

## VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (XIV): To Give Light, True Words

*Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile (Jn 1:47).* Jesus' praise for Nathanael could also be applied to Himself by all those listening to Him. The Master spoke only true words, and deeply lived by them. In Jesus' words, we always see his burning desire to give us the best that He has. And his love leads Him to always speak with transparency, eager to give us his truth and his mercy. That is why, then as now, his life and testimony are so powerful, although sometimes they can also shock or disconcert people.

### Without fearing the truth

We see this power of the Master's words in the 6th chapter of Saint John's gospel. Shortly after the crowd has been left amazed by the multiplication of a few loaves and fish that enables everyone to eat their fill, we see Him determined to reveal an important truth. Jesus well knows that the thousands of people who have followed Him there will have a hard time understanding it. But He refuses to leave out a single word, or water down the message to make it more acceptable: *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life (Jn 6:54)*. Almost everyone there decides to leave, because his words are so disconcerting: *This is a hard saying; who can listen to it? (Jn 6,60)*.

At first sight, his "excessive" audacity causes Him to lose more than five thousand "followers," to employ social media language. But for the Master, this apparent failure is short-lived: it neither restrains nor conditions Him. So much so that, on seeing the discouragement and disappointment on the faces of the twelve, He asks them: *Do you also wish to go away? (Jn 6:67)*. Paradoxically, to stay with us Jesus prefers to pay the price of loneliness. To ensure a temporary success, He isn't willing to fail to nourish and show his love for us with the Eucharistic bread down through the centuries. For Jesus, as for his Church, the truth is love for mankind. He knows how essential it is to manifest Himself in an authentic way, since He wants *all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tim 2:4). And the truth often hurts. "The truth isn't cheap. It is demanding, and it burns," Joseph Ratzinger once said. "Jesus' message also includes the challenge we see in that struggle with his contemporaries ... Whoever doesn't want to be burned, whoever is unwilling to accept this, won't draw close to Him either."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus says what He has to say, how He has to say it, when He has to say it. A few days before being sentenced to death by those listening to Him in the Temple of Jerusalem, after having denounced them before the people as *blind guides, hypocrites ... whitewashed tombs* (cf. Mt 23:24-27), He rebukes them, also publicly: *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape*

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World*, Barcelona 2011, pp. 209-211.

*being sentenced to hell?* (Mt 23:33). These words are quite striking. Jesus doesn't speak this harshly with those who are in error, or with sinners. Rather He does so with those who, believing themselves to be righteous, prevent others from approaching God (Mt 23:13). He knows perfectly well that his words stir up the antipathy of those who are already plotting to kill Him. But that doesn't matter to Him. Not even the fear that his disciples could become indirect victims of his burning words restrains Him. Love for the truth and for all men and women takes precedence over this earthly life. Saint Josemaría sums up this attitude of Jesus very clearly: "Don't be afraid of the truth, even though the truth may mean your death."<sup>2</sup> With those strong and harsh words addressed to the Pharisees, Jesus is defending from error and lies the small flock that as the years go by (He already knows it) will also suffer martyrdom out of love for God and in defense of the same truth. For the truth is the first and last loving word of the Christian martyrs.

Many scenes in the life of our Lord show us clearly his love for the truth. As He himself stated in his trial before Pilate, *For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth* (Jn 18:37). And we Christians too have been baptized and confirmed to be witnesses to the One who is *the Way, the Truth and the Life* (Jn 14:6), who refuse to subject reality to personal interests or ideologies. The word "martyr" in fact means witness. Although God does not call all Christians to shed their blood for the faith, He does expect us to be willing to give up our lives, drop by drop, for that faith. He asks us to be "martyrs without spectacle," with "the martyrdom of those who spend their years working with no other aim than to serve the Church and souls, and who grow old smiling, all the while passing unnoticed."<sup>3</sup> For ultimately, "our existence in this world – both of persons and of society – is only important as a stage towards eternity. That is why earthly life is only relatively important, and is not an absolute good. What matters absolutely is that you be happy, that you be saved."<sup>4</sup>

