

GRATITUDE SPURS US TO STRUGGLE

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away (Mt 25:14-15). We know Jesus' story about the talents very well and, as with all Scripture, it never ceases to invite us to a better understanding of our relationship with God.

Jesus' parable tells of a man who generously entrusts a large part of his wealth to three of his servants. By doing so he is treating them not as mere servants, but rather as co-workers in his business. Hence "entrust" is precisely the right word here. He doesn't give detailed instructions, telling them exactly what to do. He leaves it in their hands. Judging by their reactions – the effort they put into multiplying their master's capital – two of them immediately understand him. They appreciate their master's gesture as a sign of confidence in them. We could even say that they see it as a sign of love; and so they seek to thank him by responding with love, even though he didn't make any further demands or set conditions. *The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents (Mt 25:16).* Similarly, the one who had received the two talents made two talents more. Their decision to negotiate with their master's capital, their willingness to run the risks involved and act on their own initiative, shows their perception of being loved, which stirs up in them a desire to respond to the best of their ability.

The third servant, however, perceives something very different. He feels he is being tested and so he must not fail. For him, what matters most is to avoid making a mistake, to avoid failure. *But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money (Mt 25:18).* He is frightened by the possibility of displeasing and even angering his master, and by the consequences he imagines could follow. *Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours (Mt 25:24-25).* As he believes his master is harsh and unjust, he doesn't feel that anything has been "entrusted" to him. He sees it all as a tiresome trial, not as an opportunity. And not wanting to fail in this trial, he chooses to act in the safest possible

way with what belongs to someone else and coldly returns the money: *here you have what is yours (Mt 25:25)*.

These two very different reactions can help us reflect on how we ourselves respond to what God our Father has “entrusted” to us: our life, our Christian vocation. These have an immense value in his eyes, and He has placed them in our hands. How do we respond?

Struggling out of gratitude, not fear

For the first two servants, their master’s confidence was a real gift. They knew that they didn’t deserve it, that they had no right to expect such responsibility would be given them. In a new way, they understood that their relationship with their master was not based on the success or failure of what they did, but on how their master viewed them. More than what they were at present, he could see what they were capable of becoming. Hence we can easily imagine the deep sense of gratitude that arose in their hearts. To be looked at with eyes of hope is truly a gift, and the most natural response to a gift is to want to give something in return.

If we don’t keep this in mind, we can sometimes be mistaken about the role of struggle in our Christian life. If we struggle to succeed in order to “merit” being loved, it will be very difficult to experience genuine peace. To strive to be loved, even if only subconsciously, always means that failures and reverses will lead to deep discouragement or, even worse, bitterness in our soul. But grounding our struggle on gratitude helps to avoid this problem.

The parable also suggests that the first two servants found a sense of mission in this gift, a unique, personal mission. The master, we are told, gave *to each according to his ability (Mt 25:15)*. It is unlikely that the servants had any experience of investing and overseeing such enormous sums of money. But by showing trust in them, by seeing what they were capable of becoming, their master was calling them to “be more,” to strive to reach further. In other words, he was entrusting them with a special personal mission. And seeing the gift in those terms, they were inspired and encouraged to rise to the heights of this calling. Feeling that they were part of their master’s business affairs, they made them their own, and strove to learn things of which they had no previous experience. They endeavoured to challenge themselves and grow, doing so out of gratitude and scorning any fear.

As in the parable, God our Father also calls each of us according to what He knows we are capable of becoming. This is what really matters, and what we want to rediscover in our prayer: how God sees us, not how we see ourselves. We want to make sure that our struggle is centred on Him, not on ourselves. Precisely because I can be certain of God's attitude towards me, I can forget about myself and make every effort to develop and cultivate the riches He has given me for His glory and for the benefit of others. This struggle will lead us to grow in the virtues of faith, hope and charity, and in all those human virtues that help us to work to high standards and to be true friends to our friends.

A struggle inspired by Jesus' example

We all long for peace and consolation, rest from all our labours. Jesus understands this very well. *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light* (Mt 11: 28-30). We will fully experience this rest only at the resurrection of the body, when all creation will be filled with God, as the waters fill the sea (cf. *Is* 11:9). At present, the peace and rest that Jesus offers us come precisely through taking up his yoke and struggling to follow Him.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mk 8:34). These words of Jesus are not a severe demand, imposed arbitrarily. Rather they are a source of immense consolation. Christ goes before us and experiences in his own flesh the challenges, fears and the sufferings that come, in a world marred by sin, from freely responding to the Father's call. Jesus doesn't ask us for something He himself hasn't experienced: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Heb 4:15-16). Our Lord proposes to us something that He himself has already lived.

