

PETER AT THE HELM, GOD IN THE BOAT

Another exhausting day is ending for Jesus. So many people came to hear him that he had to speak from the boat of one of his disciples. He told the crowd many parables: the sower, the lighted lamp, the mustard seed... Afterwards, as the people began to return home, Jesus and his disciples set out for the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias, perhaps aboard the same boat. A gentle breeze is blowing. Jesus finds a cushion in the stern and peacefully falls asleep. He has full confidence in the expert hands of his apostles in crossing the lake.

But soon the sea becomes agitated. The breeze gradually turns into a strong wind and we witness a new “parable,” preached not with words but with the events that unfold. A great storm threatens to shipwreck the boat (cf. *Mk* 4:37). This is not uncommon on the lake, since it is bordered by mountains on the north and is located in a depression two hundred meters below sea level. These storms usually occur when evening is falling and the wind begins to blow furiously from the west, stirring up the water.

On board, not on shore

Many Church fathers have seen an image of the Church in the boat tossed about by the wind and the waves. “The sea symbolizes this life and the instability of the visible world; the storm points to every kind of trial or difficulty that oppresses human beings. The boat, in turn, represents the Church, built on Christ and steered by the Apostles.”¹ In his final general audience, after almost eight years as Peter’s successor, Benedict XVI confided that he had experienced, along with days of sunshine and gentle breezes, also other times of stormy winds. “But I have always known that the Lord is in that boat, and I have always known that the barque of the Church is not mine but his. And the Lord does not let it sink; it is he who guides it, certainly also through those whom he has chosen, because he so wished.”²

This certainty, which is part of the shadow-filled light of our faith, leads us not to watch the storm from the shore, as though it were something foreign to us. We too are fishermen, co-workers of Peter and the apostles. We are responsible for helping all those who come on board the boat, each from our own place, supporting the Pope who is at the helm.

Just two weeks after that final audience of his predecessor, Pope Francis reminded us that he needs us, which he has often reiterated since then: “Now I would like to give you the blessing. But first, I ask you for a favor. Before the bishop blesses his people, I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me. I ask for the prayer of the people who ask for the blessing for their bishop. Let us silently pray this prayer of yours for me.”³ This is what Saint Josemaría also taught us. From very early on, he was eager that all the people in Opus Dei and those who, in one way or another, come close to the warmth of this family, would

¹ Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 7 August 2011.

² Benedict XVI, *Audience*, 27 February 2013.

³ Francis, *Apostolic Blessing Urbi et orbi*, 13 March 2013.

pray daily for the Pope, specifically asking God to watch over him, encourage him, make him happy and give him strength amid the storms.⁴

Love for the Pope, a gift we receive

On the evening of 23 June 1946, Saint Josemaría finally had reached Rome after several adventures, including another storm at sea, this time in the Mediterranean. The apartment his children had rented had a small terrace overlooking Piazza Città Leonina. From there they could see the windows of the rooms where Pope Pius XII lived. The founder of Opus Dei spent the whole night awake, praying for the Church and the Roman Pontiff. Years later, he said that some churchmen had made fun of this filial gesture, perhaps considering it naive or useless: “They laughed at me. At first, that gossip made me suffer. Later, a less Spanish love – a love that springs from enthusiasm – for the Roman Pontiff has taken root in my heart. But it is much firmer because it is born from reflection: it is more theological, and therefore deeper.”⁵

Love for the Holy Father, “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and the faithful,”⁶ needs to gradually mature over the years. At the beginning, it can be nourished by a human enthusiasm that, over time, becomes “more theological,” more aware of its reasons, its importance and supernatural origin, difficult to explain with only human parameters.

Saint Josemaría lived under the guidance of various Popes. When he was little, Saint Pius X governed the Church, and to him he owed the grace of receiving his First Communion at quite a young age. Later, when he decided to become a priest, the Pope was Benedict XV. Opus Dei was born during the pontificate of Pius XI and received definitive approval from Venerable Pius XII, who was the first Pope Saint Josemaría met personally. Saint John XXIII received him several times, showing him paternal affection. And after arriving in Rome in 1946, “the first words of kindness and affection” he heard were from Saint Paul VI (then Monsignor Montini).⁷ In *The Way*, the founder of Opus Dei points to a gift God had given him in his youth and that would be a common thread during all these pontificates: “Thank you, my God, for the love for the Pope you have placed in my heart.”⁸

Those words suggest to us that love for the Roman Pontiff is something we do not necessarily control with our willpower, with a purely theoretical conviction or a natural sympathy. Through this short prayer Saint Josemaría gives thanks for this love as a gift from God, as something received freely. This helps us understand better what he learned from his first Roman night: to love the Pope with a love received from God, which is not at the mercy of storms, and does not depend on a greater or lesser personal affinity. On the morning of the day he died, the founder of Opus Dei asked a person close to Paul VI to convey the following message to him: “For years, I have offered the Holy Mass for the Church and for the Pope. You

⁴ Cf. *Preces* of Opus Dei, with the traditional prayer *Oremus pro Pontifice*.

