



DAY 36: Contemplation

THE EXPULSION OF THE MERCHANTS FROM THE TEMPLE [277]

Placing Oneself in the Presence of God

Preparatory Prayer:

[46] ...to ask grace of God our Lord, that all my actions, intentions, and operations may be purely ordered to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty.

History:

For the history, Saint Ignatius proposes the expulsion of the merchants as found in the Gospel of Saint John, chapter 2, verses 13 to 22.

We must keep in mind that Our Lord carries out this purification of the Temple twice: once at the beginning of His public life, which Saint John places after the Wedding at Cana, and a second time at the end, after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem—this latter one is recounted by the other three Evangelists.

Since Saint Ignatius proposes the first as the historical scene, and since we are still within the Second Week, we will focus on this first purification. Moreover, it contains certain details that are not present in the others.

Composition of Place:

We should think about what the Temple of Jerusalem was like. We must not forget that this step is a preamble to the meditation; that is, it should help us pray and not distract us. This must be kept in mind because in a meditation like this there is much to imagine, and one could easily become distracted by excessive imagining. Therefore, briefly, what may help us in the meditation:

Before beginning the meditation, one could look online for material on this subject. There are many models and virtual reconstructions of what the Temple of Jerusalem was like. But, as we said, this should be done in moderation, without spending the whole day on it.

The Temple of Jerusalem in the time of Christ was magnificent. It occupied an important part of the city. Where today there are two mosques, that entire area was the Temple esplanade. The surface area of the whole complex was approximately 500 meters long by 300 meters wide. The central part of the Temple, where the sacrifices were offered, measured about 140 meters by 65, with a maximum height of 45 meters.

The front of the Temple was entirely covered with gold, which meant that for someone approaching Jerusalem from afar, the reflection of the sun upon it could be seen.

The esplanade was almost entirely surrounded by porticoes—that is, colonnaded galleries—and this is where the events we are to meditate upon today took place. This was the area where the merchants were located.

Why were there merchants in the Temple? Without going into many details, we must remember that the Jews were obliged to offer certain sacrifices. Sometimes these were two doves, as the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph did, but other animals were also offered, such as lambs and oxen.

This “system” of selling animals for sacrifice was mainly intended for those who came to Jerusalem from far away and could not bring their own animals for sacrifice; therefore, they bought them upon arriving in the city.

This, in turn, gave rise to the presence of money-changers. Foreigners, in order to purchase the animals, had to exchange their money. And just as happens today, in the exchange the money-changer makes a profit—and more than once they went too far.

Thus, we can imagine on the one hand all the beauty of the Temple, and at the same time the contrast of looking toward the porticoes filled with animals, cages, and the tables of the money-changers, along with all the disorder and noise that this entailed.

All of this is what Our Lord encounters when He goes up to Jerusalem for the Passover, and He decides to purify the Temple.

Petition:

The final preamble, the fruit of this meditation, is the same as that of the entire Second Week:

[104] ...to ask here for an interior knowledge of the Lord, who for me has become man, so that I may love Him more and follow Him.

Body of the Meditation

We have these three points proposed by Saint Ignatius: [277]

“FIRST POINT. With a whip made of cords He casts all those who sell out of the Temple.

SECOND POINT. He overturned the tables and scattered the money of the wealthy money changers who were in the Temple.

THIRD POINT. To the poor vendors of doves He said kindly, “Take these away! Make not the house of my Father a house of traffic.”

This can serve as material for meditation, above all on something that is present in both the first and the third points: the dominion that Our Lord had over His passions or affections. This is also something that one can profitably ask for as the fruit of this meditation.

We could reformulate the petition as an interior knowledge of Christ, especially of how He had His passions ordered and how He used them for the greater glory of God.

So first: what are passions?

Perhaps some already know, but it is not out of place to recall it. Passions, or affections, are movements that arise from what is known as the sensitive appetite.

What is the sensitive appetite?

It is something we share with animals. It is the desire that arises from sensible knowledge, without the higher part of the soul necessarily intervening.

For example, merely by seeing or smelling appetizing food, desire is awakened. Or by perceiving something dangerous, flight is awakened. When a sheep flees from a wolf, it is not reasoning; it does not think, "Here comes the wolf that wants to eat me." It perceives a dark, hairy thing running toward it, and this is perceived as danger; therefore, the passion of flight is aroused to avoid the evil of ending up as the wolf's dinner.

What animals have in this regard, we also have. And an important part of our path toward holiness is marked by the dominion of the passions. When there is insistence on the need to practice and strengthen the virtues, it is in part in order to be able to dominate the passions and not allow the passions to dominate us.

