

“It is worthwhile!” (I): A Force That Conquers Time

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” In this well-known quote, the 17th century English poet John Donne is lying sick in bed when he hears a bell tolling in the distance for the funeral of an unknown person. This leads him to begin reflecting on the interconnection of all men and women. Every person is connected to every other human being in some way. We all share the same destination and are passing rapidly through this world on our way towards God.

A risk and bold gamble

Each of us forms part of a web of relationships that has welcomed and sustains us in this world. And it is precisely in those personal bonds where the need for fidelity arises. Although the term “fidelity” is used in many different contexts, “it is especially relevant,” the Prelate of Opus Dei writes, “to consider fidelity in relationships between people, in its deepest human aspect.”¹ We need each other not only for our material needs, but in order to be happy. “Since man is a social animal, one man naturally owes another whatever is necessary for the preservation of human society,” Saint Thomas Aquinas says, when speaking about the need for mutual trust in society. It is true that the first support we require in life is usually material, simply in order to survive. But we also need each other’s support in order to go forward with hope and trust. Therefore, the saint continues: “It would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another.”²

We sometimes hear that our time is characterized more by the personal search for total autonomy than by the awareness that our actions are linked to those around us; that we prefer the illusion of being totally self-sufficient, rather than admitting our need for others. The attitudes that lead us to isolate ourselves from others, which we all harbor within to a greater or lesser extent, are a first fissure we need to overcome when striving to be faithful.

Although some virtues are not immediately tied to a direct relationship with other people, such as fortitude or temperance, other virtues can exist only in relationships. Fidelity, in particular, is one of these, since it involves a give and take between two persons. First, believing that the other person facing me has good intentions towards me; and secondly, constructing one’s own life with the conviction that that other person loves me now and will continue to do so in the future. In this sense, it is born first in the other person, and doesn’t initially depend on ourselves. It is a virtue

¹ Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 1.

² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 109, art. 3, ad 1.

that overcomes our tendency towards self-sufficiency and invites us to a humble openness that, as Pope Francis said when speaking about fidelity within marriage, “always involves a risk and a bold gamble.”³ Fidelity is a dynamic force that is meant to grow. It is “a force that conquers time, not through rigidity or inertia, but in a creative way,”⁴ and leads to a happy life shared with a person we trust.

Teresa of Jesus and Jesus of Teresa

From what we see daily in the media and from our own experiences, we all realize how urgent it is to rediscover the beauty of fidelity, the human good that it entails and the happiness it brings. We see clearly the need to rediscover it in marriage, in the family, in people’s relationship with God and, in general, in any type of personal relationship.⁵ To bring this about we rely, first of all, on the help of our Lord. And then also on the yearning for a creative fidelity that we detect in so many people, also in ourselves – “a fidelity that is a free response to God’s grace, lived out with joy and also with good humor.”⁶ The human heart is not satisfied with an absolutely autonomous life, lived alone, since “no human life is ever isolated. It is bound up with other lives. No man or woman is a single verse; we all make up one divine poem.”⁷

At times all this can seem almost like an unattainable dream, something beyond our strength. And in a sense it is, since each of us, if we rely only on ourselves, is weak, with feet of clay; moreover, fidelity can only arise between two persons. But it is precisely the experience of our own weakness that prevents us from relying solely on our own good wishes or talents. Saint Paul’s words can help us here: *I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Phil 4:13)*. God, who offers us his love freely before we can even ask for it, and who never stops loving us no matter what, gives Himself to us as the source of our fidelity to Him and to other people.

Nevertheless, if we think about the experience of God’s faithfulness in our own life and in the lives of so many others, we could say that yes we can trust ourselves. How often, perhaps especially in difficult moments, we remember the trust our Lord has shown us, beginning with our birth (the very fact that we are alive is his choice), and then our baptism and all the times that God has shown us his love, his closeness and his light on our path. Although God’s choice has been eternal, his trust placed in us is revealed in our lives over time, and we grow constantly in our awareness and appreciation for that privilege.

³ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia*, no. 132.

⁴ Guillaume Derville, “On the Feast of Saint Joseph: A Renewed Faithfulness,” on opusdei.org.

⁵ “Loyalty” is often viewed as similar to “fidelity.” However, loyalty does not necessarily stem from trust based on love for another person, but from aspects related to justice. That is why the virtue of loyalty does not always refer to another person, but rather to ideas, values or institutions.

⁶ Monsignor Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 4.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 111.

