

CHRIST BY FAITH

G. PETRELLI

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DEDICATION

To those who love the Lord Jesus Christ.

G. Petrelli

TO THE READER

“Christ by Faith” was written in 1912 and published in the Italian language. Brother Petrelli wrote “Christ by Faith” one hundred years ago but the words are as alive and inspiring as the day they were written. Brother Petrelli was called to his heavenly home in 1957 but his inspiration and guidance lives on in his writings.

By the grace of God, I have had the privilege to translate and print twenty two of Brother Petrelli’s writings. Translating “Christ by Faith” has been a great blessing for me and I know it will be a blessing to all who read these pages with the desire to have a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

Mary Femino (nee Garippa)
Kearny, NJ
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Chapter 1

"THAT CHRIST MAY DWELL IN YOUR
HEARTS BY FAITH." (Ephesians 3:17-19)

All of us, many times, have seen mothers who guide reluctant children with loving persuasion. We have read that travelers who desire to reach the heights of great mountains must follow their guides faithfully. And we all know of having arrived at some experiences as a consequence of addresses received and followed.

The Christian aims for the highest ideal; but like the child and the traveler, he must follow a guide. The Word of the Scripture is the best guide; it leads one to the feet of the Savior. But precisely because it guides, the Scripture must be obeyed faithfully, even where it does not seem to harmonize with our opinions and experiences.

The Bible is the book of promises. However, each promise has one or more conditions. We must not question the honesty of one who promises without obeying the conditions, just as a sick one cannot question the effectiveness of a medicine without trying it.

Surely, one of the greatest promises of the Scripture is recorded in Ephesians 3:19: "And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God." However, this great promise follows the prayer of verses 16 and 17, of which it is a consequence: "That He would grant you...to be

strengthened with might by His spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. "*That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.*" Solomon wrote: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5) The apostle Paul goes even further and prays that Christ becomes, completely, the sovereign of our heart, the center of our thoughts and our affections. "To know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge." This is the point to which one must arrive, and then all that we know in other fields of knowledge will become nothing in comparison to the knowledge of the love of Christ.

The Christians of Ephesus, moved by various winds of doctrine, were in danger of following human teachings. And, perhaps, it could already be noticed there was too much discussion and too little faith. Hence the emphasis is given by the apostle to the word "faith." "Christ dwells in your hearts by faith;" faith, not knowledge, will be the consequence. Christ will dwell, not a principle, not an emotion or a motive, but a living Person. And that is the Christ that the Apostle preached; the Christ who died on Calvary for our sins, the Christ of the Resurrection, the Prince of life, the Christ for whom the believers are waiting. Such a personage, the only one Paul knew, must live in our hearts.

It is only after an intimate communion when we no longer live for ourselves, but Christ lives in us, that we can know His love. Peter had a similar experience when he exclaimed: "We believe (*first part*) and are sure

(*consequence*) that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (John 6:69)

The martyrs knew the love of Christ. They were called to choose between worship of the emperor or Christ; facing death, they had only one answer: “Christianus sum”- I am a Christian! Their words revealed a profound conviction which surprised their accusers and caused them to marvel. Some of the accusers accepted Christianity and elected martyrdom alongside those who were accused. Heroes like Stephen saw the glory of God and died blessing and forgiving his murderers.

We must also remember the heroes of the Oriental missions. The savages tore out the hearts of some of them in order to examine what made them sure of the love of God. They were unflinching in their duty and serene in the face of death.

By association of ideas, the ancient prophets come to mind, with their brief and precise messages: “Thus saith the Lord...” They seemed to be ambassadors who had just come from the court of a famous and powerful Sovereign and they were bringing absolute, incisive commands from him. Let us not forget it: such men had a sure knowledge of the love of God in their heart.

“Why are you trying to govern yourself while you cannot?” exclaimed St. Augustine. And it was not until the great man had accepted Christ by faith that the doubts that tormented him left him. Elsewhere,

Augustine says that without the guidance of the Lord he could not know anything.

Paul had thought thus before Augustine, and before and after Paul and Augustine other heroes of the faith thought this way. But alas! Many who try to come to the knowledge of Christ by means of their reasoning do not think this way. Only a fool would want to go his own way without the guidance of the Scripture, or follow directions different from the teachings of the Scripture!

True Christians do not hesitate to acknowledge their inability to understand Christ. They know that He Himself, the guest of the heart, must become the teacher of the intellect. And humble converted persons hasten to choose, along with the Psalmist, the place of the needy one, and to enter the program: to know Christ in the school of Christ.

Chapter 2

OBEDIENT TO THE HEAVENLY VISION (Acts
26:19)

It is not possible to speak suitably of Paul in a single meditation; the hours of certain men count for centuries in the history of humanity. We will focus our consideration briefly on the words that Paul addresses to King Agrippa in Acts 26:19. Paul's words cast an immense ray of light on the character and activity of the great apostle.

In this verse we read: "Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." These are the words that follow the exposition that the Apostle made to the king about the appearance of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and the order he received to witness the gospel before the Gentiles.

For this reason, not for anything else, but only for the motive that Jesus had appeared to him. Such was the reason for his long and laborious missionary career. The work of the Apostle Paul was immense and requires an adequate cause that explains it; and it cannot be found in the intrinsic strength of man, but rather in his obedience to a superior power. The explanation is plain and simple: "for that which I have shown," speaking to Agrippa of the appearing of Jesus on the road to Damascus, etc.

At this point it is good to take a step back, and to call the attention of the reader to Acts 20:23 and 24: "Save that the holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear..." And in Acts 21:10-12 we read that when Paul was living in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet and said, "Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle." His friends tearfully begged him not to depart, but the apostle answered that he was ready to die in Jerusalem. Like Christ, Paul had turned his face toward Jerusalem, ready to give his life for the cause that he followed.

There are different kinds of heroism. One who suffers an unexpected persecution serenely is, without doubt, a hero, but a much greater hero is one who sets out toward martyrdom, knowing he could avoid it; with each step he draws nearer, aware of the great hour of the trial. Paul also had to overcome the strong temptation that arose from the fact that those around him were advising him, at least for that time, not to set foot in the Jewish capitol. They would have been able to discourage the strongest man; however, the cause that pushed Paul forward was stronger than that power. The prophecy of Agabus was fulfilled, and we find the apostle chained and tranquil before Agrippa. "O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."

I was not. The apostle does not say I had not, or am not; but I *was not*, a continuous action. Not one day, one

month, or one year, but several years, continually progressing in an always larger vision, doing only one thing, and running toward the goal.

The apostle Paul was obedient not only in favorable circumstances, in the happy hours of success and surrounded by enthusiasm, but always; that is, even when others would feel their heart freeze; notwithstanding the envy, the slander and discord. Paul was obedient in spite of the ingratitude of those he loved most and by whom he was loved the least; in every condition of his agitated existence, in poverty as in abundance; notwithstanding a serious infirmity that always tormented him. Paul did not waver a single moment, even when, a few times, his work did not seem to bear fruit, and he met obstacles, or else he was received by the most discouraging indifference. And we know that indifference is more powerful than hatred.

St. Paul obeyed even when he had to change an entire plan of work in a moment, like when he was directed toward other regions, even though he had a vision of a pilgrim calling him to Macedonia. The source of Paul's marvelous life was the appearance of the Master. The great apostle was ready to obey orders.

The threefold question of a great thinker is noteworthy: From whence are you coming? Where are you? Where are you going? From whence, oh Paul, are you drawing the immense strength for all the activity? *From Christ.* Where are you Paul, in the moment that you speak to

Agrippa? *In Christ.* Where are you going; what is the goal of your career? *Christ.*

For St. Paul, death was considered gain. It would bring him to an encounter with Jesus, the sole object of his unceasing faith and the hope of his heart. There were no discussions about where heaven might be. An intimate friendship was being formed between him and Christ, increasing every year, never complete. Paul never forgot the voice he heard on the road to Damascus. However, he had never seen his Master face to face like the other apostles. And for such a personage he lived and suffered like no one else had lived and suffered, anxiously waiting for the day in which the "black servant," death, would present him forever to his Lord.

The apostle Paul is not the only one to whom the Master has spoken. There are many who have had, who in one way and who in another, heavenly apparitions and visions, *but they allow them to vanish.* Some follow for only a short time: few arrive to the goal. The coldness of the indifference that surrounds us destroys the enthusiasm of many who started, after having promised to persevere until the end. In order to reach the goal it is necessary to have in reserve an immense strength, and this is not human. It is necessary that the pilgrim, along the way that becomes increasingly arduous, it is necessary for the pilgrim to draw, without interruption, from the fountain of life: Christ Jesus. In other words, it is necessary to live in a persevering communion with the Lord.

