

Fr. Romeo Evangelista's Homily
December 15, 2019
Third Sunday of Advent (A)

The 19th-Century great apologist and theologian John Henry Newman went through many a spiritual crisis during his existence of 89 years. He was first hardly a Christian, then discovered the divinity of Christ. At that time he hated the Catholic Church and the papacy. Yet, he loved the Fathers of the Church of the 4th and 5th centuries, and for 30 years had to live with this basic contradiction. Eventually he became an Anglican and was ordained an Anglican priest. Then after 20 years of prayer and study, he converted to the Catholic Church. Two years later he was ordained a Catholic priest and later on was made a Cardinal of the Church. Before dying in 1890, he directed that the following epitaph be placed on his tomb, "From shadows and symbols into the truth" – an epitaph which summarized his spiritual journey. Well, this man, who passed most of his life questioning his beliefs, stated at one point this famous phrase, "A thousand difficulties do not constitute a doubt".

In today's gospel reading we see that John the Baptist has real difficulties concerning Jesus. These do not really constitute a doubt, for John knows without a doubt that Jesus is truly a man of God. After all, he himself testifies, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. How I have seen and testified that he is God's Chosen One". And, from that time on, John predicts that Jesus will exercise God's terrible judgment over Israel and purify the people by separating the good elements from the bad ones. John says of Jesus, "His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear the threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire". And so when Jesus launches on his public life, John expects spiritual fireworks. "How we will have some action!" he thinks. And then he waits. Nothing happens. Jesus does not call down fire from the sky to burn sinners to a crisp. On the contrary, he runs after sinners and practically courts them! And when questioned about his odd behavior, he justifies himself by saying that sinners are spiritually sick people and that his role is to cure them of their sickness.

Then he spends his time telling stories, blessing children, and announcing the nearness of God's kingdom. Where is the fiery judge who was supposed to tackle evil head on and destroy it in a giant confrontation? After a while John is confused.

He has no real doubt as to the holiness of Jesus, but he has difficulties about his role in the scheme of things: is he the Messiah – one of whose titles was “he who is to come”, based on a passage of the prophet Malachi – or merely another precursor like him. Jesus kindly answers John's difficulty by quoting together various passages of the prophet Isaiah that picture the time of salvation as marked by deeds such as the ones he is doing. To John's credit, this response of Jesus clears away his difficulties and he simply readjusts his image of the Messiah. Now he understands that the Messiah is not a judge but primarily a savior. But, for a while there, John had to go through a sort of “night of the faith”

This gospel episode is really consoling for us. Because at one time or another, we all go through dark periods in our faith life. Any intelligent person is bound to ask himself or herself pointed questions about the significance and meaning of a lot of doctrines and beliefs: the Trinity, the Eucharist, the infallibility of the Pope, the afterlife and so on. Unfortunately, some Christians are afraid of raising questions about their faith, wrongly thinking that such questioning is equivalent to entertaining doubts about their faith. Well, it is not. It is merely an honest effort to resolve difficulties, an attempt to deepen one's faith and make it more coherent and reasonable. A thousand difficulties do not constitute a doubt. An objective study of our faith is always rewarding. Like in the case of Newman, it leads us “from shadows and symbols into the truth”. For our faith is based on the truth, and it will not crumble because we dare question it. On the contrary, it will emerge stronger and brighter than before.

As we prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas, let us prepare ourselves by taking the time to reflect and pray on our Catholic faith. It is our most precious treasure, the guiding light of our lives. It is the one that leads us all not only to know more about Jesus but to always have a joyful heart as we wait for His coming into our very own lives.

