chose to build His Church, putting into his hands “the keys of the kingdom of Heaven,” with the power to bind or loose everything on earth as in Heaven (see Mt 16:18-19).

And yet none of this actualizes the vocation if a nucleus is lacking, if an essential foundation is missing. It is as if all of this, which indeed is immense, was suspended on a wire, a wire on which everything hangs, which gives to all of this its vitality, just as an electric wire conducts electricity, allowing an entire factory, an entire airport, an entire hospital to function. Years ago, a tree fell on an electric line in Switzerland, and half of Italy was without electricity! So it is here: there is a point between us and Christ that either makes our vocation and mission which we receive function, or not.