

“It is worthwhile!” (III): Making Time an Ally

Sometimes simply reading a few pages of the life of Jesus enables us to experience with Him the joy and also the weariness of evangelizing. Like that day, for example, when He multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed thousands of people. That same night, He came to the disciples’ boat, walking on the water. And when they finally reached Gennesaret, He cured all the sick people there (cf. *Mt* 14:13-36). For those following Christ, these must have been unforgettable days. His love and power captured the hearts of simple people, those who allowed themselves to be challenged by the new world opening before their eyes. But we also read that this was not true for everyone. Those very days, some religious leaders, apparently concerned about being faithful to God through their traditions, through the fulfillment of a thousand external precepts, ask Jesus: *Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? (Mt 15:2)*. The contrast between the simple and the complicated is great. The Scribes accuse Jesus and his disciples of being unfaithful and careless in their relationship with God. But our Lord takes advantage of this opportunity to highlight the core of a truly faithful life.

Fidelity based on successive conversions

A truly fruitful life of a person God will praise as a “good and faithful servant,” is based neither on words alone, nor on the mere fulfillment of external precepts. For both can be present without true fidelity in the heart. Jesus makes this clear with forceful words from the prophet Isaiah: *for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men’ (Mt 15:6-9)*. When this happens, Benedict XVI said, “religion loses its authentic meaning, which is to live listening to God in order to do his will – which is the truth of our being – and thus we live well, in true freedom; and religion is reduced to the practice of secondary customs.”¹

Surely several of those teachers of the Law, whose lives were now focused on external piety and the zeal to detect the failings of others, had savored in their youth the experience of the true God. Surely back then they had responded with generosity, with true eagerness, to the loving invitation to share in God’s life. We will have considered this fact on more than one occasion, when reading passages of this type. What happened to that first love? Certainly, we couldn’t call those Scribes *faithful* simply because they never abandoned their profession as religious leaders. But then, what is fidelity?

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, 2 September 2012.

When Saint Josemaría reflected on the tie uniting each faithful with the Church, he stressed that it is not simply a matter of “remaining.” It is not simply a question of possessing a baptism certificate, or of attending certain ceremonies: “Christianity is not an easy way of life. It is not enough just to be in the Church, letting the years roll by. In our life, in the life of Christians, our first conversion — that unique moment which each of us remembers, when we clearly understood everything the Lord was asking of us — is certainly very significant. But the later conversions are even more important, and they are increasingly demanding.”² Being faithful has nothing to do with a passive attitude; it is not simply “not being outside.” Rather it requires an ever-renewed response, open to the newness time brings, made up of successive conversions. To build a truly faithful life, we need to remember that we are temporal beings, with our own personal biography: we become who we are over time.

False security of the immediate

The desire to understand better the nature of time has captured the attention of many thinkers and writers, from ancient times to the present day. Also in the cinema, for example, we find many stories that experiment with time: playing with a hypothetical possibility of pausing it, going forward or backward, or even eliminating it. Duration is part of the mystery of human life. “My spirit is enkindled with the desire to understand this most intricate enigma,”³ Augustine confesses. This relationship with time acquires special overtones in our day and age, in a culture that is increasingly accustomed to the immediate. With the possibility of experiencing “right here and now” so many aspects of our existence, from communication to obtaining goods or producing emotions, we can view as strange, and almost inaccessible, everything that requires the passage of time to bear fruit, to display its beauty, to grow and strengthen. And fidelity is precisely one of these realities.

Time can mean opportunity, development, life. But it can also imply delay, fleetingness, tedium. How can we come to see time as an ally, rather than an enemy? How can we come to see time as the channel willed by God so that a happy and fruitful life, filled with companionship and peace, may become a reality for us? Fidelity, since it is not an immediate emotion or an instant prize, is always accompanied by some uncertainty; it is always in the process of becoming true. And this uncertainty is good because it requires of us a constant attitude of being attentive; it leads us to be always creative in love.

Since it is a question of a good that arises between two people, fidelity is always exposed to the temptation of wanting to replace this “positive uncertainty,” which requires time, with quick false securities built by ourselves, and which therefore exclude the other person. We may be tempted to mentally set aside the other person, replaced by an immediate security tailored to our

² Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 57.

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter XXII

own needs. And this is what sometimes happened to the people of Israel in their relationship with God. The Bible shows us the fine line separating fidelity to the true God from idolatry, from putting our faith in what we can build and control with our own hands.

It is impressive to consider the scene of the people so deeply loved by God building a metal figure to worship. *So all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"* (Ex 32:3-4). What could have led the people to such confusion? What made them think they had been abandoned by the One who had actually rescued them and accompanied them on their way? The answer is found on the same pages of Sacred Scripture: they did it because *Moses delayed to come down from the mountain* (Ex 32:1). They were betrayed by their own urgency to hasten God's own times; they let themselves be carried away by the need to have an immediate insurance that was measurable and quantifiable, instead of abandoning themselves to the security of faith.

