

A REVOLUTION IN INTIMACY

Jesus has been invited once again to a dinner. His host has insisted on his coming, eager to offer Him a special reception. But an unexpected event interrupts them. A woman who had not been invited comes in. Simon, the Pharisee who owns the house, is surprised and embarrassed. But Jesus seems to have been expecting her and his eyes light up when she enters. He certainly knows her soul better than she does, and sees into her sorrow-filled heart. He knows that, in seeking to love and to be loved, she has taken the wrong path and has lost her way.

Jesus is moved by the woman's signs of courtesy and affection. She anoints his feet with perfume, after cleaning them with her tears and kisses. Jesus then turns to Simon, who had been watching the scene sternly, and addresses these words to him: "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" (*Lk 7:41-42*). That woman has learned to love by letting herself be forgiven. There lies her true greatness, and Jesus praises her publicly for it (cf. *Lk 7:44-46*).

It had never been so easy

Possibly for the first time, that woman feels the joy of being respected. Jesus looks at her in a different way than others do. She realizes that she has no need to be defensive before Him. She has never seen eyes that looked so deeply into her heart and has never felt so loved. She longs for her heart to be cleansed, and Jesus' words about the pure of heart are already becoming a reality in her (cf. *Mt 5:8*). "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Yes, they shall see Him even upon earth, where nothing is pure, but where all creatures turn crystal clear when we can look at them with the Face of the loveliest and whitest of Lilies between!"¹ For the first time in her life, she experiences an affection that doesn't have to be forced or won by trickery.

For years this woman had wasted all the gifts God bestowed on her. But now she realizes that she has a chance to start anew. She can become the woman she was meant to be, both strong and sensitive, serene and passionate. Now she can finally be herself. For one of the great deceptions of impurity is the conviction that we will never be loved for being the person we truly are, and therefore we need to "sell" an attractive appearance in order to be loved. But this in the end is impossible, since love has no price. It is either given freely or it doesn't exist. When someone gives in to this emotional "blackmail," sooner or later the appearances vanish and one is left with the bad taste of having been deceived.

¹ Saint Therese of Liseux, *Letter 105 to Celine*. Saint Therese is speaking to her sister here about our Lady.

Being amazed by every heart

For love to grow and take root, one needs to make room for it, sometimes with considerable effort, since holy purity “is a rose that blooms only among thorns.”² Maybe that’s why we are sometimes afraid to risk love and try to “assure” it. A heart that becomes impure doesn’t want to risk suffering and prefers, in a tyrannical and disrespectful way, to create one’s own comfort zone. Sometimes one may be seeking compensations, or giving expression to a hidden anger. At times we may even think we have attained love, when in reality we are using the other person, if only “virtually.” I force someone to “love me,” to make me feel “of value.” In light of God’s promise of unconditional love, sin is a farce that condemns one to loneliness.

The solution is not to isolate oneself and become discouraged, thinking that real love is impossible. Rather, it requires seeking the love that God has sown right where we are, especially in the people and relationships around us. Saint Josemaría encouraged us to love others by “generously placing our hearts on the ground, so that others may tread softly and find their struggle more pleasant”³ This can be one of the fruits – among many others – of holy purity: making the lives of others more lovable and loving.

It is not just a question of avoiding personal sin, but of attaining a way of looking at others and relating to them that helps everyone feel loved, as God’s image. The clean soul is sensitive about one’s own and others’ vulnerability; he or she dresses in a humanly elegant way and seeks to be loved freely. It is true that our hearts, when placed on the ground, run the risk of being stepped on. But that is the only way to love and receive love in a way that accords with God’s love. A person with a clean heart knows how to look at others without tarnishing God’s image in them.

Hence we can say that Jesus has “revolutionized” freedom and love. He invites us to safeguard the intimacy of God’s sons and daughters even in our way of looking and our thoughts. He wants us to share in his own amazement at the dignity of every human heart. Intimacy is sacred ground that requires “removing one’s shoes” before treading there.

Part of our mission

Holy purity requires safeguarding – in ourselves and in others – something that is precious in God’s eyes. And the best defense of that treasure is to be in love. It is also true that the desire to have a clean love will often require beginning anew. Letting ourselves be forgiven and loved are manifestations of humility, of the realization that holy purity and the love of others are a gift. “In order to give himself to us, God often chooses unthinkable paths, perhaps the path of our

² Saint John Vianney, *Curé* of Ars, Sermon on penance.

³ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 228.

limitations, of our tears, of our defeats.”⁴ In confession we let ourselves be loved like nowhere else. Those who let themselves be forgiven open the door to a freer love and are able to respond – they have already begun to do so – with a love tailored to the love they receive.

Another possible difficulty can arise here. Sometimes, even without realizing it, we can be embarrassed to receive something free. We aren’t used to something so great being a gift. We often prefer to think that we have achieved it with our own strength, because this makes us autonomous and allows us to experience our own power. We don’t want to depend on another person in something so decisive. In contrast, those who have learned to let themselves be loved are convinced that we cannot always give, but must also receive. “Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.”⁵ Our ability to love is always the result of a previous gift: *He loved us first (1 Jn 4:19)*.

Holy purity is essential for carrying out any apostolic mission. Evangelization is carried out free of charge. If our heart isn’t clean, we will not be able to understand the self-giving needed when the fruit fails to come when we had hoped, but when God disposes it. A true and clean affection, the heart of any evangelizing mission, does not impose itself or demand an answer. It doesn’t present an invoice for what is offered; it doesn’t distinguish between persons, rejecting those who are antagonistic or getting tired of those who go more slowly. It never stoops to blackmail or reproach. In a word, true affection is faithful.

As always, we only need look at Jesus to learn how to be loved. And there is no lesson as powerful as the one He offers us in the Eucharist. There Jesus does not impose himself. No one is so patient as He. No one desires so strongly that we love Him, but also no one says it so quietly, as in a barely perceptible whisper. He knows how great a gift our freedom is, which He himself has given us, and doesn’t want to compromise it for anything in the world. No one values both our fragility, and the dignity it contains, as much as Jesus. Therefore, in our endeavor to grow in this virtue, it is very pleasing to God when we offer Him each of our steps, also our stumbles and defeats. God is “pained” only by our own suffering and by the solitude in which we isolate ourselves.

We can imitate Saint Josemaría here in his recourse to our Lady: “I crown the Mother of God and my Mother with my purified failings, since I have no precious stones or virtues. Take heart!”⁶

⁴ Francis, *Audience*, 29 January 2020.

⁵ Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas est*, no. 7.

⁶ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 285.