Saint Josemaría encouraged each of us to discover in our own lives how to be other "Simons of Cyrene" in helping Christ to carry the Cross. "For a soul in love it is no misfortune to become voluntarily Christ's Simon of Cyrene and, in this way, to give such close company to his suffering humanity, reduced to a state of rags and tatters. For if we do

this, we can be certain of our closeness to God, who blesses us by choosing us for this task.”¹ We discover that our struggle is taking place *with* Jesus. It means union with Him in my efforts right now, not just when I succeed. To accept the struggle freely, as one of the consequences of accepting the gift of my Christian vocation, opens the door to the discovery that Jesus himself is helping us in our struggle. And so “it is not just any cross we are carrying. We discover it is the Cross of Christ, and with it the consolation of knowing that our Redeemer has taken it upon himself to bear its weight.”²

At the same time our Lord also invites us to see the results of a life that embraces the Cross: the victory over sin and the death, and his glorification by the Father. Because of the Resurrection, in Jesus we have absolutely unshakable proof that our effort to be faithful to what our Father God has given us is worth any sacrifice and suffering. As Saint Paul tells us, *This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:17)*. Alongside Jesus we can look at the Cross and see not pointless and meaningless suffering, but rather victory and redemption. We come to see the meaning of the challenges and difficulties that necessarily arise when we try to follow faithfully Christ’s example in carrying out the Father’s will and bearing abundant fruit.

Grace does not eliminate struggle but transforms it

Perhaps the servant who buried the talent entrusted to him felt overwhelmed, or even saddened by the efforts he saw his companions making. Comparing himself with them and feeling inadequate for such a job, he looked for an easier, safer way. So he dug a hole and buried the gift that had been entrusted to him, together with all the possibilities that came with it. The same drama is repeated every time we evade the effort and discomfort involved in pursuing anything worthwhile in life. We must never forget that the struggle and effort required by a loving search for the good are neither unjust nor arbitrary. It is intrinsic to the very nature of life in our fallen world, the life that our Lord has sanctified. On our way through life, union with Jesus comes about precisely through struggle: a free, loving struggle to grow in the supernatural and human virtues. God’s grace is not a substitute for the effort that is intrinsic to each person’s life, but rather unites it to God himself.

¹ *Friends of God*, no. 132.

² *Ibid.*

Our effort and struggle are not an expression of self-sufficiency or “neo-Pelagianism.” For as St Paul wrote to the Philippians: *It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:13)*. The struggle, then, is not opposed to the action of grace in us. In the final analysis, growing in the theological virtues is simply a matter of growing in love, both divine and human love, and holiness “is the fullness of charity.”³

Saint Josemaría expressed this same theological truth in these terms: “Later, while talking to our Lord in your prayer, you understood that fighting is a synonym for love, and you asked for a greater love, with no fear of the struggle awaiting you, since you would be fighting for Him, with Him and in Him.”⁴ The more we try to live our struggle as a “struggle to love,” the more we will want this love, this struggle to grow. We will overcome the temptation to bury the gifts we have received in order to avoid the effort required, and instead invest those gifts, taking on all the struggle this requires.

Free to grow, free to learn

In his pastoral letter of 9 January 2018, the Prelate helps us to understand in greater depth the close relationship between freedom and struggle in our lives. “The freer we are, the more we can love. And this love is demanding. ‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (*1 Cor 13:7*).”⁵ At the same time, the more we love, the freer we feel, even at difficult or disagreeable times. “The more intense our charity is, the freer we are. We also act with freedom of spirit when we don’t feel like doing something or find it especially difficult, if we do it out of love, that is, not because we like it, but because we choose to.”⁶

This is not just a “technique” to make ourselves do what we don’t feel like doing, masking what is hard or unpleasant under the words “love” and “freedom.” Rather it is a profound truth of our souls that each of us is invited to discover. The more we identify ourselves with the gift that God has granted us, with our talents and our mission, the readier we will be to fight, whenever necessary, to care for and cultivate this gift. We will not be driven by fear, or duty, but rather by our gratitude to God, and a desire to respond fully to his

³ *Furrow*, no. 739.

⁴ *Furrow*, no. 158.

⁵ Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Love. “Our faith in God’s love for each one of us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:16) leads us to respond with love. We can love because He has loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10). It fills us with security to know that God’s infinite Love is to be found not only at the origin of our existence but also at every moment in our lives. For God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.”⁷

“Think a moment about those of your colleagues who are outstanding for their professional prestige, their integrity, or their spirit of service and self-sacrifice. Isn’t it true that they devote many hours of the day, and even of the night to their jobs? Isn’t there something we can learn from them?”⁸ We can undoubtedly learn to struggle better, and thus be free to love more. And what we can learn from those who struggle best is that they tend to have an “open struggle.” They don’t see their aptitudes and talents as fixed or determined. Like the first two servants in Jesus’ parable, they understand that what has been given them is intended to grow through their effort and struggle. Setbacks and difficulties aren’t seen as failures but rather as opportunities to learn and improve. Struggle in itself is seen as a sign of progress. They want to know their own weaknesses and receive advice from others, instead of feeling hurt because others have seen their defects.

As with the servants in the parable, God has entrusted us with a wonderful mission. He has chosen to count on us to make his infinite Love present in the middle of the world in which we live. “Realizing that God is waiting for us in each person (cf. *Mt* 25:40) and that He wants to make himself present in their lives also through us, leads us to strive to share abundantly with others what we have received. And in our lives, my daughters and sons, we have received and we receive a lot of love. Giving love to God and to others is the most proper act of freedom. Love *fulfils* freedom, it redeems it. Love enables freedom to discover its origin and its end, in the Love of God.”⁹

The two servants who cultivated their master’s gift discovered a much greater reward than they could ever have imagined. *Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master (Mt 25:23)*. This is the joy that we seek, and it is also the joy that accompanies us in our struggle, a struggle filled with hope: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18)*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 4.

⁸ *Friends of God*, no. 60.

⁹ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 4.