What, then, is the difference between idolatry and fidelity? We worship false gods when we allow ourselves to be tempted by the search for security; but not a security based on love for another person, on the gift that the other person is, but a security based on self-affirmation: on the security we ourselves can control. These idolatries have found many different expressions down through the centuries that separate us from that episode of the golden calf. Today they also take various forms: people in whom we place expectations that only God can fulfill; our professional career, as a place to win applause; a hobby that robs our loved ones of the time we owe them; or even aspects of our piety that at some point in the past led us to the true God.

In moments of difficulty, when our interior world is shaken and we want to flee from the vertigo of time, when we want to tell ourselves that we matter, that we are not insignificant, we can fall into the temptation of building metal gods. Fidelity then means unmasking those securities made out of cardboard, and putting our trust in God. "Faith is the basis of fidelity. Not vain trust in our human ability, but faith in God, who is the foundation of hope."⁴

Affections help us to know the truth

"Fidelity embraces all the dimensions of our life, for it involves the whole person: intelligence, will, feelings, relationships and memory."⁵ That is why Jesus claims for God not only our words, or the mere fulfillment of certain external precepts, but our heart. *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice*, He says on another occasion, citing the prophet Hosea (cf. Mt 9:13). When asked by a Pharisee about the most important commandment, he replies, again with words from Scripture: *You shall*

⁴ Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 1.

love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment (Mt 22:37-38).

In his catechesis on the Holy Spirit, Saint John Paul II explained how the third Person of the Trinity “penetrates and moves our entire being: intellect, will, emotions and bodily nature, so that our ‘new nature’ will imbue space and time with the newness of the Gospel.”⁶ Our Lord ardently yearns for our happiness, and so He doesn’t want us to be internally “fractured.” He wants us to have a transparent relationship with Him, unifying ever more fully our intelligence, our desires, our emotions, our small and big decisions... All of these aspects of our being should constantly mature over time in a growing unity. To build a relationship that is deeply faithful, this harmonious development of our faculties is essential.

“I also want you to have strong affections,” Saint Josemaría said. “If a person does not put their heart into what they do, it is unpleasant and spiritually deformed.”⁷ At the end of many get-togethers, the founder of Opus Dei blessed “the affections,” the feelings of those who had come to listen to him, because we need to put our hearts into what we do. “As true man, Jesus showed his emotions. He was hurt by the rejection of Jerusalem (cf. *Mt 23:27*) and this moved him to tears (cf. *Lk 19:41*). He was also deeply moved by the sufferings of others (cf. *Mk 6:34*). He felt deeply their grief (cf. *Jn 11:33*), and he wept at the death of a friend (cf. *Jn 11:35*). These examples of his sensitivity showed how much his human heart was open to others.”⁸

Our feelings need to be formed, to mature, to learn; they tell us the truth about ourselves and about our relationships. We need to make this aspect of our being an integral part of our response to God, in order to be able to make decisions that involve our life in time. Here we have to be careful to avoid two extremes: those who deny the value of the affections and emotions, trying to silence them and pretending they don’t exist; and those whose decisions are guided only by their feelings. In both cases, the result is a fragile way of being that usually ends either in the rigidity of those who bind themselves to an idol, or in the disorientation of those who continually change course, letting themselves be led by their most immediate perceptions. Neither case creates fertile ground for joyous fidelity. If we don’t learn to integrate our emotions into a mature stance towards life, fear of the future can arise, the fear of making big decisions, which can undermine the stability of the “yes, I want to” that we once said. In contrast, the maturing of our feelings in union with our intelligence leads to a stable life, in which good things are enjoyed and less good things are borne with serenity.

⁶ Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 21 October 1998.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 2 October 1972.

⁸ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 144.

Awakening our vocation to love

On another of those exhausting days, Jesus rests by the well. A woman who does not belong to the Jewish people sees Him there. Our Lord knows the heart of that Samaritan woman. He knows she has had a turbulent life, that she has suffered a lot, that her heart is deeply wounded. And because He knows her heart, her deep desire for happiness, her longing for true peace, He quickly goes right to the point. *You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly (Jn 4:17-18)*. The Samaritan woman may have resigned herself to the conclusion that fidelity is impossible; she may even have thought that we are not made for such great things.

Perhaps we have had similar experiences, in our own lives or in the lives of people we love. But all this is no obstacle to beginning again in a life of fidelity, which is synonymous with happiness. Jesus speaks to us like this woman who, although she doesn't yet know it, will soon become a disciple and begin a new life: *whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (Jn 4:14)*. Jesus, facing a wounded person with little hope in her life, “addressed her desire for true love, in order to free her from the darkness in her life and bring her to the full joy of the Gospel.”⁹ Aware of the true meaning of the deep vocation to love in the heart of that Samaritan woman, Christ acts decisively and invites her to a new conversion: “It is a call from God's love to our love, in a relationship in which God's faithfulness always steps in first.”¹⁰

⁹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 294.

¹⁰ Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 2.