

NORMAL, DISCREET... AND DIVINE

It is the Sabbath, and Jesus is in the synagogue at Nazareth. Perhaps He recalls many warm memories from his youth. How often He would have listened to the Word of God there! His neighbors, who have known Him since He was a small child, have heard the surprising stories about his miracles in neighboring towns. But their very familiarity with Jesus becomes an obstacle for them. *Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"* (Mt 13:54-55). They find it hard to accept that the Messiah could be someone they have seen grow up day by day, who has lived alongside them in such a discreet and simple way.

Someone so much like themselves

The inhabitants of Nazareth think they know Jesus well. They are sure that the stories told about Him can't be true. *Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?* (Mt 13:56).

They know his parents, the house where his family lives. "Jesus' own family, so full of grace and wisdom, did not appear unusual or different from others."¹ It was inexplicable how someone so much like themselves could work miracles. "The ordinariness of Jesus, the provincial carpenter, seems not to conceal a mystery of any kind. His origin marks him out as one like any other."² The Son of God worked alongside Joseph in his workshop; "most of his life was dedicated to this task in a simple life which awakened no admiration at all."³ But Jesus' ordinary and simple life became the excuse for not believing in his divinity.

Isn't it true that we too are often suspicious of what is normal and ordinary. We are attracted by what is special, what stands out, what is extraordinary. It may be the case that our capacity for amazement is dulled; we take many things for granted and get trapped in routine, overlooking the miracles in our daily life. We can even grow accustomed to the greatest miracle of all in our life, the presence of the Son of God in the Eucharist. And the same thing can happen in our personal meeting with Christ in prayer, when serenading our Lady with aspirations in the Holy Rosary, or when filling our minds and hearts with the Church's teachings through spiritual reading.

Perhaps we have become accustomed to having our Creator so close to us. The Giver of all graces, the Love that quenches all our desires, is enclosed in the tabernacles spread throughout the

¹ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia*, no. 182.

² Benedict XVI, *The Infancy Narratives*, Image, 2012, p. 3.

³ Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, no. 98.

world. God has wanted to make all his omnipotence present in places of normal everyday life. There, often without any show, He works countless miracles around us.

Finding God in what is ordinary

That God acts in such a normal, ordinary way can confuse us, because it may seem to lack the spontaneity we think essential for any relationship. What is normal may seem to us as too predictable, apparently lacking in creativity, in the surprise and ardor true love requires. Perhaps we miss something distinctive that will make our relationship with God a unique adventure, a spectacular testimony that others can admire. We may think that normality means uniformity, and lacks the personal contribution that each one can make.

It is true that when we face what always seems to be the same, the understandable reaction is to grow accustomed to it. Nevertheless, we know that God is inviting us to find Him in what is ordinary, in our daily circumstances. Human love is like that as well; it grows and deepens not only through great or special happenings, but through the silence, tiredness and misunderstandings of days spent together. “There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations,”⁴ and we should be eager to discover it in our own life.

The ordinariness of our daily life is no obstacle to God’s ardent love. He looks upon us at every moment with renewed affection. The fact that my life is ordinary and normal does not concern Him: it is *my* life and that is sufficient for Him. And He offers us the opportunity to make of our life something exceptional and unique. He always counts one by one, and never makes comparisons among his children. He has called each of us from the creation of the world (cf. *Eph* 1:4): there is no one exactly like myself and therefore I am very special for God.

Caresses that seem monotonous

God’s acting in what is ordinary and normal enables our life to be, as Saint Paul says, *hidden with Christ in God* (*Col* 3:3) – filled with days that are alike in which nothing special apparently happens, and nevertheless in which something extraordinary is taking place. “In this daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbors.”⁵

From a superficial viewpoint, it might seem that a person striving to attain sanctity in ordinary daily events has a monotonous life. But as Saint Josemaria said, making use of a graphic comparison: “Plan of life: monotony? Are a mother’s caresses monotonous? Don’t those who love

⁴ Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 113

⁵ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exultate*, no. 7.

one another always say the same thing?”⁶ God never stops thinking of us or loving us at any moment; it doesn’t matter how ordinary our life is, but rather how exceptional it is for Him.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a letter to Pope Eugene III, a good friend of his who later would be beatified, encouraging him not to neglect his constant life of prayer. Thus he wouldn’t get absorbed in all the demanding activities of his new ministry in the Church: “Set aside your occupations for at least some time each day. Otherwise they will lead you to where you do not want to go. Do you want to know where? To the hardness of your heart.”⁷ Without some specific customs of piety each day, our heart is in danger of closing itself to God’s love and becoming hardened. Without his divine affection, even the most holy things can lose their meaning. Without Him at our side, we have no strength to do his will.

