

REFLECTION

God, not man will save the Church

ECCLESIA

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The appointment of Archbishop Victor M. Fernández as Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith was definitely a slap in the face by the Pope to those cardinals who had tried to prevent the situation from collapsing by opposing the appointment of Archbishop Wilmer to the post. And it was yet another burden loaded on the shoulders of those who are trying to stay upright in this situation of great suffering of Catholics

trying to be faithful, in spite of everything, to the teaching of the Church.

Each step towards catastrophe clearly deepens the suffering and magnifies the worry. What will we do if Fernández gives the go-ahead to the blessing of gay couples? Or if he were to abolish the ancient liturgy altogether? Or if he makes priestly celibacy recommended, but no longer obligatory? Or if... you name it. Hypotheses that seem anything but a mirage and that, given the dramatic acceleration of this last part of the present pontificate, are felt to be very close.

Faced with the times that realistically lie ahead, the temptation to find a reassuring refuge, at any price, becomes ever stronger. People are looking for a chance to continue their sacramental life, to find a serene environment of faith for their children, to ensure worthy liturgical celebrations, and even to save the Church from going adrift. The result is that, in under ten years, thousands and thousands of faithful have decided to join schismatic communities, which in their eyes represent a refuge in the current storm, an environment that is safe from the persecutions that blatantly come from that authority that should guard and promote the faith, but instead seems intent on dissipating and destroying it.

The solution may have its own humanly understandable logic, either in the “survival mode” line, or in that of trying to “save the Church”. The real problem for Christians of all times, however, is the struggle to enter into the logic of the Cross, to believe that death is not the end, but the condition of a new fruitfulness.

“The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven”. Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church, at No. 677. The Church is called to follow her crucified Lord and Bridegroom. This statement, which might seem obvious, has consequences of extreme importance and concreteness.

The disciples, Peter in the lead, did not abandon him out of fear. One who is afraid does make a swipe to kill the guard of the High Priest, who had come to arrest the Master. What disconcerts Peter, which somehow takes away his fighting spirit, and disappoints him, is the Lord's rebuke: *“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”* (Matthew 26: 53-54). In his eyes, Jesus does not want to do anything to save his mission, to save the nascent Church, to

save his followers.

Even less does it appear from the Gospels that Jesus reproached his own for not having made an effort to defend him, to prevent his capture and death. On the contrary, he commands Peter to put his sword back in its sheath (cf. Jn 18:11), just as he had rebuked him earlier when Peter had thought fit to lecture the Lord about his Passion and Death: "Then Peter took Him aside and began rebuking Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord! This shall not happen to You'" (Mt 16: 22). We know the Lord's harsh and firm reply.

In the hour of the Passion, Jesus seems not to want to do anything even to save the souls of those who would or could believe in Him. *"He saved others. He cannot save Himself. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him"* (Mt 27:42). Did not the Son of God come that men might believe in Him and, believing, might have eternal life? But then why does He not perform the great act that would strengthen the faith of many, His disciples first of all? The scribes and elders even hold it against Him that it would be the very sign of Christ to be delivered by God: "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He loves Him" (Matt 27:43, quoting Wisdom 2:18).

Instead, the Lord asked only one thing of the disciples: to watch and pray so as not to fall into temptation (cf. Mt 26:41). The disciples knew that Jesus would rise again, that death would not be the final word: The Lord had told them three times; they also knew that the grain of wheat had to die in order to bear fruit (cf. John 12:24). But the temptation to reason and act in a merely human way, even if for the noblest purpose imaginable - to save the Lord, to save the nascent Church! - had taken over, because they had not watched and prayed.

"The Church will follow her Lord....". So what to do? To watch and pray, so as not to fall into temptation: to have the strength to stand firm, while everything dissolves; to continue to believe that the Church is of divine institution and will certainly not fail because of the machinations of men, however powerful they may be; to avoid seemingly effective solutions, but which lead us to act contrary to what God has established for his Church.

If "the Church will follow her Lord" in the Passion, then his death will not be apparent, but real. To our eyes all will seem truly lost, as it did to the eyes of the disciples, who saw their Master truly dead, placed in a tomb complete with a seal, declaring the final 'game over'. We shall see - we are already seeing it - that Pilate,

Caiaphas, and Herod will find a petty agreement to get rid of the righteous one; we shall see false trials, dominated by lies, to accuse those who are in the truth, while Barabbas will be set free; we shall know the most terrible loneliness, caused by abandonment, misunderstanding, and even betrayal by friends and relatives; we shall weep while others rejoice (cf. Jn 16:10); they will lay hands on us (cf. Lk 21:12), dragging us before the civil and religious powers.

If we try to escape from all this by giving in or, more subtly, seeking refuge in a "church" that guarantees us tranquillity, the Mass, and the "traditional" catechism, but a church that, in theory or in practice, shirks Peter's authority, then we will be in the logic of wanting to save the Church ourselves, as the disciples presumed to save the Lord, and of wanting to save ourselves, but not in the way the Lord intended.

It is only Mary Most Holy who can obtain for us the grace to remain with her, standing, strong, at the foot of the Cross, without giving an inch, believing that, in Christ, death is life, the Cross is triumph, just when everything seems to say otherwise. And of believing that the Church cannot fail, that the gates of Hades will not prevail (cf. Mt 16:18), because the Church belongs to Christ. Therefore it is not we who must save the Church, but the Church who must save us. And the Church is one. That is why, in spite of everything, we remain in the Church, also accepting to die with her: *"Let us go also, that we may die with Him!"* (John 11, 16).