

STAYING ON THE PATH

Many times when I speak to the congregation from the pulpit I remember with sadness the faces of many people who used to sit there listening attentively to the Word, many of them who made public decisions of commitment, and as adults were baptized, who for a time experienced the joy of being used by the Lord and serving in different ministries in the church.

During the past couple of decades, we have systematically given people the opportunity three times a year to seal their faith in baptism, this step of obedience and example. The vast majority do so with deep conviction and emotion, bringing joy on earth and in heaven.

We have also seen many remain faithful in spite of winds and seas, following the steps of the Master. Nevertheless, many others in this journey become trapped in the snares of this age, as referred to in the title of a Chilean drama on social themes by Isidora Aguirre, *Those Who Get Stuck on the Way*.

It produces deep sorrow in the pastoral soul when persons suddenly disappear from the House of God. I am going to introduce this new baptismal ceremony with some thought on this matter.

The Apostle Saint Paul explains some historical episodes in the journey of his people that give light on this reality, warning believers how to avoid getting stuck along the way, giving practical advice and spiritual principles so that our walk with God may endure until we reach the goal that awaits us at the end of our days.

Christianity is a journey.

Jesus said: *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life..."*

It would be unusual, inconceivable, unheard of, that suddenly the Way would disappear, be interrupted or cease to exist. So, in essence, the problem is not with the Way but with those who travel on it. The Lord always goes before, opening the way and leaving footprints. But the question is why do we sometimes end up in a dead-end street? What causes us to get lost in the labyrinth of this era? Why do we stop walking with the Lord?

First Corinthians chapter ten tells us:

*"For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers,
that our forefathers were all under the cloud and
that they all passed through the sea.*

²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

³They all ate the same spiritual food

*⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that
accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."*

History tells us that more than six hundred and fifty thousand family heads registered to leave Egypt en route to the Promised Land. Including women and children, it is estimated there were around three million fleeing from the land of the Pharaohs. All of

them, without exception, witnessed the amazing signs and manifestations of the power and wonderful works of God.

Remember that a cloud indicated the way by day. When the cloud stopped, they set up camp. When it moved, they continued their journey. Similarly the column of fire guided them at night. They were all witnesses when the waters of the Nile turned to blood, the plagues of lice, rats, grasshoppers, and darkness that covered all Egypt except the Israelite homes. They all crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and saw water break forth from the rock in the midst of the desert, as well as many other supernatural events, finally managing to escape from captivity to their longed-for liberty.

When they were hungry, they all ate the same food and drank the same spiritual drink. Manna fell for all of them and they all heard the voice of God. They received the Law, the statutes and decree, sculptured in the tables of stone. The impressive manifestations of the Lord were for all of them during that couple of years. They were guided and protected by that cloud and submerged in that sea without water.

*⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them;
their bodies were scattered over the desert.*

Here we have the description of a serious problem and the consequences of their acts. Here we are today, some four hundred persons studying the Scriptures. We are going to end this reflection, this reading, by being receptive to what the Lord wants to say to our hearts through this service or through these words. May what He wants to correct, to encourage, to speak to your life be received in a different way by each one of you.

We all hear but not all of us act on the divine commandments. Many receive the blessings and benefits that come from above, but later do not share the grace. They receive the Word with joy but do not put its counsel into practice nor obey the instructions. They please themselves rather than please God. It is always like this.

One question for you. Are you pleasing God or yourself?

⁶Now these things occurred as examples ...

These past events occurred and were recorded in order that we might always consider and learn from them. They are examples for those who would embrace Christianity during the times of Nero, the Middle Ages, the Industrial Revolution or in these days, for you, for me, for us who belong to the twenty first century.

When we forget where we put our glasses or the keys to the auto, there is chaos, anguish. If man loses his memory it is a disaster. All people agree on the necessity of conserving historic memory, not only to imitate the good examples, but more so to avoid the suffering, the horrors, the errors of these men of former times. Hence the importance of museums and books.

*to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.
⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written:
"The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry."*

Here we can discover a long list of reasons, of red lights, yellow lights, stop signs, warning signs, for the persons who leave the way of Christ.

First there is covetousness. They wanted evil, sensuous, and economic things. They desired in their hearts situations that were not legitimate, that were not permitted. Greed does not only imply the excessive desire for money, but also all these egocentric appetites – strong desires for self gratification, the root of much evil and the destruction of many homes.