In May 1936, Saint Josemaria in a talk suggested that each of those listening to him ask for the “grace to fulfill my plan of life in such a way that I make good use of time. Why do I go to bed and get up at the wrong times?”⁸ But we might ask: what does love for God have to do with the amount of sleep I get? This is the marvelous reality of God’s “normality.” Our sleep, our health, our daily plans are very important to Him. And above all, He doesn’t want us to become upset at night when we haven’t been able to get to everything we wanted to do that day, since the one who acts and moves things forward is always God.

To guarantee our freedom

At the beginning of his pontificate, Benedict XVI alerted us to a constant danger that may also have been present in the synagogue at Nazareth that day: “The world is redeemed by the patience of God and destroyed by the impatience of men.”⁹ What is normal can seem too slow to us. We want good and holy things to be accomplished as soon as possible. At times it can be hard for us to understand why it takes so long for the good to arrive, why the Messiah began “by spending nine months in his Mother's womb, like the rest of men, following the natural course of events.”¹⁰

In reality, by this way of making Himself present, what God is perhaps seeking is to guarantee our personal freedom, to be sure that we too want to spend time with Him, whether in a few minutes of prayer, or by taking a quick break from our daily activities to say a few loving words to Mary, or in many other ways. If God manifested himself in an extraordinary way, we wouldn’t have any choice but to respond to Him.

⁶ Saint Josemaria, Outline for a talk, 22 August 1938. Cited in Pedro Rodriguez, *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, commentary on no. 77.

⁷ Saint Bernard of Clairvaux Letter to Pope Eugene III.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, Outline for a talk, May 1936. Cited in Pedro Rodriguez, *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, commentary on no. 78.

⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005.

¹⁰ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 18.

Hence we see how happy Jesus seems to be to pass unnoticed in the Gospel scenes. The Magi, for example, must have been surprised to encounter the King of the Jews held in the arms of a young woman, in such a simple setting. God does not want to force us to serve Him. The personality of his Son is so attractive that God has chosen to make Himself known in what is normal and ordinary in order to give us space to respond freely. He wants free children, not people who are blinded by the light. He knows that nothing moves us as much as the personal discovery of a hidden treasure. Being grateful for and enjoying this freedom – with all its lights and shadows – helps us to share in his patience when facing so many situations that, at first sight, seem to be an obstacle for the redemption, and nevertheless are the ordinary path along which God acts.

God's commandments and norms are also a gift and an invitation. "As Thomas Aquinas said, 'The new law is the grace of the Holy Spirit,' not a new norm, but a new life within us given by the Spirit of God himself. Augustine summed up this spiritual experience of the true newness of Christianity in the famous phrase: *Da quod iubes et iube quod vis*, 'give me what you command and command what you wish.'"¹¹ Thus it is easy for us to understand these ardent words of the Psalmist which can help us to thank God for this freedom: *With my lips I declare all the ordinances of thy mouth. In the way of thy testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on thy precepts, and fix my eyes on thy ways (Ps 119:13-15).*

God is present in the ordinary and normal

We live in an era of mass phenomena, when some persons have millions of followers, and photos or videos go viral in a matter of minutes. How does this affect what we have said about the role of what is ordinary and normal in God's way of acting? We know very well that God is patient and has told us that his action is like leaven: it dissolves in the mass and reaches the furthest corner. God is interested in saving the world much more than we are. He is the one who spurs, enkindles and sustains us. "With the amazing naturalness of the things of God, the contemplative soul is filled with apostolic zeal."¹²

Pope Francis invites us to open our hearts to God's impelling grace: "How good it is for us to hold the Lord 'in our arms' (*Lk 2:28*), like Simeon. Not only in our heads and in our hearts, but also 'in our hands,' in all that we do: in prayer, at work, at the table, on the telephone, at school, with the poor, everywhere. Having the Lord 'in our hands' is an antidote to insular mysticism and frenetic activism, since a genuine encounter with Jesus corrects both saccharine piety and frenetic hyperactivity. Savoring the encounter with Jesus is also the remedy for the *paralysis of routine*, for it opens us up to the daily impetus of grace."¹³

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesús de Nazaret II*, Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid, 2011, p. 83.

¹² Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 120.

¹³ Francis, Homily, 2 February 2018.

“Mary sanctifies the ordinary everyday things – what some people wrongly regard as unimportant and insignificant: everyday work, looking after those closest to you, visits to friends and relatives. What a blessed ordinariness, that can be so full of God’s love!”¹⁴

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¹⁴ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 148.