In the history of Xerxes we read that in order to maintain his hatred against the Greeks alive, he gave orders to a slave to whisper in his ear every day at dinner time, the words: "Remember the Greeks." A Christian must always keep the infinite love of his Lord in mind.

Finally, allow us to present an image to the reader: that of a gymnast who can walk on a tightrope in the presence of people who watch in astonishment. All his attention is fixed on a certain point, while he uses all his strength to stay in control of the center of gravity of his body. He looks neither to the right nor the left, but directly ahead. The crowd does not disturb him; a slight disobedience to this law and he would be lost. Thus a Christian is not distracted to the right or the left, running after the noise of the world. Whatever they say or think of him does not matter to him. Forward, always obedient to the voice that calls him so that he may be able, like Paul, to say in turn: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

Chapter 3

JESUS CHRIST, THE SAME YESTERDAY, TODAY
AND FOREVER
(Hebrews 13:8)

Baron Humboldt describes the earthquake that decimated Cumae. All the earth around him was trembling; a short distance away he saw trees and houses being swallowed up by abysses that were opening in the ground. There was not a hand's-breadth of earth on which he could safely put his foot. And, in the midst of so much ruin, lifting his eyes to the vault of heaven, like other times, he found it blue and immovable.

The principal object of the letter to the Hebrews is to put the excellence of Jesus in prominence, superior to everything and everyone. St. Paul moves quickly from one comparison to another with a sure language. At first sight, verse 8 of Chapter 13 appears to be isolated, with no immediate connection to the verse that precedes it, nor with that which follows it. A solitary verse, towering in the midst of all the beautiful verses of the letter to the Hebrews, it is a gem of incalculable value that shines and stands out in the collection of rare and precious jewels: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today and forever." There is great strength in the brevity of such language.

All of chapter 13 is an exhortation. However, in verse 8, it seems that Paul wants to give greater emphasis to all that he has said, and uses an unforgettable expression that looks like a sensation that is observed unexpectedly and immediately lost from sight, but one that left a lasting remembrance for his entire life.

We will reverently attempt to write about a few of the many beauties of the verse and if the whole panorama is not given to us to admire, we will point out those points that we retain to be more important, asking the reader to meditate them better on his own. And before continuing, we want to testify of the comfort that we have often found in the words of the text. This verse is, indeed, a great encouragement of faith.

The immediate idea that follows the reading of Hebrews 13:8 is that of immutability and perpetuity. Jesus Christ is superior to time. When did He begin? When will He finish? The writer remembers the sublime language of the Psalmist (Psalm 102:27) who, in his afflictions, appealed to God who is immutable above all things that change.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.” The strength and depth of His doctrine don’t go out of style and do not become faded from generation to generation or with changing customs. The glory of men is of short duration; that which is important today will be unimportant tomorrow: the heroes of one age are forgotten in the next generations. If Hannibal, Caesar and Napoleon were to appear among us they would

appear to us to be entirely strange. The ruins of monuments that were to testify of men or of famous events are proof of the uselessness of attempts to make human events survive over the centuries. And even the most ardent enthusiasm yields to the slow but inexorable force of time.

Instead, Jesus Christ does not pass; He is the contemporary of all the ages. Every generation finds interest in Him. There is no conquest of progress or height of concept that leaves Him behind; the pioneer humanitarians of all ages will have Him as an unsurpassable model. Jesus is the ideal that marked the way to many heroes and martyrs of preceding centuries. He is the same today and points out to us ways not yet discovered.

We admire some men; however, not always in the same way. A person who was highly esteemed by us at one time appears different with the passing of years. Many enthusiasms grow pale in the face of increased experience and no true greatness can remain immaculate for long under a very close examination. It is a very prudent counsel given by some writers: in order to maintain friendship one cannot be too curious about personal particulars. There would be no friendship without compassion, or it would end in a short time. But Jesus is always a friend: we do not discover any defect in Him; rather, the passing of time renders Him more intimate and admired.

There are some who live in the past; they nourish a predilection for great historic heroes; and yet, even such hero worship does not last, or, at least it is not maintained at the same level. One may cultivate the imagination as much as one wants, but the study of other books and biographies of other men belittle the hero who evoked such admiration. Whereas, the hero Jesus appears always greater to us, in the measure that we keep moving forward. Perhaps there is no way to know Him better than to study the greatest men that lived and ascertain that none of them can be compared to Him.

A French writer who denied the divinity, conceded the divinity of Jesus in a full sense, when he exclaimed: "your hero worship will never grow old." Is there anything in this world that doesn't grow old?

Jesus is always the same. He is the same with everyone: beneficent like the light, warming indiscriminately those who do not hide from the rays of His love. He is the same in the house of the Pharisee and the Publican; before the Roman official and before Herod and Pilate, the same with the Samaritan. Jesus was always the same dignified meek figure. In every place, Jesus was in His proper place. Men are not always the same. Permit us two references: In an interesting Russian novel there is a portrait of a man who was working in the office of his boss in an administrative position, in the humiliating and unwilling role of a slave and flatterer. As he was leaving the office he proudly stood up straight, whereas, a few minutes before he was bowed down. In the presence of the workers he assumed the hard, cruel, savage and

arrogant expression of authority. Proud now: cowardly shortly before.

No, men are not always the same. They do not treat everyone from the same point of view and with the same equity and love.

Victor Hugo describes a woman who was all tenderness toward her only little daughter. In her mother's eyes, the little girl never had enough clothing, toys and food. He also describes the cruel and merciless ill-treatment with which that woman, at the same time that she was heaping caresses on her daughter, was victimizing a poor little orphan girl who had been entrusted to her. She was sending her out to do hard work in the inclement weather of a harsh winter barefoot, hungry and poorly dressed. There were no caresses for her; only incredible torture.

No, men are not the same. We are moved by sympathy and antipathy: we do not see the wickedness of some, and we exaggerate a small defect in another. It is different with Jesus: We enjoy equal rights before Him.

Someone in a multitude said to Him: "Behold, thy mother and thy brethren..." And Jesus answered: "Who is my mother or my brethren..." "Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother." (Mark 3: 33-35) All of humanity is the family of Jesus and that is why the title Son of Man is due Him. Jesus Christ is always the same, whatever the changeable opinion men may have of Him.

The historical Jew assigns the place of Master to Him, believing to honor Him beside Hillel and Philo. (Note: Hillel was a leader of the Jewish people and Philo was a Jewish philosopher). The sociologist qualifies Jesus as a great humanitarian. Schools try to define Him; adversarial critics believe they will demolish Him, and often say that they have done so. Schools, opinions and systems, however, are not always the same, but Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today, and in eternity. Above the barbaric tumult the forehead of Christ is lifted up and remains serene and eternal.

Even today Jesus has the same compassion toward those who call upon Him. "Have mercy on me," was the cry of the poor people who ran to Him when he was walking in Palestine. The same cry bursts forth from thousands of souls: "Have mercy on me, oh Lord." And He feels the same compassion today and has the same beneficent touch. *Jesus does not send anyone away with empty hands.*

It is necessary to emphasize this truth: Jesus is the same. Many systems are maintained for a certain time in memory of the founder, but they do not survive for long, at least not without undergoing profound changes. Jesus is not a system or a remembrance. He is the Living One, and is not sought only in the past.

Oh the comfort of this assurance! Images and figures are not sufficient to give prominence to the greatness of the words: "Jesus Christ is the same today." There are no boundaries in the ocean, but the pilot is sure of the way

as he is confident in the indication of the compass. The rising and setting of the sun in the boundless plain of the desert indicates the way to the traveler. Elsewhere, the vertex of a high mountain is used for direction. A traveler who traverses unknown lands would become lost if he looked down. He is attentive to one of the above-mentioned points of orientation, and his tired eye rests in anticipation of the joy of arrival.

A Christian often loses courage. If Jesus were not alive, one would turn back one hundred times, not one; but the reassuring and sure voice of the Master comes to him. Jesus Christ passed through similar pains and tiredness, comforting and having compassion. The pilgrim resumes his walk protected by the company of the same Jesus who lived, suffered and performed miracles in Palestine.

Forward, therefore, Christian reader, strengthened by the promise: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and always."

