

SOMETHING GREAT THAT IS LOVE (X): Towards the Fulness of Love

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (Jn 13:1). These are the words Saint John uses in his Gospel to introduce Jesus' surprising gesture before beginning his Paschal meal. When they were all seated at the table, Jesus *rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded (Jn 13:4-5).*

Jesus washes the apostles' feet: of men who were weak, but chosen to be the foundation of his Church. They had all been afraid amid the storm on the lake; they had doubted the Master's ability to feed a large crowd of people; they had heatedly argued over who would be the greatest in his Kingdom. But they had also begun to experience the suffering involved in following Him. And they hadn't left Him, as so many others did, after his discourse on the Bread of Life in the synagogue at Capernaum. They have accompanied Him on his long trips throughout the land of Israel, and they know that some now wish He were dead.

Peter is astonished when Jesus begins washing their feet. He can't understand it and rebels: *Lord, do you wash my feet?* Jesus replies, *What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.* But Peter insists, *You shall never wash my feet (Jn 13:5-8).* Simon's forceful reply is surprising. He doesn't mean it as a rejection; rather it is his love for our Lord that leads to his refusal. But Jesus makes clear his mistake: *If I do not wash you, you have no part in me (Jn 13:8).*

You will understand later

Right from his first encounter with the Master, Saint Peter had been growing interiorly. Little by little he had begun to understand who Jesus is, the Son of the living God. But our Lord's Passion is drawing near, and Peter still has a long way to go. In the Upper Room a scene with two acts takes place: the washing of the apostles' feet and the institution of the Eucharist. And Peter begins to discover the depth of God's Love, and how deeply this Love challenges him personally. Up to now, the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself is still mainly words for him, and hasn't taken root in his heart as deeply as Jesus wants. And so he rebels. He refuses to accept that God's will for him is a life of love and humble service to every man and woman, no matter who they are.

Peter's experience can often be repeated in our own life. We too can find it hard to understand what our Lord wants, and we need time to grasp the most basic truths. In our heart a great desire for love can mix with less noble intentions; often we are paralyzed by fear, and the

words on our lips are not accompanied by deeds. We love our Lord, and we realize that the divine vocation is our most precious jewel: so much so that we have sold everything to buy it. But the passing of the years, changing circumstances, certain unpleasant situations or the fatigue of daily work can cloud our path.

It can also be the case that one has not yet attained the degree of human and spiritual maturity required to live one's vocation as a path of love. Our charity towards our neighbor can be dragged down by distortions that diminish the mystery of the human person created in God's image: sentimentalism, which leads to a response based on one's momentary perception of things rather than a deep relationship with God and our fellow men and women; voluntarism, which results from forgetting that the Christian life means above all letting God love us and love through us; perfectionism, which sees human deficiencies as somehow foreign to God's plan.

Nevertheless, precisely because God takes into account our personal limitations, He is not surprised nor does He grow tired at seeing us complicate or even disfigure our vocation. He has called us, like Peter, when we were sinners, and He insists: *If I do not wash you, you have no part in me*. Simon Peter stops protesting: *Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!* (Jn 13:8-9). Jesus knows that Peter is reacting out of love, and so He replies just as forcefully. The apostle's heart responds with the impetuous ardor we expect from Peter: *not my feet only but also my hands and my head!* Is Peter even aware of the meaning of what he is saying? What happens later that night to him seems to show that he isn't. He will come to understand it later, bit by bit: through the suffering of Jesus' Passion and the joy of the Resurrection, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit. But his dialogue with Jesus teaches us that to reach the fulness of Love the first step is to discover Jesus' tender affection for each of us; and to realize that, by rectifying our mistakes and miseries, we will become more and more like Him.

Steps towards freedom

Following Jesus means learning to love as He does. It is an ascending path, and also an arduous one, but at the same time it is a path of freedom. "The freer we are, the more we can love. And love is demanding: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things* (1 Cor 13:7)."¹ When still a young priest, Saint Josemaria discovered this path of ascent towards freedom: "Steps: to be resigned to the will of God; to conform to the will of God; to want the will of God; to love the will of God."²

The lowest step towards freedom is that of resignation. It is the least generous of the four, and can easily give way to spiritual lukewarmness. One could describe it as putting up with a situation without growing through it: putting up with it because one has to, accepting "what fate has dealt me." It is true that fortitude, which is a cardinal virtue, also requires putting up with difficulties, offering resistance. But this leads to a growth in freedom, because one grasps and

¹ Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

² Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 774.

wants the good that makes resistance worthwhile. Resignation, in contrast, fails to grasp any good, or sees it so tenuously that it fails to generate joy. At times, even for a certain length of time, one will be able to last in this situation by making a considerable effort. But when a person takes on a permanent attitude of resignation, sadness will bit by bit worm its way in.

