

## THE LIFE OF JESUS, AN EVER-OPEN CONVERSATION

*What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? (Lk 13:18).* This is a question that Jesus asks before telling several parables. Perhaps it reflects something He himself has often thought about, at least whenever He was trying to convey his message in a new environment. We too may want to ask ourselves frequently: how can we bear witness to God's love here and now, in this specific setting? What is the best way to share Christ's light in each epoch in history, with these specific people with their own way of seeing the world?

If we approach the Gospel with this key, we see our Lord's interest in the culture that shaped the world around Him. He once used a popular song to stir the hearts of those listening to Him (cf. *Mt 11:16-17*). He makes use of a recent event everyone was talking about – the accidental fall of a tower in which eighteen people died – to help his listeners form a clearer idea of God (cf. *Lk 13:4*). Moreover, Jesus is always open to all kinds of questions, even from people who seem hostile to his person or his preaching. In spreading his message, He tries to avoid sterile polemics, and seeks to fill a void, a hunger in people's hearts. And this openness doesn't change even when He knows that these questions are not made in good faith (cf. *Mt 22:15-22; Mk 12:13; Lk 20:20*).

On not a few occasions, we also see Him spending time in intimate conversation with people to help clarify their ideas, such as his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus (cf. *Jn 3*), the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (cf. *Jn 4*) and with the disciples from Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*), and in so many walks taken with his disciples. Jesus knows that his words, so clear in themselves, can often be misunderstood, filtered through one's personal experiences, lifestyle and human limitations.

Since faith is “the encounter with an event, with a Person,”<sup>1</sup> looking carefully at these attitudes of Christ can be a good way to learn how to better communicate to others the encounter with Him that has transformed our own lives. For as Saint Josemaría said, “Jesus' entire life is nothing else than a marvelous dialogue, my children, a wonderful conversation with men.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Every epoch in history is unique and good for God**

Each epoch is shaped by a culture, by shared convictions and yearnings. And hence evangelization takes on different accents over time. Benedict XVI pointed out that often “Christians are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 1

<sup>2</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letters 37*, no. 7.

commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society.” However, he continued, “not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied. Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case.”<sup>3</sup>

Benedict XVI didn’t intend to present a pessimistic view of the world today. Every epoch is good for God, since He can draw good out of any situation. He was simply trying to highlight the new situation we face for announcing Jesus’ message. Many people today haven’t heard his message clearly or think what they have heard is irrelevant; they haven’t heard the Good News of God’s love for all men and women. This situation shows us the need to find new and more effective ways to enkindle the imagination and heart of those around us. It is true that one can still point to many cultural and artistic reflections of the Christian spirit. But often these have no apparent connection with the Person who gave rise to them or to God’s merciful plans for each human being. A marvelous work of art or the defense of a basic human right can seem like the beautiful remains of a once great message that is now almost unknown.

The fact that the Christian faith is no longer “a self-evident presupposition for life in society” makes the mission of sharing the Gospel more challenging, and even more beautiful. Taking nothing for granted about people’s knowledge of the faith, we will have to explain the core of Jesus’ message: uncovering the roots of the new life He offers us and pointing to what is most important. At times, the situation will be similar to that of the first Christians, who announced a new message aimed at bringing hope to hearts left unsatisfied by the philosophies of the day. Therefore, like Jesus, we want to find the best way to talk about the Kingdom of God with those around us. “How beautiful it is,” says Pope Francis, “when people select their words and actions with care, striving to avoid misunderstandings, to heal wounded memories and to build peace and harmony.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Expressing the Christian message as a symphony**

The lack of “a unitary cultural matrix” today is the starting point that we need to keep in mind when trying to bring Christ’s message to those around us. In striving to make the Church’s dogmatic and moral teachings known, we first need to mark out clearly the guiding framework that gives them meaning, the heart that gives them life. It shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus gave priority to the commandment to love God and neighbor over everything else in his message (cf. *Mt* 22:37-39). This is what gives order and harmony to his teachings, and makes them understandable. Something similar happens when a person is trying to appreciate a great painting; one doesn’t focus first on a small part of the painting but rather on the composition of the whole,

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Porta fidei*, no. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, Message for the 50th World Communications Day, 24 January 2016.

trying to grasp it in its entirety. Similarly, if the Christian proclamation were reduced to one or two specific topics, there would be the risk of never exhibiting the authentic and integral picture, which gives meaning and beauty to each of its elements.