It is very important to keep in mind that passions are neither good nor bad in themselves. In our case, the goodness or malice of the passions depends on whether what one wills to do is good or bad. That is why the practice of the virtues leads us to dominate the passions, not to eliminate them. A saint is not a person without passions, but someone who dominates his passions and uses them as is fitting and when it is fitting.

And since Our Lord is true man, He also had passions. Of course, Christ is a unique case, because being God He has perfect dominion over His passions. No passion arises in His soul unless He wills it. And He causes those He wills to arise at the moment and in the perfect measure. The passions or affections of Christ are perfectly subject to His will.

This is something that could never occur in any of us at the same level, but as we have already said, growing in the virtues in order to dominate the passions is an important part of the path to holiness.

In this expulsion of the merchants, this quality of Our Lord is clearly evident—this perfect dominion He had over His passions, and especially over anger.

Saint Thomas Aquinas says that anger arises in response to an injury caused by another that is perceived as unjust by the one who becomes angry, and what it seeks is to cause harm to the one who produced that injury, in pursuit of just retribution.

This is what happens to us so often when we are wronged. The first thing one cries out for is justice, and if the wrong is very great and there is no self-control, one ends up seeking justice by one's own hand.

Certainly, when Our Lord entered the Temple He must have perceived the injury caused by these merchants to what was most sacred—ultimately to Himself. And if He used His anger at that moment to expel them, at no point was He dominated by it.

The Gospel says that before He began to drive out the sellers, He made a whip of cords. What does this mean? Our Lord sees the situation and has perfect mastery over Himself. He does not explode in anger nor does He immediately begin to expel the merchants. First, He takes the time to make a whip. He must have gone to get the cords; He must have taken a moment to assemble it; perhaps He even tested it first. In all these moments He maintains control over His passions.

But when the time comes to act, He allows this passion to be awakened. As we have said, passions are neither good nor bad in themselves; they depend on our voluntary act—on whether what we are doing is good or bad. And since Our Lord could not will anything evil, this anger was good.

It is sometimes difficult to imagine Christ in this way. Surely we have seen in ourselves or in others the effects of anger: how it can make a person unrecognizable, how it inspires fear, how it sometimes increases physical strength, how one can see the fire of anger in the eyes. If this happens with the anger of a human person, let us imagine that of a divine Person.

Our Lord chose to use this passion in order to carry out the purification of the Temple, so that the work might be more perfect—but, as we have said many times, while maintaining perfect dominion over it.

And this dominion is also seen in the third point proposed by Saint Ignatius. He did not drive out the sellers of doves with the whip, but rather gently asked them to leave.

Why this deference toward the sellers of doves? Because doves were the offerings of the poor, and very likely the sellers themselves were poor. They were not selling doves in the Temple in order to enrich themselves, but in order to be able to eat, and perhaps also to support their families. In short, there was far less guilt in these sellers of doves, and much greater need—and Our Lord knew this perfectly well.

Therefore, for these poor vendors, Our Lord does not use His anger. With complete calm He asks them to withdraw, and they obey Him.

We see then that however great the anger Christ used to expel the other merchants may have been, He was never dominated by it. From one moment to the next He was able to restrain it and calmly ask the sellers of doves to leave.

We can therefore meditate on how Our Lord, being true God and true man, has His passions perfectly under control and how He uses them for good—and how this generally does not happen in us.

Let us think of when, at the beginning of the Exercises, we asked for indifference, and also when we ask for the third degree of humility: at bottom, we are asking that our actions not be determined by our passions.

A person who does not have mastery over his passions will hardly ever act rightly. He will never do the greatest good possible. If he does something good but without dominion over his passions, it will be only partially good. And in general, since the passions belong to the lower part of the soul, they will always drag us down to the lowest things a human being can do.

We can reflect on how many times we have failed to do good because we lacked passion. How many times we have not overcome ourselves for lack of boldness or hope. How many good works done out of love could have been more perfect if we had used our passions.

And at the same time, how many of our sins have had their origin in a disordered passion. This is perhaps most evident in sins of the flesh, but not only there. Perhaps we fell into a lie out of fear, or failed to do good out of despair.

Now comes the task of each person to meditate and see which passions are disordered in our lives: which one is most urgent to bring into order, which one I need to use more, and which one I need to restrain more.

Colloquy

We then conclude the meditation as always with a Hail Mary, an Anima Christi, and an Our Father, asking the Virgin, Our Lord, and the Father to grant us the fruits of this meditation.