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Letter 17*, no. 19.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 23.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 46.

⁸ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 573.

can assure him – because you have heard me say it many times – that I have offered my life to our Lord for the Pope, whoever he may be.”⁹

Saint Josemaría, Saint Catherine, Saint Jerome...

In the central offices of Opus Dei in Rome, a small silver chest holds a relic of Saint Catherine of Siena. On the enamel of the urn an inscription in Latin is engraved, which can be translated: “She loved God’s Church and the Roman Pontiff with deeds and in truth.” The 14th-century saint wrote in one of her letters, referring to the Pope: “Whatever we do to him, we do to Christ in heaven, whether it be reverence, or insults.”¹⁰ And in another letter she begged: “Humbly would I have us rest our head with love and affection upon the lap of Christ in heaven, and of Christ on earth, who takes his place, out of reverence for the Blood of Christ, of which he holds the keys.”¹¹

This reverence for the figure of the Roman Pontiff – besieged, in that century, by complicated storms – enabled Saint Catherine to share in the immense responsibility that weighs on the shoulders of every Pope, and spurred her to an intense prayer of intercession for them. Saint Josemaría, who was well acquainted with Saint Catherine of Siena’s writings, once said: “I would cut out my tongue a thousand times with my teeth and spit it away, before uttering the slightest murmuring against the one I love most on earth, after our Lord and Holy Mary. The one who is, as I like to say, repeating Saint Catherine’s words, *il dolce Cristo in terra*, the sweet Christ on earth.”¹² This attitude is the polar opposite of speaking negatively in public about the Pope or undermining trust in him, not even when some specific personal criteria are not shared. If the latter were to happen, we need to render at least “religious assent of the understanding and the will”¹³ to his teachings.

Testimonies to union with the Pope in the lives of the saints are as numerous as the saints themselves. To mention just one more example (a person who lived almost a thousand years before the saint of Siena), we can reflect on the words Saint Jerome addressed to Pope Saint Damasus, in his lapidary and fiery style: “As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but your blessedness, that is with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the church is built! This is the house where alone the Paschal Lamb can be rightly eaten. This is the ark of Noah, and he who is not found in it shall perish when the flood prevails.”¹⁴

Finally, we could say that the Church's boat has a guidance system based on three sources. First, Christ who, although he sometimes seems to sleep, is present in each part and in each crew member. Then, Mary, a star who constantly illumines us, even when the waves are huge and threaten to shipwreck us. And finally, Peter, who is at the helm following the command of Jesus

⁹ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Forty Years With a Saint*, 2018.

¹⁰ Saint Catherine of Siena, *Letter 207*, I, 436.

¹¹ Saint Catherine of Siena, *Letter 28*, I, 549.

¹² Saint Josemaría, *Letter 17*, no. 53.

¹³ Code of Canon Law, no. 752. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 892.

¹⁴ Saint Jerome, Letter to Pope Damasus, 2.

himself. “Christ. Mary. The Pope. Haven’t we just stated, in three words, the loves that make up the entire Catholic faith?”¹⁵

Praying amid the wind and the waves

When meditating on the storm on Lake Tiberias, Saint Augustine exhorted those listening to him to trust in the one who truly governs not only the boat, but the entire world: “Imitate the winds then, and the sea; obey the Creator. At Christ’s command the sea giveth ear; and art thou deaf? The sea heareth, and the wind ceaseth: and dost thou still blow on? ‘I say, I do, I think that...’ What is all this, but to be blowing on, and to be unwilling to stop in obedience to the word of Christ? Let not the wave master you in this troubled state of your heart.”¹⁶

Nothing escapes God’s loving providence: neither the roaring winds nor the raging waves. “*Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?* Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things.”¹⁷

But for this conviction to take root in us, we need to grow in our contemplative life, a life of prayer that is open to God’s actions, so often surprising to us. We need to let go of the temptation to try to take hold of the helm ourselves. Saint Josemaria insisted: “Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a wonderful passion, for in him we see Christ. If we talk and listen to our Lord in prayer, we will go forward with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even when faced with events we do not understand, or which produce suffering or sorrow.”¹⁸

Even Jesus sleeping in the boat is redemptive. This apparent inactivity is how he often acts. He appeals to our freedom, encouraging us to take part in the marvelous mission of bringing the infinite love of his Father to all men and women. His heart is always attentive. “The guardian of Israel does not slumber nor sleep” (*Ps 121:4*). Sometimes we fail to understand his times and ways – his patience. But we can always be sure that, in the end, “while he calmed the storm on the sea, he also calmed the tempest in souls.”¹⁹

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¹⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Instruction on the Supernatural Spirit of the Work*, no. 31.

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *Sermon 63*, no. 3.

¹⁷ Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic*, 27 March 2020.

¹⁸ Saint Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, no. 13.

¹⁹ Saint Cyril, in *Catena Aurea*, *Lk 8:22-25*.