The addiction to greed causes some to seek money in casinos, in gambling, perhaps winning once and losing ten times, many times hiding their weakness and laziness behind these actions. Others fall under the generalized sin of social climbing – wanting to have what others have, coveting the ox, the burro, the land of their neighbor – refusing to live with what God allows them to generate, accumulating credit cards and getting entangled in debts until they finally end up losing their dreams and even the beds from their houses through bankruptcy.

A greedy man brings trouble to his family... Proverbs 15:27

Economic stability is established through many years of work and sacrifice. Austerity should be the life-style of the Christian. Those who are in a hurry to get rich are not without blame, say one of the proverbs. This is definitely not the way the Lord plans for His children.

We are warned of the sometimes subtle danger of **idolatry**.

It is very difficult today for a Christian to embrace a tangible idol of wood, plaster or stone, but what many do is enthrone idols in their heart. Idolatry signifies loving or putting something else before God.

The first commandment, and the most important, is to love God above all else. To love Him not only on Sunday mornings when we go to church, but when we are afflicted, when we are in need, when we are happy, when we are ill, when we are unemployed, when we receive good news or bad, at our place of work, in the kitchen, in times of abundance, in scarcity, with all our mind, with our reason, with our feelings, with all our heart, with all our strength and all our will.

Idolatry is the sin we commit when we love other things more than God, when our mind is captivated by the concerns of this world, when our feet walk in other paths, the wide and attractive paths that society offers causing us to stray and removing us from the straight and narrow and leaving God to one side in our list of priorities.

"The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry."

When the Scripture says that *the people sat down to eat and drink*, it is not referring only to the sin of gluttony, of overeating, since obviously in the desert there was not much variety in their food, just one type of grain – manna – which was prepared in various ways. We are unmasking the great generalized idolatries of this world: when the concerns of surviving, when the responsibility that every human being has to look for a roof over his head and his food, are transformed into consumerism, into social climbing, into the concern to guarantee the future by the accumulation of riches, when work, the obtaining of resources, is transformed into an end in itself and not as a means of living, disobeying the scale of values that God has established.

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.*

That is why many people stop walking with God – their minds, hearts and actions give priority to their concern for the things of this world, economic stability and everything concerned with survival.

⁵*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.
You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.*

In the same way, James 5:5 when referring to fattening yourselves, is not speaking of excess fat in the arteries, of little physical exercise or of the need to control your cholesterol, but of feeding your spiritual life on garbage, of being dissolute, living licentiously.

Besides, the verb ‘fattened’ does not suggest the idea of a quick sandwich, a lunch in the middle of the work day to meet the needs of the body, but permanence, time, digression. On the other hand, when one gets up from a long discussion at the table, it is not to serve others, not to give to others nor share what has been received, but to play, for complacency, for satisfaction of the delights and pleasures, to spend what has been gained, giving opportunities for diversion and selfish distractions.

There are many occasions in which we find this existential, materialistic, trivial attitude that is revealed in various Biblical stories: *"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* 1 Cor. 15:32.

A Christian should seek economic liberty. He should be diligent, a good worker, make an effort in everything. He should also get sufficient rest, sleep, but never forget that his priority is serving the Lord.

Is that clear?

This happened as a warning, as the Scripture says, *if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* May we never forget, because Christians can very quickly to be ensnared by the cares of this world and not realize how they are eating and drinking, getting fat, trapped by the business of this world.

That is why the Biblical writer illustrates the implications of the fight to survive: *and rose up to play*. Here are the pleasures, the delights, the attractions, the excuses.

We are very tired, we work so much, we have a lot to do, so we seek spiritual refreshment, rest, not in the way of the Lord where we may recover from the exhaustion that comes from the stress and pressure of work, but in distraction, be it at the beach, in sports, in television, or other things that do not give rest to the soul.

In the end we arrive back from the country, from the snow, we play sports, we watch television, we go to the movies, we spend hours entertaining ourselves and end up more tired, more exhausted, more depressed, and more dissatisfied, because those activities, healthy as they may be, will never and can never replace the spiritual refreshment that the Lord wants to give us through intimate communion with Him.

⁸*We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and
in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.*

Another reason people often trip up is that they transgress the divine principles with regard to their **sexual life**. Not a few stop walking with God precisely for this problem. In just one day twenty-three thousand people fell because of this.

They didn't imagine that Moses would take so long, that he would be gone forty days when he ascended Mount Sinai. Neither did Moses know it; he just left in obedience to God and remained there until he had received the instructions and the tables, then he went down and was confronted with the screams, songs and dances of the people fornicating before the golden calf.

