

AFRICA-EUROPE FAITH AND JUSTICE NETWORK

25th ANNIVERSARY MASS, Collegio dei Verbiti, Roma. 28th May, 2013.

(Sirach 35:1-15; Mark 10:28-30)

My Brothers and Sisters, we gather around the altar of the Lord this afternoon, as members and delegates of the *Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network*, to celebrate twenty-five years of witnessing to the life of the Church and carrying out her mission in our "*faith and Justice Network*". As such members and delegates of "*faith and justice network*", we seek to witness to and, so, live a *faith that does justice*. Our *justice*, as in the case of Abraham (*our father in faith*), is the fruit of our faith (Gen.15:6), and it denotes first and foremost our *respect for the demands of the relationship in which we live, especially, our relationship with God, our relationship with one another and our relationship with the world/creation*. Our coming together, then, as brothers and sisters in the faith, despite the diversity of our Religious Congregations and Communities, to render worship to the Lord together in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass, is essentially a fundamental expression of our *faith that does justice*.

The Scripture Readings, which accompany our celebration this afternoon and help to dispose us to worthily take our places at the Lord's table, invite us now to consider aspects of the sacrificial meaning of this worship through which we give the highest expression to our lives of *faith that does justice*, and the radical generosity that the life of discipleship requires that we make with our lives to God.

To begin with, Ben Sirach, as the prologue to his work tells us, was a devout member of God's people and an avid student of the Scriptures of God's people in the Old Testament who decided to share his reflections. Our First Reading this afternoon belongs to his reflection on the sense sacrifices and offering that are offered to God.

For Sirach, since all sacrifices: all that one offers is in fulfillment of the commandment, the sense(s) of the sacrifices of God's people is also fulfilled in three ways: in the observance of the Law, in kindness and almsgiving and in the righteous conduct or holiness of the one who makes an offering.

The observance of the Law fulfills the sense of all sacrifices of God's people, "*for the one who keeps the Law makes many offerings; and the one who heeds the commandments makes an offering of well-being*." Similarly, kindness and almsgiving also do fulfill the sense of sacrifice, "*for the one who returns a kindness offers a choice flour; and the one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering*." But at the end of it all, it is the worthy disposition of the one who makes an offering: his righteousness and generosity, which make an offering acceptable to God. While "*the offering of the righteous enriches the altar; and its pleasing odor rises before the Most High*," it is the generosity and cheerfulness with which one offers sacrifices which likens one to God, witnesses to his generosity towards man and wins his favour, even sevenfold!

This identification of the fulfillment of the sense(s), indeed, the *soul*, of the sacrifices of the Old Testament in obedience to the Law, in kindness and almsgiving and in the cheerful and

generous disposition with which sacrifices are offered resonate loudly with sentiments expressed in the Psalms, in the Book of Proverbs, in the Prophet Jeremiah and, finally, in the Letter to the Hebrews.

The Book of Proverbs is clear about the disposition worthy of all sacrifices: "*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is his delight*" (Prov. 15:8). Similarly, the Psalmist identifies "*a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart*" as the sacrifice acceptable to the Lord (Ps.51:17). Furthermore, the kindness and almsgiving, which Sirach identified as fulfilling the sense of sacrifice, are replaced by *the doing of righteousness and justice*". This, according to the Book of Proverbs, "*is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice*" (Prov.21:3).

But, it is to the Prophet Jeremiah that we look to find the most radical formulation of Sirach's identification of the fulfillment of the sense of sacrifice in obedience to the Law. Through Jeremiah God says: "*For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifice. But this command I gave them: Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you will be my people; and walk only in the way I command you...*" Jer.7:22-23). This radical identification of the true sense or *soul* of sacrifice in obedience to God's Law is also known to the Psalmist, according to whom God does not desire "*sacrifice and offering, but an open ear*"; not "*burnt offering and sin offering, but a delight to do the will of God*" (Ps.40:6-8).

This bit of Ps.40 is worth reading and re-reading, because it is the most direct preparation for and an explanation of the sacrifice of Jesus, at least, according to the Letter to the Hebrews (10:5,8). Quoting the Psalm we just referred to, the Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus' passion and death as his sacrifice that takes away sin, and explains it as an expression of Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father: Jesus' living out his total submission to the will of his Father. Sin, having entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve (Gen.3), is taken away by the obedience of Jesus; and this is the sacrifice which we celebrate sacramentally this afternoon; and our communion with Jesus in this Eucharistic sacrifice must lead to our communion in his obedience and submission to the will of the Father. This is the first and basic form of justice or righteousness (towards God) which leads to the other forms of justice or righteousness (towards one another and towards creation).

Let us now consider briefly the Gospel Reading too!

As we do so, let us recall that disposition of generosity and cheerfulness which Sirach extolled for offering sacrifices. In our Gospel Reading this afternoon, Peter's account of how much they have had to abandon to follow Jesus: how much they have had to sacrifice to become his disciples, is countered or responded to by Jesus' approval and endorsement of the radical form of generosity that must characterize the life of his followers.

From being a characteristic of the life of discipleship, this radical generosity was also the distinguishable feature of the early Christian community that lived characteristically in the power of the Holy Spirit. The early Christian community is presented as living a life of radical generosity in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37). Kindness and almsgiving, which Sirach had identified also as a sense of sacrifice, characterized the life of the early Christian community; and just as an offering made with stint and with grudge incurred the displeasure of God, so did stinting property offered to God for the use of the Christian community by Ananias and Sapphira constitute the first sin of the early community (Acts.5; cf. also Joshua 7). Such radical generosity appear to be precisely that feature of discipleship that disposes us to respond to the needs of one another: that feature that disposes us to live the forms of justice or righteousness towards one another.

May our celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, then, dispose and help us to live the very many senses of sacrifice, including those we make of our lives as disciples of Jesus: as Religious Men and Women(Ps.51:17); and may God bless and sustain us!