Chapter 4

WHOM SHALL YE SERVE? (Joshua 24)

It was the last great public act in the life of Joshua. He gathered the elders of Israel in Shechem and reminded them of the marvels that God had worked in favor of the people, delivering them from many enemies and giving them a land flowing with milk and honey. He exhorted them to fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth and to put away the strange gods that were among them, or to select, right then, what strange divinity they preferred to serve, warning them that they would certainly fall into idolatry and their transgressions would not be forgiven.

Joshua was a very great man. The Scripture presents his entire eulogy in the words "Servant of the Lord." He learned how to serve God by long experience, and knew what it meant to be faithful to Him although surrounded by many who were corrupt. When he was sent to explore the Promised Land, he and Caleb encouraged the people to take possession of it, whereas all the other explorers advised against entering into Canaan saying it was inhabited by giants against whom the Hebrews would be like locusts. And of an entire generation that perished in the desert, only Joshua and Caleb, monuments of faith, set foot in the Promised Land. The last discourse of Joshua was the synthesis of his marvelous life: he did not glorify himself, but the Lord.

It is necessary to remember the benefits that we receive; in fact, we are much more apt to remember the evil and not the good received. In all the Scripture we see represented with insistence the picture of the favors that God bestowed liberally upon the elect people. Joshua thought it was good to reawaken the record of the history of Israel, and, seeing it surrounded by strange divinities, invited them to choose between pagan worships and service to the true God. He warned them that in any case, he and his family would serve the Lord.

“Choose you this day whom ye will serve...” *Today*: there was no reason to delay: *whom ye will serve*; that is, either the Lord or the gods served in Egypt, or the gods of the land where they were.

The hypothesis of not serving any divinity was not foreseen. Throughout his long experience Joshua did not encounter a people without religion. From the abominable idolatry of Egypt and from the heinous worship of the Canaanites they were warned that if Israel strayed away from the Lord they would imitate the people near them. Nor had Joshua forgotten the sad story of the golden calf that was built in the absence of Moses.

Serving—this word sounds harsh. Many would like to not find it in the Scripture. However, even if the word were taken out of the dictionary, the fact remains in life, men have always served; and the history of humanity shows us that those who served God were the most free. Our heart must be occupied by an ideal. If it does not follow

the truth and that which is good (God is truth and absolute goodness), it will go after evil.

In Hebrew history we never find the people without a religion. Pagan altars and worship were introduced in the place of the God of Israel. And we find religious degradation is always accompanied by moral and political decay of the people.

Pilate said: "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered: "We have no king but Caesar." In order to see Jesus condemned, on that occasion the Jews who hated the Roman government declared themselves to be faithful, voluntary subjects of the emperor. The history of the Jews is a demonstration of the fatal error that people commit in distancing themselves from service to God. How many martyrs, how many Jews sold into slavery... "We have no king—but Caesar!"

Jesus said: "I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive." (John 5:43)

Whom should we serve? Much time has gone by, and it is still timely to repeat Joshua's question today. We are still surrounded by idolatry, with Egypt at our backs and the Canaanites around us.

It is a tremendous illusion to think that one does not have to serve God. Aside from the slavery of our egoism that can be silenced only by the love of Christ, if we are far from God we run the danger of falling into the religions

of other people. And indeed what is this movement from the West that wants to introduce Buddhism? We acknowledge that it is rich in excellent maxims but it has not been able to improve the condition of the people who have followed it. The Hebrews had the example of Canaan before them that was enough to make the excellence of the religion of Israel stand out. The Christian people have before them the sad condition of women in India and elsewhere, not to mention others, enough to appreciate the merit of the religion of the Gospel.

And before finishing, I would like to repeat what the great old Russian man has written of his youth far from God: "The sum of the sufferings that I have tasted in my life that was happy according to the world would suffice to form a martyr of Christ." (Tolstoy from "Martyr of Judea")

Therefore let us choose, as we have two ways before us: *God or mammon, or Christ or antichrist.*

And, after what we have said, the words of the Master seem to be more reasonable and full of love: "Take my yoke upon you" (therefore, there are other yokes)... "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Chapter 5

THE POWER OF CHRISTIANITY

“... Truly this was the Son of God.” (Matthew 27:54)

The various denominations of Christianity have not always been nor are they in harmony among themselves. In the face of many studies on the doctrine, often confused or contradictory, I have asked myself many times, how can Christianity, travailed by so much discord for centuries, always make progress in its triumphant ascension? There is only one answer: it possesses in its heart an infinite power that human things do not have, and this power is Christ, Son of Man and Son of God. And so that which could cause discouragement in some, in the face of the question: If it is the truth why are there so many contrasts and divisions? This in itself, I say, is a demonstration of the truth. In fact, if it is a lie, why hasn't it fallen, travailed by discord and divisions? Things out of their natural state do not last. All that is false may shine for a time but is destined to perish.

Before proceeding we wish to clarify that the power we speak of is that intimate force in events and men that assures the triumph of great ideals above and in the face of obstacles that seem to be insurmountable.

And going back to the origins of Christianity, we ask ourselves: Was primitive Christianity powerful or influential? If, for influence, we understand the support

that it receives or gives by human relations, Christianity did not have influence. For example, Paul, chained before Felix and then Festus and Agrippa, did not have influence; he could not command even one soldier, but he was powerful in the resolute message that he gave even in those conditions. In the prisons of Rome he was not influential, but powerful. Influential men are not always powerful: rather the contrary is often the case.

We are examining primitive Christianity. The strength of the message was not due to the influence of learned men, but to the heroism of its followers. The greatest revolutions that have changed the course of society were often the effect of events that wiser and more reasonable men perhaps would not have advised. The first revolution of the common people in Rome was provoked principally by the sight of an old man, bowed with age, who was going to be enslaved for debts contracted during the war of the republic that he had defended in many battles, as witnessed by the scars on his bare chest. It was a pitiful scene that determined the life of Giuseppe Mazzini, who, as a young man, watched in pain as the Piedmontese exiles departed. And it was the tombs of illustrious men that awakened the fervor for the studies on Vittorio Alfieri. We could multiply examples, but we will restrict ourselves to the theme.

Jesus never attempted to prove God: whoever drew near Him in sincerity felt that this proof was not necessary. His words were simple, and had a power that made one marvel... therefore, we appeal to Him to explain the beginning of the great movement.

Men without means were proclaiming the ideal of Christianity before two dreadful enemies: Paganism and Judaism, and these simple men were victorious while it seemed that they had been defeated. There were martyrs who maintained such a serene composure in the face of death that their accusers were converted. Clemente Alessandrino cites that in the martyrdom of James of Zebedee, the accuser was converted and executed together with the accused.

From one generation to the next, from century to century, Christianity has handed down a sacred deposit that has always found a group of heroes ready to give their lives as a testimony. New followers increased by the example of others, and these others who suffered saw other examples before them. Going back to the past we come to the apostles whose assurance caused their enemies to say that they had been with the Galilean. In fact, the living Christ was in the apostles.

The opponents of Christianity marveled at how the apostles loved each other. The opponents tried many times to destroy the tree but they could never reach the roots. A human Christianity would have been destroyed one thousand times.

The theme is so vast and presents so much material that it has not been easy to limit it. And since it is clear that the power of Christianity is Christ, and that going back from the effects to the cause we arrive at Christ, we wish

to pick, in all of the life of the Lord Jesus, one moment to describe Him alone, if possible.

It is not easy to speak of Jesus dying. Christians who have been tried by long experiences and who are given to serious study have confessed their inability to treat the grandiose theme of the crucifixion and death of the Lord adequately, a few hours that centuries have not succeeded to illustrate adequately. And it is with trembling, with extreme reverence, that we attempt to contemplate the dying Jesus.

Humanly speaking Jesus was defeated. All his human demolishment culminates in that human cry: "I thirst." But in reality He is the victor, and His victory is expressed in another cry: "It is finished."

So much power in so much forsaken desolation has never been observed. And it is in that forsaken desolation that superhuman power blazed forth with an immense light. Lifted upon the cross, in the hour of extreme ignominy, He attracted men to Himself: *marvelous*. At the foot of the cross, among others, there was a Roman soldier, who, religiously speaking, was indifferent to the questions of Judaism. This soldier had a rank, he was a centurion, a seasoned soldier who had experienced dangers and had been present at many executions and crucifixions; therefore, the spasms of crucified ones would not make an impression on him. His position made him, if not cruel, insensitive or indifferent.

