

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

July 19, 2020

Homily of Most Reverend Mario Yamanouchi Michiaki

Bishop of the Diocese of Saitama

The parable of weeds (false wheat) in Matthew 13:24-30

The parable of weeds comes after the parable of the sower and just before the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew's Gospel.

The drawing engraved in my memory

I still remember a black and white drawing I saw as a child: While the sower and caretaker of the crop sleeps deeply on the edge of the field, someone appears with a bag around his neck and spreads seeds of weeds in the field of freshly planted wheat. The picture had the words from Matthew 13:25, "while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away."

When did I know about the weeds in a wheat field, at Manucho in Argentina?

When I first prepared a small group of boys for their first communion I was a Salesian novice. I was only 19 years old. The novitiate had novices from Argentina and Paraguay. It was in the middle of a field of more than 250 hectares with about one hundred black and white Holstein dairy cows. At a large part of the land wheat, corn and sunflower were grown depending on the season. During the preparation for the children's first communion, we had the Sunday with the parable of the wheat and the weeds. After the Gospel Reading, the novice master who was a celebrant of the Mass began asking the children of farmers if they knew the weeds that Jesus was talking about. Many of them made gestures that they were not sure what they were; then, the novice master showed a picture that he had drawn, describing the real wheat and its difference with the false wheat. The children then smiled, saying that now they knew what Jesus was saying. They understood the weeds were the false wheat that appeared every year among the wheat fields, but many said that lately false wheat with black ears did not appear so much (this was in the year 1975). Thanks to that explanation of the novice master, I also realized for the first time what Jesus was saying about the weeds was the false wheat (in Japanese it is called "doku mugi").

Some beautiful wheat fields in Saitama Diocese: Tatebayashi

Around Tatebayashi I have seen many wheat fields. At first all look green with flowers and then with the ears they turn yellow, ready to be reaped. Now in this month of July, after the harvest, they become rice fields. As I was driving past the wheat fields at Tatebayashi, I often remembered today's parable and wondered how Jesus would explain this parable today, whether he would add any comment. And then I asked myself what resonances were heard in me in face of the wheat fields. At first sight I found not even a single false wheat but other grasses or small weeds, but surely in Tatebayashi there would be no enemy of the sower who would think of sowing false wheat in some newly planted field.

Before the explanation of this parable in the mouth of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew presents another parable of the very small mustard seed that sprouts and grows into a big tree where birds can make their nests (Mt.13:31-32), followed by another of the yeast that a woman mixes in the flour to make it ferment (Mt.13:33).

Reading Matthew's explanation of the parable of the weeds, we see that neither the disciples nor the crowd understood what Jesus meant. Let's reread Matthew 13:36-43 where Jesus himself explains the parable. I would like to focus on the two aspects.

The attitude of good wheat

The peasants who listened by the lake did not need many explanations to identify the sowers of the weeds: They were the enemies of the kingdom of God, those Pharisees and chief priests who were opposed to Jesus healing a sick person on the sabbath (Mt.12:9-14). The peasants knew the sowers of the weeds were those leaders who reduced the poor to a religious outcast because of their ignorance of the law and the impossibility of fulfilling it.

It is possible that those simple and meek people, the first who turned to the call of the kingdom of God, also discovered the weeds they also carried within themselves and experienced the healing of the whole person through the power of Jesus.

The wheat and the weeds growing together are the expression that proposes a new society Jesus wanted. It is the conviction that the reality of evil will be an inseparable companion of the history of salvation. Dividing humanity between good people to be saved and bad people to be condemned has cost irreparable errors that history still regrets.

Explanation of the weeds (the false wheat)

The explanation of the parable lends itself to many reflections, all of them perhaps foreseen by the evangelist. In the first place, it is an exhortation to tolerance, in the face of the constant risk of every group or religious institution to believe and proclaim itself a chosen group in front of the others easily qualified as "weeds".

The Church has fallen many times throughout her long history into this complex of superiority and condemnation of other religions, of other Christian denominations, and of fellow Catholics who differ from what is established as institutionally or theologically correct.

And above all, the emphasis of the explanation of the parable is on the eschatological judgment where, at the end of time, the supreme judge will make the separation between the true citizens of the kingdom and the weeds or subjects of the Evil One (Mt.13:38).

The criterion of separation, as will be said later in the judgment of the nations (Mt. 25:31-46), will be the option for the poor and needy. Whoever accomplishes this call of the Gospel in his life will be identified as a good seed in the kingdom of God, even if he does not explicitly belong to the Church.

We are now in the time of God's patience. Let us respond to the call to have the attitude of good wheat and live hand in hand with all people in His mercy.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).