

13. The strength of the martyrs

The Letter to the Hebrews brings its reflection to completion in an exhortation to a memory of Christ that fixes its gaze on Him, crucified and glorious, to draw from this memory the strength of grace that enables us not to lose courage and trust in the struggle against sin, in ourselves and in others:

“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb 12:1-4).

The author of the letter speaks almost only of suffering, of struggle against sin, of a wearisome race, of blood outpoured. But in the midst of all this, he inserts a phrase: “He has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God,” and it is as if in that phrase was concentrated the whole victory of Christ against evil and death, the whole resurrection. It is enough for him to show this image, to put at the center of the whole universal and cosmic struggle between good and evil the victory of the Risen one from which springs the strength and victory of the redeemed.

The vision of the mystery of Christ in the letter to the Hebrews reminds us immediately of the strength of the martyrs and the meaning of Christian martyrdom. Christ, at the right hand of the Father, by sending the Spirit makes it possible also to bear witness to Him to the point of martyrdom, as is paradigmatically illustrated in the protomartyr Stephen.

As one reads the account of Stephen’s martyrdom one has the impression that he had read the exhortations of St. Paul and of the letter to the Hebrews. Evidently it is the opposite that happened: the spectacle of the martyrs inspired the apostolic writings. Let us not forget that Paul was a direct witness of and accomplice in the martyrdom of Stephen.

Now, it is as if the stoning of Stephen was provoked essentially by his vision of Christ at the right hand of the Father, just as the passion and death of Jesus were decided when he affirmed before the Sanhedrin that they would see the Son of man “seated at the right hand of Power” (Mt 26:64).

We read in the Acts of the Apostles: Stephen, “filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look,” he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (Acts 7:55-58).

This episode shows how, for the primitive Church, “fixing one’s gaze” and “thinking attentively” (cf. Heb 12:2-3) on Christ who is at the right hand of the father in glory was the center of Christian life, and how that was the substance of testimony, even unto martyrdom. Jesus’s presence with the Father was the center of Christian meditation, the fount of grace, but also the motive that drew forth hostility to the point of violent death.

In that vision of Stephen, in that vision of faith in Christ that Stephen and the first Christians had and transmitted also to us, the whole meaning and value of life is concentrated, the whole treasury from which they lived, and for which they sacrificed their life, because the glorious presence of Christ at the right hand of the Father means more than life, is more our life than our life is.

“I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56)

Stephen dies because he bears witness to what he contemplates. His gaze fixed on Jesus is testimony and martyrdom, which in Greek are the same word. We are all called to make memorial of Christ, to cultivate awareness of him, to go deepen his Word, our relationship with Him in prayer, and to see him in our neighbor, in the poor. Does this gaze fixed on Jesus truly take our entire life? Does it truly give all our life for Him? Does this gaze fixed on Jesus truly grip our whole life so that it become witness to Him?

It is incredible how St. Stephen lets himself be “impressed” by what he sees when looking at Jesus! He is impressed by it like a photograph is impressed by the light of the image that it reproduces. Stephen dies like Jesus, saying almost the same words, pardoning his executioners like Him. It is not a fiction, it is a real image that is reproduced because Stephen is entirely exposed to the light of the Model that is imprinted in him.

Stephen, contemplating Jesus at the right hand of the Father, contemplates not just two Persons near each other, but their relation, their love, their reciprocal predilection. Deep down, Stephen contemplates the Holy Spirit, contemplates the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit in communion of eternal and infinite love. Stephen is called “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:55) when he fixes his gaze on the Son at the right hand of the Father. In him the memory of God is a presence that fills him and takes him within the Mystery, just as the death he undergoes can do nothing but manifest the Mystery that they want to silence and suppress in him.

It is important to meditate on this scene by comparing it with our gaze on Christ, our contemplation of God’s mystery. How much does our memory of Christ “take” us? Often we struggle to let ourselves take a little time, a little attention, a little effort, a little sleep. The testimony of the martyrs and confessors shows us that it is indeed possible, even for mere children like the shepherd-children of Fatima, to cast the whole net on the right side of the boat, and that it is this “casting” of one’s whole life that is fruitful, that fills the net of life with fruit for the Church, with fruit that is the Church, which is the communion among men in which the Trinitarian Communion is reproduced.

We know that we need a conversion to let ourselves be engaged by the predilection between the Father and the Son and the Spirit, which is the substance of that “right side” which is reserved for each of us, and to which Jesus invites us, calling us back with familial tenderness from the shore of the lake. He calls us to enter into his closeness with the Father, and to cast into it our life.