Well then: I have tried many times to study this man at the foot of the cross. What must he think or feel facing Jesus? As soon as the centurion saw Jesus lifted up on the cross, he heard the crucified one pronounce a few words; he listened. It was the prayer of Jesus for His enemies: "Father, forgive them..." These were new words to that pagan ear. How is it that this man dies crucified and prays for His crucifiers! The rough soldier is shaken. Later, it is a simple and moving scene: Jesus now recommends the mother to John; still another picture: Jesus does not answer when insulted by a thief. When He was appealed to by the other thief He promised: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise." These words were even stranger to that ear. What could that man promise when He was in such a miserable condition? And yet that expression was not from one who was disillusioned or a fanatic; that serene intonation could only be from one who was sure. As he was close to Jesus, the soldier listened to other words, and with the words he was attracted to consider the entire attitude of the young, dying man. Jesus was suffering painful spasms and convulsions of His members; but He showed an attitude in which there appeared nothing bitter or undignified. What is this, the soldier was thinking. And later he saw that visage become animated and listened. Jesus said: "All is finished." What could be finished, thought the soldier. Yet that statement that was so complete and so sure was serious and dignified. Later, it was the moment of extreme agony; the soldier contemplated Jesus and gathered His last words: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And he bowed His head and died.

The soldier followed Jesus' words and movements and was attracted by an invisible power. Jesus expired, and together with the testimony of the elements, one hears the cry of the pagan soldier, the first testimony that the world gave for Christ, from His death. What the soldier must have experienced in Jesus' death is not possible for us to say. But his exclamation is an index of what developed in that short time. Nobody had died like that young man, *nobody*. And the soldier cried out forcefully, "truly this man was the Son of God." Truly! Such was the power of Christ precisely in the moment that He appeared to be least powerful.

If someone were able to write, it would take an entire volume to study only that which passed through the heart of the soldier at the foot of the cross and all that occurred until that powerful cry: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" If indeed someone could write such a book, he would present the greatest volume of religious psychology to the world.

But who can analyze all the marvelous ways by which that which is divine makes its way into the human soul? The facts remain; we ascertain them; that is all. Many times we have tried to convince men by our reasoning; perhaps we may succeed in confounding, but never in persuading. Only Christ has the power of persuasion. A portion of His life, presented with reverence, prepared by prayer, under the light of the Holy Spirit, a single portion, we say, makes its way into the heart of many listeners in an admirable way. How does this happen, why does it happen? We have no human reasons. This

power that is invisible, but which we feel, constrains and dominates us.

And have you, friend reader, noticed what extraordinary power there is when in the middle of the most learned and eloquent discourse a single phrase of Christ is cited? How it becomes separated from the rest of the discourse and makes the hearts of the listeners quiver?

In whatever place, even among the most profane blasphemers and the most indifferent, among voices most hostile to religion, before the most skeptical crowd, let us try this as many times as we want: if we are filled with the love of Jesus, pronounce His name and refer to a single one of His expressions and we will observe something like an electric current. *At least someone will be touched.*

Oh the extraordinary power of Christ! If we are convinced of this power and if we live in communion with Christ, our work, weak as it may be, will assume an extraordinary strength, supported by the immense, invincible strength by which many will cry out the words of the Roman soldier: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

Chapter 6

MESSAGE OF BETHLEHEM

I. The Three Worlds

One of the marvelous pages I remember reading with pleasure is the prologue, "The two worlds" in "The Wandering Hebrew" by E. Sue. In the book, two great sinners were condemned to wander until the redemption of their soul. After going through a hurricane, coming from different directions, they hoped to see each other at the extreme confines of the world. They seemed to be close to each other, when there was a moment of luminous refraction caused by the aurora borealis at the narrow Bering Canal, but the light vanished quickly, and they continued their solitary walk by different directions. This writing suggested to me the title of this writing: "The three worlds."

"At the birth of Christ, three continents were united at the manger of Bethlehem. Europe was represented by Herod and the power of Rome; Asia was represented by the Magi and the wisdom of Persia; Africa was represented by the flight of the baby Jesus into Egypt, the ancient house of the people of Israel." Thus wrote a great thinker.

These continents had three specific and almost irreconcilable characters. On one hand there was the

active and practical element of the Roman people; on the other the meditative, intellectual element of Persia; and Egypt gave the idea of a life beyond the tomb.

Each of these three elements lived in its own sphere. There had always been a profound antipathy between Egypt and Asia, and Rome desired to bring its banner everywhere and to impose strong laws. However, these three ideals, each incomplete in themselves, but forming a grandiose unity, were not to perish, and all three were united in the divine baby at the cradle of Bethlehem.

The Romans lived a practical life, and Jesus was industrious and energetic and such activity contrasted with the tired social climate of the Orientals. But His energy was tempered in an admirable way by sweet and profound contemplation. Persians loved their quiet hours but Jesus was the true friend of solitude, into which He would withdraw, tired from long labor, to live in communion with His Father. Jesus was more active and contemplative than anyone before or after Him may have been and the immense activity did not produce a bitter character, nor did the contemplation make Him a dreamer.

Jesus opened a new field to energy and thought. To these two elements I add a third. In Egypt, the land of the pyramids, the tombs of the Pharaohs have stood for centuries and symbolize immortality. The Egyptians took great care in embalming cadavers they intended to preserve from the ravages of time. And Jesus represented life. Before the memorial of Lazarus, in

answer to the grieving Martha, He explained: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." (John 11:25, 26)

Active, contemplative, immortal, the three factors are united in a single man. The three worlds represent the three sides of the human need: Jesus understands all three. These three principles had had three special means of expansion. Roman activity propagated itself by material strength; Persia expanded with an apparent wisdom and the immortality of Egypt spread with the durability of its monuments. Now Jesus has entrusted these three elements to a different method of expansion. To the short-lived kingdom of violence, He has substituted the eternal dominion of love; to the pretense of wisdom, the simplicity of the hearts; to the hardness of material works, faith in the Savior. Therefore, conquer the world with love, open your heart to the divine mysteries with the simplicity of a child and live in eternity by faith.

But there was something that the past did not know, or to which it had not paid attention. The cry of millions of sufferers, always heard but never answered, that also arrived to the cradle of Bethlehem. Jesus, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, answered that cry with His tenderness and compassion. He brought the active strength, wisdom and immortality down to the level of the misfortunes, and moved by compassion, He went around doing good.

At the cradle of Bethlehem the three worlds shook hands, and the sorrows found consolation; a new epoch arose, little noticed at the start, but they gave a different direction to the history of humanity.

II. Joy for Another

“And the angel said unto them, fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10, 11) I desire to call attention to the words “great joy.” The angel announced that people would have great joy. And yet, this promise of “great joy” was, more than anything, a prophecy. The people did not have joy; instead, we know that all Jerusalem was troubled. However, the shepherd of Bethlehem, the old man Simeon, the prophetess Anna, and heaven rejoiced for the birth of Jesus.

Joy for another. We express ourselves in two ways for or against the good of others. We are sorry or we congratulate. Of these two expressions the first is, in most cases, the most sincere; we are more disposed to feel sorrow for another’s misfortune rather than joy for another’s success. The condolence of your friend for your misfortune will indeed be more profound than his joy when fortune smiles on you. The Lord Jesus Christ taught us what it means to suffer for another, and He also left us a picture of what it means to rejoice for another. Jesus was joyous by nature, and sad only for the sin of humanity. We read in Luke 10:21 that “Jesus rejoiced in

the spirit." That was one of the rare occasions when Jesus manifested joy, because men did not grant Him many similar occasions. The seventy had returned, full of joy, from their mission and the Lord was rejoicing because of their happiness, because He saw in that joy the distant vision of that which is pure and serene in the kingdom of heaven. The last meaning of the joy of Jesus is that it passed through the heart of His Father.

There is joy for another, and it must be unselfish, above domestic and social ties, a joy that makes one happy for the good itself. Such a joy was announced to the shepherds of Bethlehem; the message came down from Heaven, because true joy comes only from Heaven. Sadness rises from the bosom of humanity without Christ.

Perhaps it is because of this that the literature and art of all times and places has presented sadness very well, but has come short in the description of joy; even if they have attempted to describe it they have not been able to free it from the uneasiness that is the insidious poison of every human happiness. The Land of Dante is firm and sure in describing the Inferno; it trembles and almost falls in Paradise.

The words of the angel, "great joy," are prophetic. And when the cradle of Bethlehem shall be a cause of joy, *fear will cease*. And this will happen if men dispose themselves, in humble expectation, to receive Jesus Christ. All other possible joys are included in this. From joy in the Lord it is easy to come down to love for

our neighbor. Then the happiness of one will truly be the happiness of another. This is also a message of the cradle of Bethlehem: joy for another is a gift from God.

