



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 3 November 2021

[Multimedia]

On the Letter to the Galatians: 14. *Walking according to the Spirit*

In the passage from the Letter to the Galatians we have just heard, Saint Paul exhorts Christians to *walk according to the Holy Spirit* (cf. 5:16, 25), there is a style: *to walk according to the Holy Spirit*. In effect, to believe in Jesus means to follow him, to go behind him along his way, just as the first disciples did. And at the same time, it means avoiding the opposite way, that of selfishness, of seeking one's own interests, which the Apostle calls the "desires of the flesh" (v. 16). The Spirit is the guide for this journey along the way of Christ, a wonderful but also difficult journey that begins in Baptism and lasts our entire lives. Let us think of it as a long excursion on the mountain heights: it is breath-taking, the destination is attractive, but it requires a lot of effort and tenaciousness.

This image can be helpful to understand the merit of the Apostle's words: "to walk by the Spirit", "to be led" by Him. They are expressions that indicate an action, a movement, a dynamism that prevents us from halting at the first difficulties, but elicits confidence in the power "coming from above" (*Shepherd of Hermas*, 43, 21). Walking along this path, the Christian acquires a positive vision of life. This does not mean that the evil present in the world disappears, or that the negative impulses of our selfishness and pride diminish. Rather, it means that belief in God is always stronger than our resistance and greater than our sins. And this is important!

As he exhorts the Galatians to follow this path, the Apostle places himself on their level. He

abandons the verb in the imperative — “walk” (v. 16) — and uses the indicative “we”: “let us walk also by the Spirit” (v. 25). That is to say: let us walk along the same line and let us be led by the Holy Spirit. It is an exhortation, a way of exhorting. Saint Paul feels this exhortation is necessary for himself as well. Even though he knows that Christ lives in him (cf. 2:20), he is also convinced that he has not yet reached the goal, the top of the mountain (cf. *Phil* 3:12). The Apostle does not place himself above his community. He does not say: “I am the leader; you are those others; I have reached the top of the mountain and you are on the way”. He does not say this, but rather places himself in the midst of everyone’s journey, in order to provide a concrete example of how necessary it is to obey God, corresponding ever more and ever better to the Spirit’s guidance. And how beautiful it is when we find pastors who journey with their people, who do not separate themselves from them. This is very beautiful. It is good for the soul.

This walking “by the Spirit” is not only an individual task: it also concerns the community as a whole. In fact, it is exciting, but demanding, to build up the community according to the way indicated by the Apostle. The “desires of the flesh”, “the temptations”, — let us put it this way —, that we all have, that is, our jealousies, prejudices, hypocrisies and resentments continue to make themselves felt, and having recourse to a rigid set of precepts, can be an easy temptation. But doing this would mean straying from the path of freedom, and instead of climbing to the top, it would mean returning towards the bottom. In the first place, journeying along the way of the Spirit requires giving space to grace and charity. To make space for God’s grace, not being afraid. After making his voice heard in a severe way, Paul invites the Galatians to bear each other’s difficulties, and if someone should make a mistake, to use gentleness (cf. 5:22). Let us listen to his words: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (6:1-2). An attitude that is quite different from gossiping. No, this is not according to the Spirit. What is according to the Spirit is being gentle with a brother or sister when correcting him or her and keeping watch over ourselves with humility so as not to fall into those sins.

In effect, when we are tempted to judge others badly, as often happens, we must firstly reflect on our weaknesses. How easy it is to criticise others! But there are people who seem to have a degree in gossip. They criticise others every day. Take a look at yourself! It is good to ask ourselves what drives us to correct a brother or a sister, and if we are not in some way co-responsible for their mistake. In addition to giving us the gift of gentleness, the Holy Spirit invites us to be in solidarity, to bear other’s burdens. How many burdens there are in a person’s life: illness, lack of work, loneliness, pain...! And how many other trials that require the proximity and love of our brothers and sisters! The words of Saint Augustine when he commented on this same passage can also help us: “Therefore, brothers, if a man has been caught out in some wrongdoing, [...] correct him in a spirit of gentleness. And if you raise your voice, love within. If you encourage, if you present yourself as a father, if you reprove, if you are severe, love” (cf. Sermon 163/B 3). Love always. The supreme rule regarding fraternal correction is love: to want the good of our brothers and sisters. It is a matter of tolerating the problems of others, the defects of others in

the silence of prayer, so as to find the right way to help them to correct themselves. And this is not easy. The easiest path is to gossip. Talking behind someone else's back as if I am perfect. And this should not be done. Gentleness. Patience. Prayer. Proximity.

Let us walk with joy and patience along this path, allowing ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking visitors taking part in today's audience, especially those from England and the United States of America, as well as the group of American military chaplains meeting in Rome in these days. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord. God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. The Solemnity of All Saints and the commemoration of our Faithful Departed that we recently celebrated offer us the opportunity to reflect, once again, on the meaning of earthly life and on the value of eternity. These days of reflection and prayer are an invitation to us all to imitate the Saints who remained faithful to the divine plan their entire lives. I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, we now turn to the Apostle's exhortation to "live by the Spirit". Paul uses the image of "walking" to describe the journey of Christian discipleship (*Gal 5:16*). The Holy Spirit guides us along the path of holiness; he teaches us to persevere in the new life we have received in Christ and to reject "the desires of the flesh" that are contrary to it (*ibid.*). Paul makes it clear that the journey of discipleship, which begins at baptism, is demanding; it requires constant struggle, not only in our lives as individuals, but also in the life of the community. Only by the grace and charity that are gifts of the Spirit can we overcome the ever-present temptations to anger, envy and selfishness. In this sense, Paul urges us to "bear one another's burdens" (*Gal 6:2*), to be gentle in correcting those who go astray and compassionate to those who are suffering. Let us ask for the grace to be confirmed in our efforts to live by the Spirit and to act in a way worthy of the calling we have received in Christ.