

TRUSTING IN GOD

St. Luke tells us that on one occasion our Lord was preaching by the shore of the Sea of Galilee and so many people wanted to listen to him that he had to ask for help. Some fishermen were washing their nets on the shore. They had finished the bulk of their work and were tidying things up, surely with the idea of getting home as soon as possible to rest. Jesus got into one of the boats, that of Simon, and from there continued speaking to the crowd.

The evangelist does not tell us what our Lord taught. He wants to draw our attention to other aspects that contain important lessons for our Christian life.

Struggle and trust

Perhaps Peter and his companions thought that Jesus, after finishing speaking, would return to shore and go on his way. But instead he turned to them and asked them to take up anew the work they were about to set aside for the day. They were surprised, but Simon had the greatness of soul to overcome his fatigue and reply: *Master, we toiled all night and took nothing. But at your word I will let down the nets.*¹

They had worked all night—with nothing to show for it. They knew their work well, since it was their job and they had a lot of experience. But all this had not been enough to guarantee success, and they had returned tired and empty-handed. We can easily imagine their discouragement. Some, overcome by a feeling of uselessness, might even have been thinking of giving up that business entirely.

We know that the narrative ends with an abundant catch of fish. If we look for the difference between their success and the previous night's failure, the answer is clear: the presence of Jesus. All the other circumstances of the second attempt seem less favorable than those of the earlier one. The nets not fully cleaned, the wrong time of day, the fishermen's physical and mental exhaustion....

Our Lord makes use of all this to give them, and us, a very important spiritual lesson: without Christ we can't achieve anything. Without Christ, our struggle will yield only exhaustion, tension, discouragement, a desire to give up; without Christ we will try to fool ourselves by blaming circumstances for our lack of effectiveness; without Christ we will be overcome by a feeling of uselessness. But with him, the catch is abundant.

Sanctity does not consist of fulfilling a set of norms. It is Christ's life in us. Therefore, rather than "doing something," it consists of "letting something be done," letting ourselves be led—but responding fully. "You are a Christian and, as a Christian, a child of God. You should feel a grave responsibility for corresponding to the mercies you have received from the Lord, showing careful vigilance and loving firmness, so that nothing and nobody may

¹ Lk 5:5.

disfigure the distinctive features of the Love he has imprinted upon your soul.”²

When we struggle to be saints, the thread of our will meets the thread of God’s will and interweaves with it to form a single fabric, a single piece of cloth that is our life. This woven fabric has to become fuller and fuller, until the moment comes when our will is identified with God’s, and we are unable to distinguish one from the other, because both seek the same thing.

Almost at the end of his life on earth, Jesus told St. Peter: *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would: but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.*³ Before, you relied on yourself, on your own will, on your strength; you thought that your word was surer than mine.⁴ And now you see the results. From now on you will depend on me and want what I want...and things will go much better.

Interior life is a work of grace that requires our cooperation. The Holy Spirit fills the sails of our boat with his wind. In responding, we have, so to speak, two oars: our personal effort, and trust in God, the certainty that he will never leave us. Both oars are necessary and we have to employ both arms if we want our interior life to advance. If either is lacking, the boat will start turning in circles and be very hard to control. The soul then, as it were, “limps along;” it fails to make progress and becomes exhausted, and easily falls.

If an effective decision to struggle is lacking, piety becomes sentimental, and virtues become scarce. The soul seems to be filled with good desires, but they prove ineffective when the moment comes to make an effort. If, on the other hand, everything is entrusted to a strong will, to a determination to fight without relying on our Lord, the fruit is dryness, tension, exhaustion, distaste for a battle that fails to draw any fish to the nets of the interior life and apostolate. The soul finds itself, like Peter and his companions, in a fruitless night.

If we notice that something similar is happening to us, if at times we fall into discouragement because we are depending too much on our own knowledge or experience, on our own will-power... and too little on Jesus, let us ask our Lord to come into our boat. Much more than the results of our own efforts, we are in great need of his presence. We see that our Lord did not promise them a great catch, and Simon did not expect it. But he knows that it is worthwhile working for our Lord: *in verbo autem tuo laxabo retia,*⁵ at your word I will let down the nets.

Abandonment

Let us backtrack a bit and turn our attention to Jesus’ request. *Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch.*⁶

Duc in altum. Steer your boat into the deep water. To enter deeply into interior life, we need to give up keeping our feet on solid ground, totally under our control; we have to go where there might easily be waves, where the boat will rock and the soul realize that it

² *The Forge*, no. 416.

³ *Jn* 21:18.