But when, in contrast, we try to be faithful only through our own strength, when we lose sight of the relationship our fidelity is based on, we stop experiencing God's trust in us. And we forget about all the gifts we have received, like those vinedressers who forgot they were working only because the owner went out first to look for them, and not because of their own merits (cf. *Mt* 21:33-46). We focus, instead, on how tiring and insufficient our own efforts are. Little by little complaints can arise, brief escapes and unfaithfulness in small things. We can even "get used to" being close to our Lord, and simply seek to calm our conscience, falling into lukewarmness. The novelty of the other person is lost, the surprise of his face, the creativity that a personal relationship always requires.

Ultimately, we can be faithful because God trusts us. This is how the saints have been faithful. Biographers recount that one day Saint Teresa of Avila, when about to go up the stairs in the convent of the Incarnation, met a beautiful child who smiled at her. She asked him: "Who are you?" The boy responded with another question: "And who are you?" The saint, amazed, replied: "I am Teresa of Jesus." And the boy, with a smile, told her: "Well, I am Jesus of Teresa." It is in a relationship like this, between two people, that fidelity arises, including our own relationship with God: "A Christian can never be a lonely person, since we live in continual contact with God, who is both near us and in heaven."⁸

Fidelity of God's children

"The virtue of fidelity is deeply linked to the supernatural gift of faith; it becomes the expression of that steadfastness proper to those who have made God the foundation of their entire lives," Benedict XVI said. And he continued: "In faith we find the sole guarantee of our standing firm (cf. *Is* 7:9); only on this foundation can we in turn be truly faithful."⁹ Seeing God's faithfulness, which precedes the fidelity we want for ourselves, we can consider three ways we can strengthen our own fidelity: experiencing the joy of belonging to the Father, in Christ, as free persons; deepening ever more fully our personal identification with his will, which is also personal, and which is always a gift to us; and living better the fraternal relationships that arise among those who want to be faithful.

First, we belong to God – not as something inert, but as living beings, as free persons, capable of both loving and opening ourselves to the love of another person. God has given Himself to us personally, in his Trinitarian love. Therefore we want to come to know our Lord and ourselves ever better, so as to enjoy, suffer, work and relate to others steeped in our divine filiation. As in the dream of Jacob's ladder, according to the interpretation of Saint John of the Cross, the more we climb in our knowledge and love of God, the more we descend into the depths of our own

⁸ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 116.

⁹ Benedict XVI, Speech, 11 June 2012.

soul.¹⁰ Coming to know God ever better brings us closer to ourselves, since we are the work of his hand; and, at the same time, getting to know his creation better, especially in ourselves, can fill us with wonder and love for the Creator. That is why we gladly follow Saint Josemaría's advice in the last point of *The Way*: "Fall in love, and you won't leave him,"¹¹ which Blessed Alvaro glossed by turning it around: "Don't leave him, and you will fall in love."¹² Our desire to follow Him closely, sometimes going against the grain, is enough for our Lord to instill in us a renewed and more ardent love for Him.

Secondly, we know that loving God is, in reality, a path of identifying ourselves with Christ, of letting his trust bear fruit in us. However, to achieve this we also need his help. Indeed, no one can call God Father, or consider themselves his son or daughter, unless one is in Christ. But although we all share in the same life of Jesus, each of us does so in a personal way. God has granted each of us particular talents and virtues, a unique personality, a way of seeing the world that is ours alone. Therefore each one's fidelity to God is not something uniform, as though stamped from a mold; rather it is personal and unique, forged in each one's life. Hence it makes no sense to compare ourselves with anyone else, or feel judged by anyone based on fixed schemes. "Fidelity is being faithful to a commitment of love, and it is love for God that is the ultimate meaning of freedom ... *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt 11:29-30).*"¹³

Finally, as God's children, we are all brothers and sisters. And as part of his ordinary providence (the way in which He cares for us), we all share equally in his divine paternity: we all "lend a helping hand" to God by being good fathers and good mothers for the others. No one can write their own life alone; rather we are co-authors with those alongside us. We are the protagonists in the history of our own life, and we form part, at the same time, of the histories of the others, in the great book of life. Thus we realize that the fidelity of those around us depends on our own fidelity. And vice versa: to counteract our own weakness, we have the strength of the others. This attention and care should be directed, first of all, to those in our own family, both natural and supernatural, and then extended to the other members of the Church. And since "out of a hundred souls we are interested in a hundred,"¹⁴ we are concerned about the holiness of everyone God places on our path. This is the best way to ensure our own fidelity, with both a "nut and locknut."

¹⁰ Cf. Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II, 8, 5.

¹¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 999.

¹² Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 1992, no. 50.

¹³ Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 8.

¹⁴ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 9.