### **We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard**

We see a beautiful reflection of the courageous attitude of Jesus in his first disciples. After the fire of Pentecost, the apostles' bold preaching, who now speak without fear, amazes the crowds. They have learned this from the Master. In the Acts of the Apostles, we see Peter and John brought before the Sanhedrin for publicly exclaiming the truth of our Lord's resurrection, and for defending the healing of a lame man. After a night spent in prison, they are subjected to an interrogation, where that healed man is also present. The elders and scribes ask them: *By what power or by what name did you do this?* (Acts 4:7). Peter gives a clear and complete response. Not even a hint remains of the cowardice that led him to lie and deny our Lord during the dark night of the Passion: *Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is*

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, 7.4.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letters*, June 1973, no. 12.

*standing before you well* (Acts 4:10). The boldness with which Peter and John speak leaves them dumbfounded. They don't know what to do except to order them not to teach or do anything in Jesus' Name again. And Peter and John reply: *Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard* (Acts 4:19-20).

These examples from the life of Jesus and the first disciples provide us with clear guidelines on how to proclaim Christ's truth. A false prudence could lead us to make complacent speeches, or to keep quiet when we should speak. Of course, evangelizing does not mean always entering into conflict, but neither does it involve always avoiding it, making compromises with the truth. Saint Josemaría wrote: "Compromise? It's a word found only ('One must compromise!') in the vocabulary of those who have no will to fight – the lazy, the cunning, the cowardly – for they consider themselves defeated before they start."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it would also be too easy-going to think that the faith can be transmitted without speaking clearly and forcefully, or without confronting the problems, yearnings and concerns of each epoch, of each person.

In any case, when Christians strive to live according to their true identity, they will sometimes have to overcome the fear of ridicule, of worrying about "what others will say." Today Jesus' disciples may not have to worry about being thrown to the lions or put into jail, as happened to Peter and John and to so many saints who have gone before us in safeguarding and giving testimony to the faith. It may happen, however, that our public image is tarnished, or even that we are persecuted because of our defense of human dignity and freedom of conscience, which are the foundation for practicing ones' faith, for respect for life, and for so many other inalienable truths.

The life of Christians, Saint Josemaría said, is not "anti-anything;" it is "affirmation, optimism, youthfulness, joy and peace."<sup>6</sup> But precisely for this reason we must have "the courage to live publicly and constantly according to our holy faith."<sup>7</sup> We cannot let our love for God and the truth grow weak in our lives, because without that love and that truth we would no longer have anything to announce to the world. Moreover, it is important to try to find a way to do the greatest possible good in each situation, bearing in mind that the transmission of the truth does not depend only on what we say, but also on what those who hear us understand. Jesus also sometimes chose to remain silent (cf. *Lk* 4:28-30; *Mt* 26:63); and if He often spoke bluntly, He always sought the best way to make Himself understood by each person listening. Hence it may sometimes be counterproductive to insist on a truth, and instead it is better to wait for another occasion, or to reconsider the reasons we give in defending that truth. And also, as part of that effort, we will have to strive to understand the reasons the others give, which can help us deepen in our own understanding of the faith and see the weaknesses in our own arguments.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Way*, no. 54.

<sup>6</sup> *The Forge*, no. 103

<sup>7</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 46.

In the first letter of Saint Peter, which we could call the first encyclical in history, this apostolic panorama is set forth clearly: *in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (1 Pet 3:15-16).*

### **In the “areopagi” of our contemporary world**

The challenge of evangelizing requires not only courage, but also intellectual and theological preparation in accord with each one’s circumstances, the “gift of tongues” and empathy with contemporary culture, which is our own world. Saint Paul’s example in Athens can help us understand how to act in the new “areopagi” of our day and age (cf. *Acts 17:16 ff*). First, we see Paul’s deep inner turmoil on confronting a city given over to idolatry. Nevertheless, his ardor doesn’t lead him to speak in a bitter or uncharitable way.<sup>8</sup> He explores the terrain and listens: first to his Jewish brothers in the synagogue, and then, on the street, to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, whom he engages in conversation while making known his own ideas about God and about life. Besides taking an interest in the city’s architecture, Paul shows extensive knowledge of its literature, which enables him to adapt his message to those interested in what he has to say. Saint Paul adapts his preaching to this difficult audience, but he refuses to water down the Gospel message. The speech he delivers at the Areopagus remains a model for us, worth rereading frequently.

