

OCTOBER 19, 2019 Saturday of the 28th Week of Ordinary Time

Optional Memorial of Saints John de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues, Priests, and
Companions, Martyrs

Optional Memorial of St. Paul of the Cross

Rom 4:13,16-18

Ps 105:6-9,42-43

Lk 12:8-12

In today's Gospel, Jesus foresees the various contexts in which his apostles will be witnesses to him, including the possibility that they will encounter hostile reactions. Appearing in the synagogues and before the civil authorities, they will bear their witness of faith both in religious and secular circles. His words are fulfilled in the Acts of the Apostles when Paul preaches in the synagogue of Salamis (see Acts 13:4-17) and when he witnesses to Jesus before the Roman authorities (see Acts 21:33-22,29). Jesus assures his followers that their earthly testimony will reach the heavens; just as they recognize the Son of Man in earthly settings, civil or religious, so the Son of Man will recognize them before the angels of God.

Immediately before this, Jesus had encouraged his disciples to have courage and confidence in times of persecution. As can be deduced from the rest of the missionary discourse, he doesn't promise them serenity or immunity from violence and rejection, but he indicates to them the true root of freedom: the victory over fear whose source is found in Jesus' victory over death. Easter will be, for Jesus and his disciples, the experience of this victory.

The moments in history, when the disciples are called upon to publicly acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Messiah, harken forward to the final judgement before God, when Jesus himself, as Son of Man, will act as advocate and defender. In the image of the juridical process (see Isa 50:8-9; Rom 8:33), one thinks of the Risen Lord, who lives with God, but who is present in his Church in an effective way, through his Spirit, in the public clash with the leaders and the powerful of this world that the disciples continue to face (see Lk 11:11-12).

Jesus' statement that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven is rather surprising, in light of the parable of the prodigal son (that comes just three chapters later in Luke), which emphasizes the forgiveness of sins. But this teaching should be interpreted in the context of the particular understanding of

Luke's notion of Christian mission. The followers of the Son of Man will reject him, as we see even Peter, the first among the apostles, did on the night Jesus was arrested. Peter failed to acknowledge and remain faithful to Jesus because he had not yet witnessed his passion and resurrection and he had not yet received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But Peter is forgiven in the greeting from the Risen Lord, "Peace be with you" (Lk 24:36), and in love (see Jn 21:15-9). After receiving the Holy Spirit, the experience of the Gospel is complete and Peter, renewed, is now filled with the power of the Risen Christ, certain of the gift of faith. His own Christological profession was the fruit of the Spirit in him (see Mt 16:18).

Of course, Luke is well aware of the experiences of the primitive Church of Acts – the courageous testimony of the apostles (see Acts 4:5ff; 5:32), but also the commitment of Christian communities exposed to the risk of apostasy or lack of faith in the face of threats and repression from outside. He then recalls a saying of Jesus that ought to cause Christians to reflect, making them more aware and strengthening them: a word against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit does not seem to allow forgiveness. He who has rejected the Son of Man during his earthly ministry will be forgiven and will have a new opportunity through the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost; therefore, he will receive a possibility of conversion and forgiveness. That was the case for Paul and for many converted Jews. But how can anyone who rejects the Spirit – who is the very source and agent of the forgiveness, repentance, and renewal of the disciples – be forgiven? Luke sees this confirmed in the experience of the hardening and blindness of those who have rejected the witness of the apostles (see Acts 28:25-28). It is a total, free, and conscious closure to the action of the Spirit and to the Spirit's movement of reconciliation and forgiveness, to such an extent that no one can be forced, against his explicit will and action, to be saved. The welcoming or the rejection of the Spirit of God is a mysterious relationship of our conscience and our freedom with God; our hearts are fully scrutable only by God and in God. Only God, who knows our hearts, grants forgiveness of sins and salvation.