Chapter 7

SIMEON

“And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus ... Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word...” (Luke 2:25-29)

“And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon.” The way the Scripture presents its personages is noteworthy. *Behold* serves to call the reader to attention. “There was in Jerusalem a man.” Others may perhaps have said: “Simeon, who was from Jerusalem,” but here the city is mentioned first. Jerusalem was the political and religious capital of the Judaic world: thus the beginning is more characteristic. It’s like saying that in that religious city there was a man: in one city, one, his name was Simeon. With such an introduction, it is right for us to expect to know something marvelous about this man, to hear great works of his life. And yet, what was said of him was not apt to draw the attention of any historian. Simeon was an unknown man to the world, but not before the Lord.

“...Simeon. And the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.” This is the intimate biography of a man who was isolated in an indifferent world.

He was “just.” It does not mean that he was without sin, but that he behaved the best that he could and knew what life should be according to the dictates of the word of God and his conscience. A sense of surprise would invade us if we had no familiarity with the Scripture. In Jerusalem there was a just man. What’s new in that? Were there not, are there not in the cities several honest men. But the language of the Scripture does not surprise us because we are used to these contrasts and because the judgments of the world are not those of the word of God.

And there was more about Simeon. He was “religious.” At first sight it seems to us superfluous to say he was religious. We are in Jerusalem, and there is a temple, around which many religious people live. How can it be explained that Simeon, who was isolated from all the activity in Jerusalem was called “religious?”

Religious is a word that has been much abused in all times; but in our text it has a special meaning. Someone has translated “religious” to mean “devout,” someone else “pious.” But in the original language it is a compound word that has a rich meaning that also means “devout” or “pious,” but makes one think of something else. The literal translation is “easy to be taken;” as of a person on whom one can depend; “Easy to be taken,

won." Taken, won by what? By the men of the world? No, because Simeon was an upright man and as such he was not yielding to the pressures of the world. He was won, taken by the word of God.

Permit us to emphasize further on this point. Why use the Greek word that in its strict meaning is translated "easy to be taken?" Because the religious man must be, above all, humble, and more than humble, yielding to the work of the Lord. The same truths are preached to many, and only a few believe them, because few open their heart to the light, and like simple children, receive the blessings. The majority listen to themselves while something is being announced. Simeon was like a little child; he believed the prophecies; *just* refers to the tenor of his life; *religious* to his attitude toward the promises of the Lord. And this disposed him to more: "...waiting for the consolation of Israel."

Such a man had an ideal, and he was waiting. He had a purpose in life; certainly he had many secondary aims in life, as everyone does; but one was the pivot of his existence, and he was aiming for that. A man who has a single and great ideal cannot be weak, because those who are strong aim with perseverance toward a single point.

"He was waiting for the consolation of Israel." Waiting is one of the most difficult secrets of life. As a rule, when men have an ideal they want to be active and industrious in order to hasten it and waiting is not easy. Many virtues are tested by the lapse of time. We do not

know how long Simeon waited, but it seems to be many years.

Others like him knew of the same promise in the Scripture; but perhaps they no longer paid attention to it. And Simeon was waiting. "And the Holy Spirit was upon him."

It is well to keep the order in mind: "just, devout, waiting, and the Holy Ghost was upon him." That is, the Holy Spirit had come upon such a man who was just, religious and patiently waiting. The Spirit of prophecy returned to be awakened after four hundred years, precisely on the eve of the coming of the Messiah.

Waiting, until when? "And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

How had it been revealed to him? Perhaps by means of a special messenger or by an audible voice to his physical ear? No. Perhaps he had been waiting for many years thinking that the coming of the Messiah was possible during his life. Certainly, Simeon was living with this expectation when, we do not know how, he had a special revelation. "Simeon, the one you are waiting for will come during your life. It is not important that you know in what year, but before you see death." What if it were merely an illusion? Certainly, we may deceive ourselves and exchange our voice for that of the Spirit. Yes, there is such a danger; but we remember that Simeon lived his

life for many years in such a way that he had become responsive and sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Those who have waited a long time can better understand the subject we are dealing with. Simeon waited a long time. There was nothing happening around him to justify the revelation he received; the world was going its way. And if he spoke to anyone about his waiting, he received very little encouragement. And, perhaps someone, shrugging their shoulders, may have looked at the old man asking themselves if he was in his right mind. "I will not see death if first I have not seen the Christ of the Lord." Simeon was repeating this to himself, and perhaps he was saying it to others.

And the days, months and years were passing: *nothing*. The old man continued in sincere waiting. Each morning he would say to himself: "perhaps today," and every evening he closed his eyes to rest after having collected his thoughts about the past revelation. And the voice of the Spirit did not leave him: "continue to wait." He lived in the world, but like a scene from a dream, or similar to one who traverses a space with his eyes fixed on something or someone beyond the place through which he is passing.

Did Simeon suffer? Certainly he suffered like all who live for that which is not of this world. On the face of men, Simeon was reading anything but the confirmation of the voice of the Spirit; and the place where he lived spoke to him of other things; but, continually, from the

depths of his heart there returned the sweet, penetrating voice: "Simeon, wait."

And the day came. One morning, quite early I suppose, Simeon arose with an unusual sense of contentment. He had slept little that night, and an inexplicable joy invaded him. He did not know exactly why, but the Spirit was telling him that something new and great was about to happen. The old man looked around himself: nothing new; the same rising of the sun, the same Jerusalem, the same men, but Simeon was not the same. A stronger voice was making itself heard: "Simeon, get moving." And Simeon left the house, following the direction indicated to him by the Spirit. "And he came by the Spirit into the temple." He met nothing new along the road, but the voice kept telling him "forward" and he found himself at the temple. There was silence around him, nothing outside or inside that alluded to the seriousness of that voice. But he is sure: his heart is burning, and the Spirit is moving him now more than ever. At a certain point two persons, a man and a woman enter; they seem to be two strangers and the woman has a baby in her arms. It is clear that they are coming to the temple for the presentation of the baby. There was nothing extraordinary in this; similar scenes occurred constantly without anyone noticing. Those two pilgrims must be quite poor, as shown by their clothing and confirmed by their offering of a pair of turtledoves that was permitted only for those who did not have the means to bring a lamb. But Simeon did not have time to examine and consider. Notice the language of the Scripture: "When the parents brought in the child Jesus;"

that is, as soon as he saw them... What happens? The old man stands erect, an immense light shines on his face; it seems that forty years of life fell away from him, and he moves nimbly as a child. He runs toward the two pilgrims. The insistent and sure voice that has guided him says to him: "there they are." Who, that poor baby? Simeon does not hesitate. He runs to that baby, and, trembling, overcome by emotion, he takes the baby from his mother's arms who allows him to do so, and begins to bless God. Simeon had lived for that instant that marks the meeting of the age that was ending and of the aura of life.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." Fancy that! Simeon's eyes saw what? A baby poorly dressed and poorly presented, and for whom no letters of invitation were sent out. There was no doubt or hesitation in Simeon; that tender child was for him no less than the Christ of the Lord. And all this with such a shabby appearance! But let us not forget who guided Simeon and at the appearance of Jesus, the Spirit moved him with the force and ardor of a love that had tenderly calmed his soul for a long time. The old man was attracted to that child by an extraordinary power; he took him in his arms and began to give glory to the Lord. Picture it in your imagination. In his extraordinary joy, and blessing God with a loud voice, moved with emotion, Simeon exclaimed with assurance: "For mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Let us suppose that a stranger came by the place where the little group was at that moment, and stopped to watch and to listen to Simeon. The stranger might think: "what's the matter with that old man, he must be out of his mind." The stranger might have thought Simeon was crazy. But Simeon would not have paid attention to the scornful face. He was blessing God: he had seen the Christ of the Lord! "For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: A light to illuminate the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel."

For Simeon, the Messiah was not a local liberator, but the light and the Savior of the world; Savior of the Gentiles and the Jews. "And Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against. Yea a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." The shadow of the cross must project itself on Mary and on all who would receive Jesus: *Falling before rising; dying before living.*

Simeon witnessed; he did not look for anything else. "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word." That is, according to your revelation. Simeon was ready to die. He was ready to see Jesus and then die. It was such a powerful joy that he expected nothing else in the world. "Release now thy servant." Simeon was old and tired, and it seemed that all his

energy and strength had been kept tight during that long expectation. But now he had nothing else to see or to wait for. "Release me from the world." It is not seeing Jesus and ceasing to live; but it is to see Jesus and then to see death; ceasing from the scene of this earth in order to begin to truly live.