Hence the richness of the Christian message needs to be expressed as a “symphony,” making resonate in tandem both the harmonious guidance of the entire orchestra and the virtuosity of each particular instrument. If a trumpet bursts out over the violins or the percussion that marks the rhythm, it may be able to produce a melody appreciated by specialists, but it will fail to excite the varied crowd that fills the room. “Each truth is better understood when related to the harmonious totality of the Christian message; in this context all of the truths are important and illumine one another.”<sup>5</sup> With regard to this reciprocal enlightenment, and echoing the Second Vatican Council, the Pope has underlined that the different aspects of the Christian proclamation are not all equal in importance; not all express with equal intensity the heart of the Gospel, the *kerygma*<sup>6</sup>: “All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.”<sup>7</sup>

Along the same lines, Saint John Paul II saw, in the rich young man’s question to Jesus about how to attain eternal life (cf. *Mt* 19:16), something more than a doubt about which rules to follow, or a search for partial solutions. The restlessness in this young man’s heart gave rise to a question “about the full meaning of life,”<sup>8</sup> and reflected his experience of “the echo of a call from God.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the guiding framework is clearly marked out, the great proclamation within which all other Christian truths can be fully understood: the love of a merciful God who, in Christ Jesus, seeks out all men and women. The isolated instruments – one or another specific doctrinal point – will only unite harmoniously with the melody if all the sounds of the orchestra, especially the most important ones, are expressed in a symphonic way.

In short, it is important to remember that, when bearing witness to our faith, the music the other person listens to, understands and internalizes counts more than what we think we have said in a satisfactory way. *Who do men say that the Son of man is?* Jesus asks. *But who do you say that I am?* (*Mt* 16:13.15). Our Lord wants to clarify, and above all He wants his disciples to do so, how far they have come in knowing their Master.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 39.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word *kerygma*, which means announcement or proclamation, is often used for the announcement of the Christian message.

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## **A lot of shared ground**

Christ has just crossed the Jordan, from Galilee to Judea. The fame of his preaching and miracles has spread like wildfire, and a large crowd soon forms around Him. Among them are a good number of Pharisees, scholars of the law. One of them right away asks Him a question about divorce. Jesus explains the indissolubility of marriage, citing words from Genesis. Although we don't know to what extent this explanation convinces them, we do see that even his own disciples, initially more willing to accept his teachings, are disconcerted: *If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry* (Mt 19:10). Something similar happens when Christ announces, this time to the Sadducees, the future resurrection of our bodies, after being presented with a complicated hypothetical case that employs the words of Moses (cf. Mt 22:23-33).

In each epoch of history, people may find it harder to understand certain points of the Church's teachings, due to the prevailing culture. The solution is not to pretend that these don't exist, since that would mean jeopardizing the happiness of those around us. The Church's teachings foster our true good and that is why we need them. True service to others will consist rather in trying to make them understandable. Realizing their situation, we need to find effective ways to explain the Church's teachings, leading people little by little to the fulness of the truth. To do so, it can be helpful to rely on elements that others already accept from the Christian proclamation, building on shared ground. In the two cases above, Jesus made use of passages from Scripture that his interlocutors already accepted as revealed by God. Also in our day and age, many points of the Christian message are shared with others: love and search for the truth, defending religious freedom, fighting against any form of slavery and poverty, the hunger for peace, caring for the environment, a special concern for people with disabilities, etc.

The greater the difficulties in proclaiming the Christian message, the more we need to stress its essential components and make use of shared convictions. The truth is like a precious stone: if we throw it in someone's face it can hurt them. But if we place it gently in their hands, sharing our time and life with them, it will be able to exercise a divine attraction. That is why friendship is the best setting for communicating the faith in a changing world marked by many different beliefs and outlooks. Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri saw her apostolic mission in this way. She was excited about "building bridges and offering her friendship to all kinds of people: people far from the faith, people from very different countries and a great variety of ages."<sup>10</sup>

## **Transforming conflicts into links**

*'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'* (Lk 4:10-11). These words from Psalm 91 are manipulated by the devil to put Jesus to the test in the desert. The tempter is trying to provoke our

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<sup>10</sup> Fernando Ocariz, Homily at the Mass of Thanksgiving for her Beatification, 19 May 2019.

