

Homily on Wednesday of the twenty third week: College mass at 12:00

Memorial of Saint Peter Claver

Readings : Col 3: 1-11; Ps 145; Lk 6: 20-26

Introduction at the Mass: the life of Saint Peter Claver

Peter Claver was born at Verdu Catalonian in 1581; he died on the 8th September 1654. After a first degree at the University of Barcelona, he joined the Jesuit novitiate of Tarragona when he was twenty years old. During his philosophical studies at Majorca, Alphonso Rodriguez, the saintly door-keeper of the college learned from God the future mission of his young associate and henceforth never ceased exhorting him to set out to evangelize the Spanish possessions in America. Peter obeyed and in 1610 landed at Cartagena, where for forty-four years he was the apostle of the black slaves.

To find laborers for their farms the master of Central and South America decided to find black slaves considered stronger than the local people to labor and work in their mines. They were very badly treated but Peter Claver defended them. They were bought 2 écus in Africa and sold 200 écus in America and in general, half of these slaves died during the sea travels from Africa to America. In spite of the repeated censure of the popes, nothing prevailed against this cupidity. The missionaries could not suppress the activity either.

One of them had therefore to give his whole life to alleviate their sufferings by becoming as it were “the slave of the slaves”. He assisted them in all their needs, gave them sacrament and baptized more than 300 000 black slaves. He defended them against their owners and this caused him severe trials. He was even denied support by his fellow companions. He was accused of indiscreet zeal and of having profaned the Sacraments for giving them to creatures that scarcely possessed a soul. Peter persevered against all his enemies accepting humiliations, and adding lots of penances to his works of charity. Lacking the support of men, God’s strength was given him. He was beatified on the 16 July 1850 by pope Pie IX, and canonized the 15 January 1888 by Leo XIII. On the 7 July 1896 he was proclaimed special patron of all the Catholic missions among the Blacks.

Homily

In the gospel, we have read the Beatitudes according to Luke, instead of 8 blessings like in Mt 5: 1-11, Luke gives only four. And these four beatitudes are addressed to all the present disciples of Jesus. These disciples include in Luke’s intention all those who would come from all over the world. They are not in any way limited to the small group of the twelve.

These beatitudes are addressed to those who are actually poor, hungry, mournful and hated now. Commenting these Lukan beatitudes saint Ambrose of Milan (339-397), one of the fathers of the Church linked them with the four cardinal virtues and against the deadly sins, for Ambrose these Beatitudes strengthen us to live a moral excellence. He wrote: “Let us see how Luke encompassed the eight blessings in the four. We know that there are four cardinal virtues: temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude. One who is poor in spirit is not greedy.

One who weeps is not proud but is submissive and tranquil. One who mourns is humble. One who is just does not deny what he knows is given jointly to all of us. One who is merciful gives away his own goods. One who bestows his own goods does not seek another's, nor does he contrive a trap for his neighbor. These virtues are interwoven and interlinked, so that anyone who possesses one virtue may be seen to have abundant rewards... Thus temperance has purity of heart and spirit, justice has compassion, patience has peace, and endurance has gentleness." (*Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 5.62-63, 68*).

But the problem for the world and for many Christians is to understand *how it could be possible to find happiness in poverty, hunger, mourning, and persecution*.

As human being, we all know that we cannot consistently escape the inevitable trials of life: pain, suffering, sickness and death. Jesus has given us the way to transcend all the difficulties and troubles through his teaching on the beatitudes or blessings of believers, showing us where real happiness can be found. However, for Jesus' teaching to bring happiness to us we need a transformation from within, a conversion of heart and mind which can only be given by the Holy Spirit through our collaboration with Him.

If we want to be filled with the joy and happiness of heaven, then we must empty ourselves from all that would shut God out of our hearts. For poverty of spirit finds ample room and joy in possessing God alone as one's incomparable greatest treasure. Hunger of the spirit seeks nourishment and strength in God's words and Spirit. Sorrow and mourning over wasted life and sin leads to joyful freedom from the burden of guilt and oppression.

So God reveals to the humble of heart the true source of abundant life and happiness. Jesus has promised his disciples the heavenly joy that surpasses their earthly trials and hardship.

Saint Thomas Aquinas said: "No one can live without joy. That is why someone deprived of spiritual joy goes after carnal pleasures." But let us ask ourselves: Do we know the joy and happiness on hungering and thirsting for God alone?

I know at least somebody who understood this. It is the saint we commemorate today, Peter Claver. In his works of charity he had to face all kinds of trials and humiliations, he endured all sorts of hardship for the good of others in God's love, and he had shown us that it is possible to be happy while facing earthly trials, for his heart reposed in God's peace. This links us to the first reading from the Letter to the Colossians. "If you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, and not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." This allows us to live according to the beatitudes and to avoid the kinds of earthly deeds abundantly quoted by the writer in this passage - just as saint Peter Claver did with his black brothers and sisters.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to build and strengthen our relationship with God through Christ, living from such a mysterious relationship with Christ in whom is the source of all wisdom and knowledge as it is said in the same Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians (2.3). May we become every day more committed to such a relation, which transforms us and prepares us for the eternal life to come. Amen.

Fr Joachim ZOUNDI sj.