Christ by faith; then leave this world.

The Jews were waiting for a Messiah that would come with splendor; few saw the Messiah in Jesus the Christ. But the ideas that many formed afterwards of the Christ do not allow them to see the Lord's return in the Scripture; they do not expect the return of the Lord in person. There were few then who were waiting and saw; there are few now who are waiting and will meet Jesus. Reader, are you among the few?

Chapter 8

THE VOICE IN THE DESERT

“Then said they unto him, who art thou? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” (John 1:22, 23)

At the beginning of this meditation, we cannot help but recall the writings of a great Italian poet who wrote of a nobleman and a poet who met in the same burial place. The nobleman was puffed up with pride because of the long list of his ancestors. Disdaining the closeness of the obscure poet, the nobleman said: “Move over scoundrel!”

In this writing we will attempt, the best that we can, to outline the elevated and humble figure of John the Baptist. At the same time we will offer some reflections on the eternal “I”, the cause of so much misery and pain. May the Lord help us to receive our lesson from the theme we have chosen.

John the Baptist is one of the greatest personages of the Scripture. His ministry took place just on the eve of that of Christ, and because the gospels occupied themselves about Jesus and John at the same time, our eye goes instinctively to the contemplation of the Master. The morning star, herald of the day, grows pale and fades away at the rising of the sun, but it is always a star of the

first order that the patient astronomer loves to contemplate in the clear dawn.

John the Baptist came into the world irradiated by a prophetic light that preceded him by several centuries. His birth came about in a marvelous way and made his calling even greater. John the Baptist represented an important part in the history of Christianity. He descended from a father and mother who came from a long line of people dedicated to religious service. Zacharias was descended from Abia and Elisabeth was descended from the daughters of Aaron. If naming ancestors would give one the right to boast, then John the Baptist had much about which to boast.

We know very little about his life before his public ministry, but enough to admire him. "The hand of the Lord was with him. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel." He spent thirty years in the discipline of a very pure life, occupied in meditation and prayer. He lived in contact with nature and his soul was nourished by the highest religious ideal.

The simplest food available around him was enough for nourishment. He ate locusts and wild honey. Even his clothing was humble. "John was clothed with camel's hair and with a girdle of skins about his loins." He took as little as possible of the goods of this world, and his cares were all on a high level toward the great ideal of his life: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." (Mark 1:3)

He was about thirty years old when he came out of the desert into Judea, preaching: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2) Being young, vibrant and intellectual, he must have been tempted to enjoy the prime of his life, but the strength of his existence had been entirely condensed in his vigorous and tireless ministry. "Repent" was his cry; the sound of his powerful voice which would get lost in the expanse of the desert, made the hearers, who came in great number, shudder. "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan." (Matthew 3:5) There was a powerful energy and a savage disdain toward sin in that poorly fed young man dressed in camels' hair. To the Pharisees and Sadducees he cried: "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7)

Such a man had the highest and strangest qualities. St. John was an austere and fascinating preacher who was drawing people to him from everywhere. And to those people who came he was speaking of another who would come after him, mightier than he, whose shoes he was not worthy to bear. This herald, a severe preacher of penitence, earned the love and devotion of the multitudes.

John's name became known in the court of Herod, who desired to see him. Later on, Herod listened to John willingly. Herod would have feared and respected St. John until the end if he had not been subjected to the fatal influence of Herodias.

John, the name itself was a symbol of grace. None of his ancestors were named John. His name had been suggested by the Holy Spirit.

The testimonies that the contemporaries of John rendered of him are marvelous. Even after his death the veneration surrounded him. At one time the Pharisees, for fear of the people who remembered John the Baptist with love, did not dare to answer Jesus as to whether the baptism of John was from God or from men. And the testimony that Jesus gave of him is: "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." (Luke 7:28)

That's not all: This young prophet, a strong and eloquent preacher who was loved by the people and feared even in the courts, had around him a group of disciples who added to his authority. And it was to such a man that a special commission of priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to ask if he were the Messiah.

As we know, Jerusalem was the center of Judaism, and it was precisely here that the leaders began to think seriously about the marvelous personage who was preaching on the bank of the Jordan, and it seemed to them that he could indeed be the Messiah that had long been expected. However, the leaders did not want to move hastily and desired to be well informed. The organized commission of priests and Levites had the task of going to the Baptist to ask him if he were the Messiah. The leaders asked him: "Who art thou?" It did not matter to John the Baptist to say who he *was*: rather, he

was carefully attentive to say who he *was not*. And he said: "I am not the Christ." That was the immediate and important objective. He was not the Messiah.

"Then said they unto him, who art thou?" They were marveling that he was not the Christ. Then a great and famous name came to the mind of those Jews: "Art thou Elias?" And John said: "I am not." Still surprised by that second answer, they continued: "art thou that prophet?" And he answered: "No."

Before going further, let us make an observation. It is true that John the Baptist was not the Christ; he was, however, an extraordinary personage. That's why there was the respectful insistence of the questions: Art thou the Christ? Art thou Elias? Art thou the Prophet?

To those three interrogations there followed three noes, without any explanation. The priests and Levites no longer understood who John might be. And yet it was necessary to know something about him; and since John did not appear to be ready to speak about himself, they obligated him to give an answer. "Who art thou," so that we may give an answer to those who sent us. "What sayest thou of thyself?"

"Who are you, what do you say of yourself?" These are serious questions that each one of us should seriously ask ourselves.

"Who are you, what do you say?" It was then, finally, making an effort, that John, overcoming a reluctance, as

if he would awaken and say "you want to know about me, you care about me," and said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."

Three noes were required before John finally responded with an answer. And yet he spoke of his work and not of his person. He did not answer: "I am John the Baptist, etc.," but, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

The three "I am nots" of John the Baptist seem to us to be worthy of consideration. He was very quick to say what he was not, and had to be constrained to speak of himself in the most modest way. And if the promptness we often demonstrate in speaking of ourselves is an index of our more or less exaggerated vanity, the conduct of the Baptist suggests to us that he had completed a rather accurate negative study about himself. It seemed that he knew who he was not, better than who he was.

As a rule, when someone is asked: "Are you so-and-so?" If he is not that person he hastens to answer: I am not so-and-so but I am, for example Cain, etc., and the second part of the answer, the affirmative one, is always given with a certain emphasis. Now, the attitude of John is truly noteworthy: three times he says what he is not, without saying what he is, and he pronounces the *no* quickly and quite voluntarily. This is an important lesson. Rather than admiring the merits we have, we should think about and meditate on the virtues that we do

not possess. And it would truly be a very interesting study, apt to keep our pride quite low, to make a continuous and scrupulous examination of what we are not. We would become aware that what we are is quite miserable in comparison to what we are not. No, no, no. We are *not*, we do not *know*, we do not *do*.

And finally, when he was really constrained to speak of himself, the Baptist acted in a way that attracted the least possible attention to himself. He did not answer: "I don't want to speak of myself." As if to say: "You know that I profess humility." Nothing like that, instead, he seemed to say: "You want to know about me. Yes, there it is; that is what I am."

Who are you? Another would have said: "I am John the Baptist, son of the priest Zacharias, etc., etc.," But no, his name was not important in that moment, his work was. John did not want to distract the ambassadors of Jerusalem from the main theme, the Messiah. For this reason, John spoke of his work in the Messianic report. All the light of his answer converged on Christ. As if to say: You are looking for the Messiah, well, in relation to him, I am the voice of one who cries before him.

In the original text the verb "am" is not there. It was a short answer, strictly as much as was necessary. And it is understood that the mind of the Baptist was entirely occupied with the Messiah, in comparison to whom he was a slave who cried out. Oriental sovereigns, and in many places even princes, had the custom of having slaves go before them in their travels on foot or on

horseback, according to the occasion. The job of the slaves was to cry out to the people to make room for the sovereign who was coming.

In some Oriental countries, in China for example, before the emperor went out, a guard ran through the city, crying that the streets must be cleared. They did not take part in the imperial procession; they cried out, went beyond and disappeared, that was their job. Nobody cared to observe the individual who ran and cried out and his name was not known or asked for.

Chapter 9

NICODEMUS

(Read St. John 2:23 to 3:21; 7:50-53; 19:38-41)

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in His name, when they saw the miracles which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself unto them because He knew all men. And needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man.”