There are thousands and thousands of marriages and families I know by name that have been destroyed for this reason: adultery, coveting the neighbor's husband or wife, getting ensnared in illicit relationships.

Multitudes of young people having received solid instructions in church Sunday Schools, finish high school, enter university, and the customs of the contemporary world, of this sexualized society, cause them to fall into fornication. They become ensnared emotionally and sexually with their partners, without formalizing their relationship, without waiting to construct their marriage, and withdraw from the congregation. They refuse to listen to God's warnings through the Word, and backslide, remaining prostrate on the road.

The consequences of living this way which gives rise to a diversity of experiences, such as promiscuity and abortions surface later and bring traumas and frustrations to their subsequent marriages.

There are also difficulties and temptations for men and women who are separated, who are accustomed to an active sexual life which is suddenly interrupted through separation or divorce. We have seen many of them – consecrated people who have sanctified their lives. Many have come to know the Lord with their homes already destroyed, and as time goes by they neglect their spiritual life, lose their vigor, their restraint, and self control given them by the Holy Spirit of God who dwells in the believer, and they become sexually involved, falling along the way.

They don't want to listen to sermons, so they go to the second floor in the church or sit in the back pews, trying not to commit themselves, until they become cold and adjust to the excuses of their own hearts.

Others fight, fall, repent, weep at the altar, are reconciled with the Lord and return to the way.

This is not just a problem of this century. These attitudes which the Canaanite people practiced were and still are abominable to the Lord, and for that reason God severely punished them.

It is necessary to tell you and to proclaim it a thousand times more: the sexual life was designed by God: it is pure, holy, and completely legitimate within the framework of marriage. Outside of marriage it is a sin.

Illicit sex and the love of money, fruits of the covetous heart, is one of the most effective tools the adversary of God has to trip up Christians.

But there is another more common cause that the text warns us about.

⁹*We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes.*

Sometimes we think that God is slow to help us. The afflictions are prolonged. We are subjected to a diversity of trials. We suffer need. Nevertheless we have to be patient because we know that the things that happen to us have a purpose.

Here is an allusion to an episode related in the book of Numbers when they argue and complain against God and against Moses because of the daily routine.

*they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! **And we detest this miserable food!**"*
Num. 21:5

The manna fell after the dew evaporated, giving daily sustenance. We are told that it was a grain like coriander seed and was pleasant to eat every day because it was prepared in different ways. Besides, it contained a perfect concentration of proteins, vitamins and minerals that man needs. However, they found it loathsome.

Their bodies were not tired. It was their soul that was unhappy, according to the eyewitness who recorded these episodes.

In spite of repeatedly teaching from this pulpit about self sufficiency and the centrality of the Word of God, the necessity of depending day by day on the Lord, some people find divine help for their daily needs insubstantial, insufficient. They forget that prayer the Lord taught us says *give us our **daily** bread*, and they complain when they find scarcity because He gives them bread for only that day and they want more, they want bread for a week, for a month, and do not understand that God wants us to depend on Him constantly. If this were not so, He would have given us another solution, another concept in the model prayer. His lips would have taught us another prayer. Nevertheless, he ratified this foundational truth in the Sermon on the Mount: *Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

What? Are we going to transgress those spiritual principles that are the ABCs of walking with Christ?

It is precisely for not treasuring them in our hearts that we wander from this holy way to which the Lord has called us, and thus encounter the consequences, the discipline and the punishment.

God had to raise up the serpent, as many people died because of the serpents. In order not to die, they had to look to a bronze serpent, symbol of faith in Christ. Those who looked at that serpent were saved, even though they had been poisoned by the serpent, representing sin. *For the wages of sin is death.* Nevertheless, if we lift our eyes in faith to Jesus we have life, we have forgiveness.

¹⁰*And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.*

Murmuring, constant complaints, meaninglessness, displeasure, permanent criticism, questioning that is nestled in the heart and mind of men and does so much damage, bitterness that contaminates, the tongue that as a small spark lights a great fire.

*¹¹These things happened to them as examples and
were written down as warnings for us,*

There are many other things that occurred but not all are written. God in His omniscience chose these and left a record of them.

*as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.
¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*

I trust, dear reader, that the explanation of this eloquent text is engraved in your mind so that you will never be ensnared in those attitudes that brought such dire consequences not only to those who fell, but to all their families, for their innocent children had to wander forty years in the desert as punishment for the unbelief and sin of their parents.

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