Lord to rise above earthly means and limitations and show forth his divine power. Saint Thomas Aquinas sees in this a temptation to vainglory that those who have already embarked on the Christian path can encounter.<sup>11</sup> Isn't it true that sometimes we would like to find no "stones" in our path as apostles and see the Good News spread throughout the world as an irresistible "angelic melody"?

We know very well that Christianity is not summed up in a series of concepts, but rather consists above all in the encounter with Jesus. Nevertheless, we may sometimes be tempted to reduce the offer of this encounter to the satisfaction of winning a dispute, to always having the best arguments against the doubts of others. But what good does it do to "win" an argument if we lose the other person? In that case we would simply be "passing by" each other, like the Levite and the priest in the parable, who passed by the side of the person lying injured on the road (cf. *Lk* 10:31-32). Being a Good Samaritan means instead "the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process."<sup>12</sup> Saint Josemaría, at the end of his life, used to say: "God has shown so much patience with me."<sup>13</sup> And there he found the reason to be very patient with others.

Hence it is also important to distinguish the different contexts in which we dialogue with others. It is one thing to defend certain values in the process of making laws or when intervening in debates about government policies, but it is quite another to seek to share the joy of one's faith with a friend. The social media, however, have often led to confusing these different contexts, and the public debate can end up invading the intimate personal sphere, where disagreements should be overcome by mutual affection. "Anyone who resorts to violence to defend their ideas," said the founder of Opus Dei, "shows by this very fact that they aren't in the right." And he concluded: "Never argue."<sup>14</sup> In polarized situations – the "disease" of a healthy and normal pluralism – sometimes the best move is to abandon terrain that has become a battlefield, in order to try first to strengthen the relationship rather than perhaps undermine it forever. In a polarized and divisive environment where contact with those who think differently is difficult, the conversation can cease and legitimate differences little by little can lead to a more or less covert contempt, or even an open break. All this is profoundly opposed to the Christian spirit.

When Jesus first announced that He is the long-awaited Messiah, He met with strong opposition: *When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong (Lk 4:28-29).* The climax of the conflict comes very quickly, and even includes the threat of death. Jesus realized that the situation couldn't be resolved simply by his words. So surprisingly He decided to walk away quietly, and passed through their

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 41, a. 4, r.

<sup>12</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 227.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from a family reunion, 10 July 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from a family reunion, 7 April 1968.

midst. Like Christ here, often the best thing will be to opt for a silence that opens the way for the work of the Holy Spirit. God's strength is not noisy; it bears fruit in silence and at the appointed time.

### **Communicating the Gospel effectively**

We should never tire of contemplating Jesus' responses to those who open their hearts to Him, who seek light and peace in Him. Jesus announces to the Samaritan woman the living water that will quench her deepest thirst (cf. *Jn* 4:10). He helps Nicodemus realize that in order to enter the Kingdom of God he has to be born anew, this time from the Spirit (cf. *Jn* 3:5). And He explains to the disciples from Emmaus how the prophets had announced from ancient times everything that the Messiah would have to endure (cf. *Lk* 24:26-27). It is good to realize that in none of these cases does He simply present the content of the faith. In all three passages, along with the doctrinal content, we see other dimensions of the truth brought to light by these conversations, which perhaps are less perceptible but just as important: the truth about how greatly our Lord values these personal relationships; about who Christ himself is and who they truly are. It is the truth of the encounter, the truth as the inspiration of a bond that is meant to last.

Jesus is not in a hurry. He does not send people away. He welcomes them at any hour and accompanies them on their way. Jesus communicates much more than what his words alone say. He helps each one, simply by his presence, to sense that they are a child of God. This is the main truth that people take away after an encounter with Him. Our challenge is to imbue every aspect of our witness – the content of the faith, the relationship of friendship, and even our way of being and speaking – with the spirit of the Gospel: “What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God's compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Francis, Message for the 50th World Communications Day, 24 January 2016.