How many, or what miracles the Evangelist does not say: the principal aim of the writer is to point out a certain imperfect faith which was not based on the acceptance of Jesus, but on what He was doing. It was a faith stimulated by the emotions of the moment; a faith that did not have a durable foundation and the Lord, knowing the instability of human nature, did not trust that kind of faith.

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

We wish to take note of the immediate connection of this first verse of chapter 3 of St. John with the preceding one. Precisely on that occasion, because of the instability of human nature, a new personage is presented.

Jesus did not need anyone to testify of man; He knew what was in man, and a man among the Pharisees. This

repetition of the word man is not by chance, and tells us that even Nicodemus, like the others, had been impressed by the miracles. He belonged to the class of Pharisees and was a ruler of the Jews. "The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him."

It is remarkable how the Evangelist distinctly describes the prominent character of the personages of the scene described: "A man." This Pharisee, a ruler, a man more or less like other men, came to Jesus by night. Everyone was talking about Jesus and the authority and the name that Nicodemus enjoyed caused him to be circumspect and to not seek Jesus by day. Criticizing that circumspection at this distance of time and place would be thoughtless; the writer and the reader would perhaps have done even less. Truly, from the point of view of the opinions prevalent in Judaism at that time, and especially among the Pharisees, the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus could be considered an act of condescension; from the point of view of Christianity it is judged differently.

Nicodemus said: "Rabbi, we know." It is in this way, as a rule, that men approach a religious problem. In the affirmation of Nicodemus there was almost the voice of a class "We," as though he was making himself responsible even for the opinions of others and was coming to Jesus more with the intention of protecting Him than anything else. Nicodemus said he knew:

“Thou art a teacher come from God;” no more, no less, “a teacher.” And he gives the reason: “for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” In a word, Nicodemus was saying: we recognize you as a teacher by the signs you are doing. The signs, not the substance of Jesus’ teaching, impressed Nicodemus; and it was precisely this excitement for signs and miracles that troubled Jesus.

Perhaps Nicodemus’ visit was motivated more by curiosity than by real interest: the old man did not want to renounce his views for anything, and it seemed that he was careful not to hide his ancestry and his motive for calling Jesus a teacher.

It may well be that Nicodemus came with a program of interrogations, and perhaps he expected Jesus to be grateful for the visit, since he was a venerated man in a high position. Nicodemus thought that Jesus would be pleased with his visit and the greeting he brought. He expected the Master to speak in order to know Him better. He did not want a direct answer, because his words were not openly a question. But Jesus answered. He answered, not to the direct question, but to all the possible content of the thoughts of Nicodemus, and Jesus said to him: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again (that is from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This answer and the determined tone of the words of Jesus were in contrast to the attitude of the visitor, and we would like to take a moment to consider that

nocturnal scene, before following the conversations of the two personages.

A certain desire for what was new, mixed with ancient prejudice, brought Nicodemus to Jesus and admiration for the young rabbi and a desire not to compromise himself had made him decide to visit by night. Nicodemus marveled at the works of Jesus; at the same time the prejudice toward anything that he knew of foreigners to Jerusalem, especially those from Galilee, dictated a tone and words to his declaration, partly conceding much and partly limiting much, by which he was expressing a half admiration, and an imperfect confession, closed air-tight, however, at the extremes of a "we know" and of *miracles that you do*.

The security of Nicodemus' social position, his age, and the fact that the noteworthy people of Jerusalem kept their distance from Jesus, gave Nicodemus a certain paternal air toward the young beginning teacher, to whom Nicodemus was coming to honor by an unexpected and undoubtedly very welcome visit. But Jesus' answer, so absolute, had to sound at first not only incomprehensible, but strange, to say the least, for that man, in that occasion.

The two personages faced each other: a white-haired old man with an honest and respected past; a young teacher, a foreigner, whose only credentials, to the eyes of Nicodemus, were the miracles He had done. When this young man, cutting the discussion short in anticipation of the possibility of a long discourse, introduced an

entirely new terrain, the old man had to look at Him and marvel. And it is easy to imagine such surprise, knowing that as we grow older, we become always more filled with the pretensions of our experience, and repeat to ourselves, with pleasure: "we know, we know, we know."

We can imagine that Nicodemus opened his eyes and mouth wide to utter an "oh," and passed his hand over his white beard, showing an expression that reflected various impressions, from marvel to disappointment and perhaps to pain.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you." It's almost as if in response to his "we know" the young Galilean was saying to him: "You know nothing." An entire plan of thoughts and experiences was worth nothing; and it seemed that, at one stroke, all the knowledge of Nicodemus would fall at that "Verily, verily" and followed an affirmation that astonished him. The young Master appeared gigantic above all the experience and authority of Nicodemus and with an even more incomprehensible affirmation, Jesus added: "I say unto you."

I, not us; one alone was assuming the responsibility of affirming. I, and who was it that was pronouncing that "I" in such an absolute way?, and was saying no less than this; that is, no one had the strength or capacity to see, simply see the kingdom of God, if he were not born again; no one, not even Nicodemus himself. And what of his studies and his long, honored experience?

Nothing. The answer of Jesus on the affirmation "I say unto you" was, paraphrasing it: "In truth you do not know that which is necessary because I say unto you, if anyone, whoever he may be, is not born again he cannot obtain even the vision of the kingdom of God." Jesus was silent.

Examining the words of Nicodemus: "how can a man be born when he is old?" I have asked myself why Nicodemus answered at all. He certainly did not understand the words of Jesus and he believed them to be incomprehensible. A quick doubt must have passed through the mind of the old man, but only a flash, because fixing his eyes on that young teacher who had such a serene and sure look, he did not feel to end the conversation. Jesus did not appear to Nicodemus to be out of His mind, nor did he seem to have answered in that way to offend him. That "I say unto you," bold as it may have seemed, carried such an emphasis that Nicodemus was taken aback. With another he would have ended the conversation; he remained before Jesus and became the interrogator: "How can a man be born when he is old?" This is a question and an objection at the same time; rather, it seems to be more of an objection than a question, as if he were saying that it is impossible to be born again, just as it is impossible for an old man to return to childhood.

Jesus refused questions and controversies and now He appealed to the spiritual nature of Nicodemus. The Christian religion, although in harmony with reason and conscience, is principally an appeal to something more

than reason or conscience. There is a moment in our life when we are moved toward Jesus, not by our intellect, but by a new force that at first we do not understand. Jesus showed Nicodemus that, above all the questions, the important question is: Am I born again? So Nicodemus asked Him: "How can a man be born when he is old?" Jesus answered: "Verily, verily," still the same affirmation, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." There are two stages: before possessing, in fact, the kingdom of God, it is necessary to have the spiritual perception of it and natural man does not have the power to receive the spiritual kingdom.

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." There are two births, one physical and the other spiritual; there are two kingdoms and two entrances.

The entrance into this spiritual kingdom has its essential condition: one must first be born. As Jesus was speaking, increasing wonder could be noted on the face of Nicodemus, and Jesus continued: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: So is everyone that is born of the Spirit." Truly, no one can see or dispute the direction of the wind, and thus no one can reason and understand the movement of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said: "How can these things be?" "How?" The *how* of things is mysterious to us.

Jesus continued: "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" This is not a question in the true sense of the word, but a demonstration, as if Jesus were saying: "See, Nicodemus, in the strength of your doctrine you cannot know these things."

"Thou art a teacher," Nicodemus said to Jesus. Jesus replied in His time: "You, teacher, cannot know these things." Jesus wanted his visitor to have a much higher concept of Him. He continued: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness." And, still another step forward. "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" Therefore, Jesus was able to speak of heavenly things.

Jesus continued: "And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven." Therefore, Christ was the witness of the things of heaven; and there was more: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

There are two "musts." "One *must* be born again," "the Son of Man *must* be lifted up." Nicodemus was looking for something else and he found himself before the Savior. And continuing, Jesus foretold of the cross. He reminded Nicodemus of the episode in the history of his people, when wandering in the desert, after their

murmuring, the Hebrews were being bitten by poisonous snakes. Moses interceded to the Lord, and the Lord ordered a brass serpent be made and uplifted on a pole so that whoever looked at it would be healed from the poisonous bites. The act of looking at that object that had the form, but not the life of the serpent must have seemed unreasonable to many Hebrews. However, those who looked at it in faith were healed. And Nicodemus had to understand, in addition, that those things were a type; therefore, "Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" in view, "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Take note of "*shall not perish*" first, as if to say that only with the Savior does one not perish; and without Him not only does one not have eternal life, but one perishes. "Whosoever believeth in Him." The Hebrews in the desert were needy; we are all needy.