Conforming to God's will is a higher stage. One accepts reality and tries to conform to it. We shouldn't confuse this conformity with the attitude of a person without ideals, who has no dreams or aspirations to live for. Rather it is the realistic attitude of a person who knows that every good desire is pleasing to God. A person who conforms in this sense learns to enter, bit by bit, into God's way of thinking, with the conviction that everything works for the good of those who love God (cf. *Rom* 8:28).

This process of conforming to God's will is called to rise higher, and we begin to *want* God's will. Saint Josemaria prayed: "Lord, help me to be faithful and docile towards you, like clay in the potter's hands. Then it will not be I who live, but you, my Love, who will live and work in me."³ Persons and circumstances we haven't chosen become wanted in themselves because we see them as good: we decide "to choose them." "My God, I chose all that Thou willest,"⁴ Saint Therese of Lisieux said. We become certain, with Saint Paul, *that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom* 8:38-39). We begin to discover, amid an imperfect world, the "something holy" that is hidden in everyday situations,⁵ and we see God's image more clearly in those around us.

Drenched in Christ's blood

The final step on this path of personal growth is that of love. With Saint John, we enter into the heart of Christian revelation: *we know and believe the love God has for us (1 Jn* 4:16). After washing his apostles' feet, our Lord tells them why He has done this: *I have given you an example (Jn* 13:15). He is preparing them for his new Commandment: *that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another (Jn* 13:34). They need to learn to love with the greatest Love, even to the point of giving their own life for others, as He will do: *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (Jn* 10:17-18). Christ's love is marked by self-giving, rising above oneself, lovingly accepting God the Father's will for each of us. This is what loving God's will means: a joyful and creative affirmation that spurs us interiorly to get out of ourselves. It is a decision that, paradoxically, is the only path for finding ourselves: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt* 16:25).

³ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 875. Cf. *Jer* 18:6: *like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.*

⁴ Saint Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, ch. 1.

⁵ Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 114.

But this love is not the same as “extreme moral effort,” leading to “a new level of humanity.”⁶ The “newness” of the new Commandment “can come only from the gift of communion with Christ, of living in Him.”⁷ Hence when He reveals the new Commandment, our Lord also gives his apostles the Sacrament of Love. The Eucharist henceforth will be at the center of Christian life: not as a theoretical truth but as a vital necessity.⁸

“The hand of Christ has snatched us from a wheat field; the sower squeezes the handful of wheat in his wounded palm. The blood of Christ bathes the seed, soaking it. Then the Lord tosses the wheat to the winds, so that in dying it becomes life and in sinking into the ground it multiplies itself.”⁹ We are able to give ourselves because our life is soaked in Christ’s blood, leading us to die to ourselves and yield an abundant harvest of joy and peace around us. Our participation in the Sacrifice of Jesus and our adorations of his Real Presence in the Eucharist leads directly to love for our neighbor. Therefore if we “are not faithful to the divine mission of giving ourselves to others, helping them recognize Christ, we will find it very difficult to understand what the Eucharistic Bread is.” And vice-versa: “In order to value and love the Holy Eucharist, we must follow Jesus’ path. We must be grain; we must die to ourselves and rise with new life and yield an abundant harvest: a hundredfold!”¹⁰

Eucharistic consistency

“Jesus is walking in our midst, as he did in Galilee. He walks through our streets, and he quietly stops and looks into our eyes. His call is attractive and intriguing.”¹¹ When we firmly decide to walk at his side, to live in communion with Him, our life is filled with light and little by little takes on a true “Eucharistic consistency.”¹² The Love and companionship that we receive from Him enables us to give ourselves to the others as He gave himself. We begin to discover and bit by bit uproot the obstacles that hinder the growth of Christ’s charity in our heart: the tendency to do the minimum required in fulfilling our duties; the fear to go too far in our affection and service to others; the lack of understanding when faced with other people’s limitations; the pride that demands others recognize our good actions, thus sullyng our right intention.

Saint Josemaria spoke movingly about the joyful life of those who give themselves to Christ and persevere faithfully in following his call. “This path can be summed up in one word: love. If we are to love, we must have a big heart and share the concerns of those around us. We must be able to forgive and understand; we must sacrifice ourselves, with Jesus Christ, for all souls.”¹³ We know

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Ignatius Press 2011, p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸ Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 158.

¹¹ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit* (25 March 2019), no. 277.

¹² Benedict XVI, Apost. Exhort. *Sacramentum caritatis* (22 February 2007), no. 83.

¹³ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 158.

this goal far exceeds our own capacities. Therefore we need to beseech our Lord frequently to give us a heart to the measure of His.

“If we love with Christ’s heart, we shall learn to serve others and we shall defend the truth clearly, lovingly . . . Only by reproducing in ourselves the Life of Christ can we transmit it to others. Only by experiencing the death of the grain of wheat can we work in the heart of the world, transforming it from within, making it fruitful.”¹⁴ This is the path of faithfulness that, since it is a path of Love, is also a path of happiness.

Paul Muller

¹⁴ *Ibid.*