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OCTOBER 24, 2019

Thursday of the 29th Week of Ordinary Time

*Optional Memorial of St. Anthony Mary Claret*

Rom 6:19-23

Ps 1:1-4,6

Lk 12:49-53

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The biblical texts of this liturgy offer a common theme: the freedom granted by God to every human person, the use that we make of it, and the responsibilities that follow from it. The passage from the Letter to the Romans traces a clear line between a life in service of sin and a life under the lordship of Christ. It also points to the endpoint of each path. The final result of sinful works is death, and death represents a separation without possibility of return. Such separation is the self-inflicted fate of those who obstinately choose to exclude God from their lives. The scenario presented by Paul corresponds perfectly to that of the Gospel. Together with the dark possibility of rejection of the Gospel and consequent condemnation, there is also the broad horizon of eternal life founded in Christ Jesus. To Paul, a veteran of living in strict observance of religious precepts as a path to salvation, it is important to stress repeatedly that communion with God through the person of Jesus Christ is an undeserved gift. No one can claim to be owed anything by God. Salvation is grace, and humanity is invited to welcome it and cultivate it.

Even in its brevity, the reading from the Gospel of Luke contains a vibrant message, so strong in tones and images that no listener can leave indifferent. First of all, it conveys a sense of imminence before which one must take a position. The manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ has ignited a flame in the history of humanity and of individual

people. In the Bible, fire symbolizes the word of the Lord proclaimed by the prophet (see Jer 5:14, 23:29, Sir 48). It is connected to the image of a hammer that, when it hits a rock (see Jer 23:29), causes a thousand sparks to burst forth. “I have come to set the earth on fire” (Lk 12:49). In the reading, the focus is on the contrasting responses that the person and the message of Jesus arouse: division, not only among strangers but even among the members of the same family. One is reminded here of Simeon’s prophecy that this child would become a sign of contradiction (see Lk 2:34). But the image of fire is also used in Scripture to offer a message of comfort: “When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned” (Is 43:2). John the Baptist baptized with water, but Jesus will baptize with fire (see Lk 3:16). It is under the form of tongues of fire that the Holy Spirit will descend upon the Church gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:2-4). Fire is also used as an image to express the judgment of God. Everything will be subjected to the test of fire that will separate the chaff from the grain. Hence the exhortation of the apostle Paul:

Each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each one’s work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone’s work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:10b-15)

The fire that Jesus came to bring to earth is clearly connected with his baptism. When his baptism, or his passion, takes place, then also the fire that he has come to bring, that is, the gift of the Spirit, will be lit. Thus, with two figures of speech, Jesus describes both the paschal mystery and the fruit that it bears for us. John the Baptist, in fact, had announced that the

one who was coming was more powerful than him, someone whose sandal straps he was not worthy to untie. If he baptized with water to prepare the way of the Lord, inviting people to repentance and conversion, the Son of the Most High came to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, so that every creature would see God's salvation and his great wonders. The fulfillment of this promise is described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, with the story of Pentecost, when the Spirit, a, Easter gift, descended upon the Church in the form of tongues of fire, infusing it with prophetic strength to begin the evangelizing mission.

Luke must have been witness to many family conflicts during his missionary travels all over the world, constantly evangelizing with Paul on some occasions, and also with other companions. Many of these conflicts occurred in the synagogues, as the stories in Acts tell us, due to the acceptance of the Good News by some and its refusal by others. It is obvious that members of the same family took part in the rites in the synagogue. This brings to mind another teaching of Jesus, which requires from his disciples a love greater than the love they have for their relatives. The reason is very simple: he is the source of love. It is he who teaches us to truly love, giving our lives for the people we love. Love motivated only by family ties is very fragile. On the other hand, when I become a follower of Jesus, I not only learn to truly love my own family, but I abandon all greed and hypocrisy, every selfishness and discrimination, opening my heart to universal fraternity, welcoming with sincere love people different from my own religion, ethnicity, culture, skin color, social status – people who were previously foreigners to me. But this can cause enmity on the part of the family and the community that do not like what is different and that refuse to accept news that can undermine their traditions and beliefs. They do not understand this new way of life – which is a real revolution, both spiritual and social – and reject it. As Luke himself says: “The law and the prophets lasted until John; but from then on the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone who enters does so with violence” (Lk 16:16).

Peace is a constant in the discourses of Jesus (see Mt 5:9) and also in his reactions, even in the face of provocation and violence. He is the Prince of Peace; he is “our peace” (Eph 2:14). It is up to those who are called by Jesus to decide where their commitments lie. The fire that Jesus offers warms hearts, especially those who do not know where to go. May he accompany us, as he did in a hidden way the disciples of Emmaus, who at the end of a tiring and disheartening day asked, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32). And it was a new beginning, the renewal of a call that, despite the wavering of the apostles, the Lord had never revoked. “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29).

