

5th Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 14:21-27 / John 13:31-35)
19.05.2019

Commended, Accountable and Loving

During 8 Sundays between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, the Church invites us to journey with the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Easter Season is the only time in the liturgical year when we have the opportunity to hear the story of our origins as Christians, the history of the Church and what God does in and through her in the world. In the Acts, Luke shows us that God's redemption of the world is accomplished through the work of his servants in the Church.

Today, in our 1st reading taken from chapter 14 of the Acts, there are two aspects which are particularly relevant to the life of our Christian Churches in 2019:

- the first aspect is related to the fact that, in our reading from the Acts, we heard twice the word "commended": Paul and Barnabas "commended the elders to the Lord" and we are told that it is in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were "commended to the grace of God". When Paul, Barnabas and the elders are assigned a ministry, a particular mission in the Church, those men are given to God.

Today, we are tempted to approach the subject from another angle. Let us take an example: in the Catholic Church, when men are ordained deacon, priest or bishop, our attention is focused on the gift which is given to them. In the Acts, what is first is that they are given to God. Christian ministers, whether they are ordained or not, are not first people to whom something is given but they are men and women who are given to God. What makes a minister in the community is not the gift of a status, particular powers or some visible insignia but their belonging to God, their personal reliance and dependence upon God's grace.

What is clear in this process is that God is in charge, we have been commended, entrusted to him. I say "we" because, in one way or another, in our communities, families, workplaces, we are all called to exercise a form of ministry.

So we all have been commended to God for a purpose, a mission. There should be no free-lance Christians, no self-appointed ministers in our Christian communities. We belong to God and are sent by the Church into the world.

- the second aspect is found at the end of our reading where we are told that, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch, "they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them". Here is a challenge for our Church: it is the challenge of accountability. Commended to God, we become accountable to him and to one another in the community. If we are responsible for one another, then we are also accountable to one another.

Last February, in Rome, there was a meeting of bishops on "The Protection of Minors in the Church" (21-24.02.2019). The American Cardinals called for a new culture of accountability in the Catholic Church. They were thinking of how bishops failed in their handling of many cases of sexual abuse. However their request should actually concern the whole life of the Church at every level.

St Paul urged the Christians who lived in Ephesus to "be subject to one another" (5:21). I do not think that he had in mind a kind of vertical and servile submission. He was calling the first Christians, and all of us today, to really encourage, support, challenge and correct one another because "we are members of one another" (Rm 12:5).

Lack of transparency and a culture of secrecy foster clericalism and abuse of power. They prevent us from growing in maturity in the exercise of our personal and common responsibility in the community. For Christians, there is no good stewardship, be that in the Churches or in our families and communities, without clarity in communication, sharing of information, dialogue and subsidiarity in the decision process.

Obviously there is need for discretion and respect of privacy. However, as St Paul reminds us, “we must no longer be children (...) but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:14-15).

So we must help one another to mature and to become more responsible and accountable in the way we live our lives as Christians.

The last aspect, which is mentioned in our Gospel reading and which is the most important, is that people will know that we are the Lord’s disciples, his Church, by the love we have for one another.

Last year, in Dublin, in his homily in Phoenix Park, Pope Francis reminded us how Saint Columbanus and his companions “brought the light of the Gospel to the lands of Europe”. According to Pope Francis, “their extraordinary missionary success was not based on tactical methods or strategic plans, no, but on a humble and liberating docility to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It was their daily witness of fidelity to Christ and to each other that won hearts” (26.08.2018).

“Fidelity to Christ and to each other”. That was the witness of Christians who were rooted in Christ and accountable to, responsible for one another.

Many centuries after St Columbanus, that should be our witness today: to be faithful to Christ and to one another. Whether we are lay men and women, religious, priests or bishops, since we have been commended to the Lord, we should rejoice in our belonging to him and to one another in the Church.

Moved by love which “causes many to be one” (St Bernard Tolomei), let us be a Church wherein all can answer their calling and use the talents God has given them, a Church which fosters a spirit of trust and accountability, “a servant Church accompanying suffering humanity on its pilgrim way” (St John Paul II, Baltimore, 08.10.1995).