

The Parable of the Weeds, Part Two

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We have said that the presence of weeds (tares) with wheat until the last day (Matt. 13:23-30) makes Christians witnesses of their faith, thus allowing them to contribute to the work of the salvation of the world.

What is striking about Christ's interpretation of the parable is that he considers the field a symbol of the world, not the Church. If the world will continue to contain the righteous and the corrupt, what about the Church? How do we apply this parable to her? Do we accept the existence of the wicked on an equal footing with the righteous? The Church is the leaven and salt of the world, "But if the salt has lost its taste, with what shall it be seasoned?" (Matt. 5:13). There is no place for the corrupt and the wicked in the Church, because in principle it is a community of saints; a community of people who have dedicated themselves to God. But in reality, they still sin and have not attained perfection; even though they are on the way to it. Therefore, the Church is also a community of repentant people who strive for holiness and perfection (definition from St. Ephraim the Syrian).

Repentance means continuous self-correction. The one who refuses to change himself and is stubborn in his sin has no place in the Church. The process of purification and cleansing is continuous and active in the Church. It is a permanent dialectical process that requires great spiritual awakening and vigilance, on the one hand, and support for the repentant on the other hand. That support should be equal in strength to zeal for the purity of the Church.

The Church is the living body of Christ, not a field. It is His vineyard, and believers are in existential union with Him. "And every branch of it that does not bear fruit He takes away" (John 15:2). The Lord said in another place: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 7:19). Regarding the quarrel between members of the Church (Matt. 18:15-18), the Lord instructed recourse to the Church, after exhausting the solutions of reconciliation, on the personal level and on the level of mediators. He said: "If he (the erring brother) refuses to listen to them (the mediators and witnesses), tell it to the Church. But if he refuses to listen to the Church, treat him as if he were a heathen or a tax collector."

On these verses and others, the Church based its canon law that aims to organize its existence in the world in accordance with its heavenly essence. Saint Basil the Great says: "If those who call themselves Christians wanted to continue preserving the gospel truth, the apostolic tradition, and the simple faith, I would not have had to speak; rather, I would have remained silent." Apologetical theology and the canons that discipline, refine, correct, and excommunicate exist because of the human face of the Church, to keep it faithful without lowering it and allowing it to distort the face of Christ and repel Him.

God sent the prophet Jeremiah to his people, and gave him a double message, saying to him: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth, and have given you authority this day over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). Isn't this the message of the Church?

There is, then, a distinction in the way believers deal with those outside the Church and those within it. Those within it are not allowed to indulge in vices after exhausting all means to help them repent. If the sinner or the lost persists in his sin, the Church disciplines him. Discipline takes many forms and stages: it begins with admonition, then warning, then punishment, then temporary excommunication, and final excommunication. This is evident in the letters of Paul the Apostle, which organized the newly emerging local churches and embodied the words of the Gospel in ecclesiastical reality.

I will give just one example concerning that brother who was cohabiting with his stepmother. The Apostle Paul says: "It would have been better for you to mourn, so that you might remove from your midst the one who has done this deed... Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:1-5). What is meant is, cut him off from the Church because he persists in his sin, so that his sin may wear down his body, so that he may come to his senses and repent. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), when he was in extreme need, he remembered the glory of his father's house, so he returned to it!

The Apostle Paul continues in his letter to the church at Corinth, saying:

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or

idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother (i.e., a believer within the church) if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Drive out the wicked person from among you’” (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

There are cases in which dialogue, consideration and compassion stop working. These require excommunication, that is, expulsion from the Church. The Church resorts to this after exhausting all means of reform, whether moral, behavioral, faith-based or sacramental, and the sinner persists deliberately on continuing in his sin or error. At that point, he becomes a stumbling block for others, and a misleading and distorted image of Christ. He must be removed from the ecclesial family lest he destroy it and cause its destruction.

The Church is both mother and father. It educates, nurtures, and cares for, and also disciplines, punishes, and refines. Its goal is to edify mankind for whose salvation Christ died and rose.

God will judge the corrupt in this world on the last day, but the Church will hold accountable the sinners within it to encourage them to repent while preserving its purity. There is no compromise or deviation, whether in faith or behavior.

In a time of looseness and competing influences on those who are called believers, accountability does not seem as easy as discussed. Complacency is unacceptable, and healing is required. Haste is harmful, and patience is needed. In the end, discipline is not merely legalistic but pedagogical for the sinner and the brethren. It requires invoking the Holy Spirit through deep prayer.

In a time of insistence on clinging to religious formalities and fighting their essence simultaneously, the Church needs a prophetic spirit and collective action to limit corruption that runs here and there. Separating the wheat from the weeds, after they have ripened, is not a difficult matter. The difficulty lies in the time of growth, that is, before reaching maturity.

Certainly, the more the Church is filled with pure people, the less corruption it will have. In the end, we are all responsible, and we will be judged for our evasion of responsibility in one way or another.

Take care of your purity so that your Church will be better!