⁴ Cf. *Mt* 26: 34-35.

⁵ *Lk* 5:5.

⁶ *Lk* 5:4.

doesn't have control over everything, where we might sink if we fall into the water.

Wouldn't it be safer on the shore, or where the water doesn't come above our knees or waist, or at most our shoulders? Perhaps we would feel safer there. But on the shore no worthwhile fish can be caught. If we want to cast our nets for fish, we have to take the boat into the deep water and throw off our fear of losing sight of the shoreline.

How often Jesus chided his disciples for their fear! *Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?*⁷ Don't we too merit the same reproach? "Why don't you have faith? Why do you want to control everything? Why is it so hard for you to walk when the sun isn't shining in all its splendor?"

The soul instinctively tries to find reference points, signals that confirm it on its path. Our Lord often gives these to us, but we will not grow in interior life if we become obsessed by the need to measure our own progress.

Perhaps we have the experience that in moments of unease, when we aren't sure of our course of action and are overcome by the desire to seek an answer at all costs, we end up attributing to some small circumstance an importance it doesn't objectively have—a smile or a serious look, a word of praise or a rebuke, a favorable circumstance or a setback, can color with their bright or dark hues things with which they have no objective relation.

Growth in interior life does not depend on being sure of God's will. An exaggerated desire for certainty is the point where voluntarism joins up with sentimentalism. At times, our Lord allows a lack of certainty which, well focused, helps us to grow in rectitude of intention. The important thing is to abandon ourselves in his hands, for it is by trusting in him that peace is found.

The goal of our struggle is not to provoke pleasant feelings. Often we will have them; other times not. A brief examination can help us discover that perhaps we are seeking them more frequently than we think, if not for themselves, then as a sign that our struggle is being effective.

We will find this, for example, in feeling discouraged when faced with a temptation to which we have not given in but which persists; in becoming upset because we find something hard and, we think, it shouldn't be difficult for us; in noting displeasure because dedication does not bring with it the warm feelings we would like....

We have to struggle in what we can struggle in, without worrying about things that are not under our control. Our feelings are not totally subject to our will and we cannot try to make them so.

We have to learn to abandon ourselves, leaving the results of our struggle in God's hands, for only abandonment, trust in God, can overcome this unrest. If we want to be successful fishermen, we have to take our boat *in altum*, where we cannot reach the bottom. We have to overcome our desire to seek reference points, to be sure that we are going forward. But to attain this we have to rely on contrition.

⁷ Mt 8:26. Cf. Mt 14:31.

Beginning again

Simon and his companions followed our Lord's advice and *they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and . . . their nets were breaking.*⁸ Those who came to help them also benefited from their daring, and the two boats were filled to overflowing, almost to the point of sinking. Such an extraordinarily abundant catch led Peter to realize the closeness of God and to feel himself unworthy of such familiarity: *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*⁹ Nevertheless, a few minutes later, *they left everything and followed him.*¹⁰ And they were faithful till death.

Peter discovered our Lord in that extraordinary catch of fish. Would he have reacted the same way if his work the previous night had gone well? Perhaps not. Perhaps in an especially generous catch he would have recognized Christ's assistance, but he would not have realized how close God was and that he owed everything to him. In order for the miracle to touch Simon's soul, it was good that things had gone so badly the night before despite all his sincere effort.

Our Lord makes use of our defects to draw us to him, provided we make a sincere effort to overcome them. Therefore, in struggling, we have to love ourselves as we are, with our defects. Upon becoming man, the Word assumed the limitations that are part of the human condition, those against which we ourselves sometime rebel. On the path of identification with Christ, a key area is accepting our own limitations.

How often it is precisely the calm awareness of our own unworthiness that leads us to discover Christ at our side, because we see clearly that the fish we find in our net are not due to our own skill, but to God. And that experience fills us with joy and convinces us once more that it is contrition that leads us to advance in the interior life.

Then, like Peter, we throw ourselves at Jesus' feet, and we leave behind everything—including the extraordinary catch—to follow him, because only he matters to us.

Prompt contrition marks out the path of joy. "Your interior life has to be just that: to begin...and to begin again."¹¹ What deep joy our soul experiences when we discover in practice the meaning of these words! Never getting tired of beginning again: this is the secret of effectiveness and peace. Those who foster this attitude allow the Holy Spirit to work in their souls, cooperating with him, but without trying to take his place. They struggle with all their strength and with complete trust in God.

8 *Lk* 5:6

9 *Lk* 5:8.

10 *Lk* 5:11.

11 *The Way*, 292.