**What about if…?**

By Pedro Méndez

What about if Jesus would have asked his disciples the following question at the end of the parable of today’s gospel, instead of giving a verdict? “Who do you think went home justified: the tax collector (publican) or the Pharisee?” This question does not have an easy answer if we consider, on the one hand, that the morality of the publican (an agent of the foreign Roman government), in Jesus’ times, was usually “presumed to be at the lowest level” (Fr. McKenzie, S.J.). On the other hand, the Pharisee of today’s gospel is not a hypocrite: he is behaving according to the Law, i.e. according to what was expected. By trying to read “behind the Pharisee’s words,” one could think that he might be seeking God, because “it is through a good conduct that Yahweh is to be found” (Fr. McKenzie, S.J.) *in the early-stage* of the Old Testament development.

And still, there is *something missing* in the Pharisee’s prayer that disqualifies him to be justified. This “missing part” leads him *to pretend to be innocent by his own good conduct, i.e. his self-righteousness.* Please, let us not judge poorly this Pharisee. As it was said above, longing for righteousness—striving to be innocent by following the Law—was expected and rewarded in the *early-stage* of the Old Testament theological understanding. It seems to me that *what is missing* in the Pharisee’s prayer is his awareness and experience of the development of the word “*righteousness*” (Hb *sedak)* in the *late-stage* of the Old Testament understanding, i.e. *the vindication of one’s innocence is achieved not only under the law; but also by personal salvation.* *This salvation is the work of God who* “*intervenes to establish ‘righteousness,’ [i.e.] ‘salvation’”* (Fr. McKenziie, S.J.). *The publican seems to understand this by asking God to intervene and to reestablish his innocence in the deepest way: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13)*, i.e. *God put your own Self in my misery.*

How important it is for us to ponder, today, this truth in our hearts: *God himself has intervened to reestablish our innocence by putting his own Self in our misery.* For us Christians, God’s intervention is made concrete in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, who reestablishes our innocence by forgiving our sins and giving us new life through His passion, death and resurrection, as well as by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.Particularly, for us Catholics, God’s intervention is made concrete in the intentional celebration of the Sacraments. *When our lives are reestablished to their innocence by God Himself, we are also impelled to be righteous as Jesus is*. This necessarily includes the love of one’s neighbors (1 Jn 3:10), something that was missing in the Pharisee’s attitude.

God is inviting us not only to continue to follow the Law so that we can have good conduct and deeds; but also to allow Him to justify us through our Lord Jesus Christ, especially through the Sacraments, and get rid of all pretention of a self-justification attitude. He is also inviting us to love and understand our neighbors as He does, instead of judging them by using our own good conduct as a parameter.

By telling us a parable Jesus illustrates who is righteous, and by doing so, impels our hearts with a burning desire to pray with the publican: *“O God, be merciful to me a sinner”* (Luke 18:13), i.e. *God, put your own Self in my misery, so that I can put my own self in others’ misery.*