At first, Saint Paul praises the beauty of an altar built to the unknown God, which he came upon while walking through the city. This cultural reference brings him closer to his interlocutors and allows him to talk about that mysterious God, whom he claims to know. With various literary references to the Greek poets, Saint Paul skillfully directs the discourse towards the truth that he wants to convey: that we are all creatures of this unknown God, because he is the Creator and Lord of all things. He also explains to them how that God has made Himself present among us, not through idols built by human hands, but by taking on flesh, and offering as proof of his divinity his resurrection from the dead.

In Saint Paul’s words, the truth of the heart of the faith – the *kerygma*, as it is sometimes called – shines forth with all its splendor before a cultured and pagan people. Nevertheless, as happened to our Lord in the discourse on the Bread of Life, most of the audience politely left: *We will hear you again about this (Acts 17:32)*. Not all ears at first are prepared to accept the word of God. But some of the people choose to remain. The narrative adds that Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and several others embraced the faith that day. Paul’s courage, intellectual preparation and understanding for others, like that of many Christians today, is kindling that allows the Holy Spirit to light the fire of Christ in many hearts. Moreover, this passage from the life of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *The Way*, nos. 396 and 397.

Saint Paul teaches us how to interact with a culture that has sometimes lost even the very language needed to address God by name.

### **Everything for everyone**

The words and life of a Christian can sometimes be scandalous, not because he or she does something wrong, but because of what is considered socially acceptable. Certainly, a Christian way of living can mark out, even without intending to, a clear contrast with the lifestyle of many people today: in their personal relationships, in certain professional habits, in ways of having a good time. These lifestyles and habits not only receive widespread approval; they have sometimes become legally enforceable rights.

Hence someone could quite possibly feel judged and looked down upon when reading a statement like this from Saint Paul: *Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10)*. These words may well have shocked some of the Corinthians who heard them, and they surely continue to do so today. We Christians want always to speak positively, and ways of speaking can change depending on the time or the interlocutors; but we cannot do as those teachers who say what each one would like to hear (cf. 2 Tim 4:4). For as the prophet Isaiah warned: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Is 5:20)*.

At the same time, our witness to the truth cannot be reduced to denouncing evil. The Gospel is above all an announcement of God's unconditional love for each person. Saint Paul's words are not limited to a condemnation of vices and sins. Right after the strong words quoted above, he adds: *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:11)*.

Perhaps today more than ever we see how “the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible. A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself ‘weak with the weak ... everything for everyone’” (1 Cor 9:22).”<sup>9</sup> Whoever experiences a deep friendship with God and with others find it easy to assimilate the truth in their own life and to make it known freely and lovingly, accompanying others on an inclined plane. It is true that “for many people a saint is an ‘uncomfortable’ person to live with. But this doesn't mean that he has to be unbearable. —A saint's zeal should never be bitter. When he corrects he

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 45.

should never be wounding. His example should never be an arrogant moral slap in his neighbor's face."<sup>10</sup>

Today like yesterday, to receive God's mercy we need to realize we are sinners, which sometimes requires a slow and patient journey, first in each one of us. How important it is that, throughout our life, we can all have friends by our side who understand us and enlighten us with true words. For only the truth makes us free. Only the truth can set our hearts free (cf. *Jn* 8:32), and bring us true joy. And that is what it means to evangelize: "it is always about making people happy, very happy." because "the Truth is inseparable from authentic joy."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Forge*, no. 578.

<sup>11</sup> *Furrow*, no. 185.