

21. April 2020

“Community of property of the original church”

Acts 24, 32-35

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need. There was a Levite of Cypriot origin called Joseph whom the apostles surnamed Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He owned a piece of land and he sold it and brought the money and presented it to the apostles.

We hear today of a wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. The newly formed church of believers was one heart and one soul, i.e. they were so united in their love for God and for each other that, led by the same Spirit, they formed a deep unity that only God can give. It is a community that did not come into being through the bonds of blood, but through the common listening to the will of God, the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God and the readiness to do His will. The unity that exists between the divine persons had spread to the faithful, rich grace rested on all. This communion already gives a small glimpse of the communion that will be completed in heaven when God, angels and men form an indestructible unity of love, in which each serves the other in joy and transmit all that he knows about God.

This love for God and for one another brought to light the glorious work of the Holy Spirit to share everything with one another. This was a voluntary event, not, as it is often the case in later attempts to create an artificial equality which then usually led to injustice, as in ideological systems, for example. An inspiration that comes from the Holy Spirit, that is, a fruit of love, can experience a distortion to the point of its opposite, if it is ideologically motivated. It lacks divine love, which is the sustaining force. This cannot be replaced by a will that is only human, even if it should be directed towards good. This is a process that can be observed again and again in the history of mankind. If the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by the striving for holiness, then the inclinations of human nature will again assert themselves and will not meet the challenges of this high way of life in the long run.

In our text, in the early history of the Christian community, a new kind of justice emerged. The focus was no longer on securing one's own possessions and then taking care of others, but on looking at everyone and at the individual. Everyone got from all the possessions what he needed. If this is accompanied by a Christian simplicity, then such a path shines all the more! If the community is one heart and soul, then it will also recognize that there can be different needs, which do not come from selfishness, but from the circumstances of life.

What a great deed of the Holy Spirit!

This way of life was later repeatedly tried to imitate, especially in the emerging spiritual communities of the monasteries. This is still true today, both in the existing orders and in some newer communities. It is not always easy to live up to this high standard, because human nature wants to find security in possessions easily and needs a striving for holiness as a basis to rein in natural inclinations. But a community property which exists on the level of voluntariness and love still radiates that light which shone in the early community.

In the midst of this new way of life of the spiritual family that had come into being, the Apostles proclaimed with great power the Resurrection of the Lord. So it was no wonder that many people were attracted to it. After all, they heard the word of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit and saw the example of an exemplary Christian life before them, in the full glory of first love. Word and life testimony were in agreement.

The example of the early church as a fruit of the Holy Spirit is still effective today in various ways. Where the Christian community keeps its eyes and heart open both to its own poor and to the needs of universal humanity, the Holy Spirit is at work and invites sharing. When this takes place, the spirit of the early church is active and will always bring forth examples of this original realization of the voluntary community of goods.