If we want to understand Christ we must understand sin. It is only the knowledge of me and my need that can make me seek and appreciate the Savior. One who does not feel needy and does not seek the Savior, no matter what he thinks, will perish because it is only in Him that one is not lost. Jesus is more than Master and an example. He is the Savior, uplifted on the cross, and why this Savior? Listen: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Repeating these words to infinity would not be too much. The reason for this Savior and the sacrifice of Jesus is the love of God who "so loved the world that..."

Who can measure this boundary of comparison "so much that," immense like infinity. Oh! It is so tender and profound that the love of God is without measure. And Jesus continues: "For God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved." I am unable to fathom this repetition. There was no need for Jesus to come here to condemn us. We were already lost without Him.

He adds: "He that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." This speaks of the love of God, once accepted, once rejected.

"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light (which then is the rejection of the love of God), lest his deeds should be reproved."

But there is more: Jesus, the expression of the love of God, cannot finish without a word of encouragement and of hope. "But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." Jesus was silent. Nicodemus had already stopped questioning and the two parted.

And then? More than a year went by and Jesus was in Jerusalem again. The principal priests and Pharisees had given orders to the sergeants to find a way to arrest Him.

“Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, why have ye not brought Him? The officers answered, never a man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed.” (John 7:45-49)

It was then, in that assembly, that an interrogative voice was heard: “Doth our law judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” Notice the strength of similar interrogation: Pharisees and priests believed they knew the law; and they were being rebuked precisely on the observance of the law. Can you, in the strength of the law that you and I know, condemn before hearing the accused, rather, can he be accused without knowing what he has done? This was a courageous question for that place and for those men and immediately after the harsh words addressed to the officers.

“Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed on Him?” In that atmosphere entirely hostile to Jesus, it was not easy to understand how a partisan of Jesus could be there, exposed to scorn and hatred; therefore, the direct interrogation of the assembly, although made in honor of the law, is a sure sign of love and devotion.

“Nicodemus, he that come to Jesus by night, being one of them.” Reader, before expecting greater heroism from Nicodemus, go in your mind to the places, times and circumstances and judge if you would have acted better, or if you would have remained completely silent.

Besides, the words of Nicodemus are recorded, but the tone in which he said them and his behavior are not described and we can only guess at Nicodemus' behavior by that which the Pharisees answered: "They answered and said unto him, are thou also of Galilee? Search and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet."

Jesus and His disciples were called Galileans for contempt. You also are his disciple, to make him understand that his warm interest was not justified merely as homage to the law. The Pharisees, avoiding any legal discussion, immediately faced the principal question: "Art thou also of Galilee? Search and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet."

The interrogation of Nicodemus remained unresolved, and the immediate effects were then seen: it is not without reason that the evangelist, who cuts the narrative short in other places, completes it here: "And every man went to his own house." And then? What did Nicodemus do afterward? What was his conduct among the people, Jesus, the Sanhedrin? It is not written.

Did Nicodemus forget Jesus, did he defend Him or did he not succeed in saving Him, yielding voluntarily or powerless before the growing storm, or did he finally turn against Him; and if not against, did he close himself in indifference? I cannot answer all these questions, but if I should attempt to do so, even imperfectly, I should write at length.

Let us open the same Gospel again. This time we are before a distressing scene. Three crosses are raised on the summit of Calvary, sustaining three cadavers. A young man who expired a short time ago is suspended on the middle one. A young man and some women are at the foot of the cross crying silently. Work is taking place near those three crosses. The Jews are anxious to take away those bodies so that they will not remain on the cross on the Sabbath; the bodies will be removed and thrown in some nearby precipice like other condemned bodies. I look around on the way to Jerusalem, or among the people who are dispersing, to wait for someone who may come to bury the body of Jesus. I know that He always went around doing good deeds. I think they will come in a crowd: the poor that He loved so much, the crippled, the blind who were healed, forming a grateful procession at the foot of the cross to take away the cadaver and give it a proper burial. *Nothing*. Still I wait and look. I remember that John the Baptist had disciples, and they requested the cadaver of John from Herod; and here was the body of one greater than John the Baptist who also had disciples. Perhaps they would come to take away the cadaver; the law did not forbid the consignment of the bodies of the condemned.

I look, but nothing. In a short time another abominable act will be committed on that disgraceful rock. That young cadaver will be removed by rough hands, and without any regard thrown into a nearby precipice.

I understand; no one will come. Jesus and His cause have gone down forever; the disciples were terrorized and dispersed, the people forgetful. The women were crying, but almost oppressed by the tragedy that occurred so quickly it rendered them stupefied. That good man had been disgraced by death on the cross.

Who will care for Him any longer? No one. But behold, along the way that ascends to Calvary I see two arriving who, from their difficulty in walking seem to be two old men, and closer, personages of some importance. They accost the soldiers at the foot of the cross and state their intention. They have obtained permission from Pilate to take away the body.

Who are they? Let us read: "Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave." St. Mark says of him that he was an "honorable counselor," and another evangelist tells us he was a rich man.

And who was the other who was also determined to lend a hand in the merciful work? We read: "there came also Nicodemus." Who, what Nicodemus? The evangelist adds with his brief language, rich in meaning "which at first came to Jesus by night."

Notice the two comings. He came now, the same one who had come by night at another time; he came and he came; between these two times there is a great part of the life of Nicodemus. Not only he came, but he came

bringing "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight." It was a rich, generous gift, more than enough to embalm several cadavers but destined for only one.

How do we explain so much abundance? He did not send the gift by means of servants; Nicodemus wanted to see Jesus himself at the foot of the cross. And that was not enough: "Then took they (that is Joseph and Nicodemus) the body of Jesus and wound it in linen clothes with the spices." Those two noble old men could have ordered others to take down the body of Jesus. *Sending* is one thing, *going* is another; it is one thing to take care of a cadaver by means of subordinates, another to take Him with their own hands and wrap Him in linen clothes. I see them, facing each other, wrapping that cadaver. I ask myself: had they come to an agreement? We do not know. Did they meet at the foot of the cross, or before? I do not know. It was truly a merciful and courageous act if we think by whom it was being accomplished, and toward one ignominiously condemned.

They are not ashamed; I see reverence and love in their movements as their hands tenderly care for the cadaver. How can all this be explained? Listen, it is the evangelist who explains it, or allows us to guess, in a phrase about Joseph of Arimathaea: "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly," as if to say, secretly until then, but no longer now, and for Nicodemus with a parenthesis: "which at first came to Jesus by night." There is a

courage now that covers that "secretly" and that "night," a courage that has been maturing for a long time.

What did the two old men say to each other? You are here? I seem to hear one of them saying that he would never have followed him in public but that now that He was dead he felt to love Him even more and wanted to render Him a tribute of affection and homage by burying the cadaver in a new tomb. And Nicodemus disclosed to his companion how he had never forgotten the conversation of that night.

"Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Oh, we understand, they exclaimed. Young teacher, now we understand your words! Let us read: "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher (take note) wherein was never a man yet laid."

Perhaps Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus had both gone without the other knowing it. They had united in the work and returned to Jerusalem together telling each other with sighs and tears, each of his own relationship with Jesus and the growth of a powerful love in each of them that had drawn them by a gigantic force, brought by different ways, to the foot of the cross.

Chapter 10

THE ARMY OF THE FAITHFUL

By faith...Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 11 to 12:2)

We ask the reader to read again attentively chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews. The word "faith" is repeated twenty-three times, and it seems like a hammer that strikes with insistence. What is faith? Many definitions have been given and it would take time to examine them. The writer to the Hebrews says: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Perhaps this is not one of the best definitions, but we will move on in order not to go beyond the limits of our meditation.

Faith implies decision. Once decided, one moves forward not waiting for more faith, or continually measuring the faith one has. Besides, chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews is the most complete treatise of faith precisely because it is faith *in action*. If one reads the chapter we have before us, after facing the scorn and the incredulity of men, one is better able to appreciate and understand the scope of faith. I will make a supposition to the reader: picture that he, during the entire day had experienced only discouragement, seeing unfaithfulness and worldly interest predominate and, believing himself abandoned, entered into his room, and cried the lament: I am alone or almost alone and then he picks up the Bible at the chapter we are considering. He

will immediately have two impressions: first, no human activity outside of religion has this testimony throughout the centuries. Second, the testimony that the past gives to faith is truly surprising. Thus, he forgets the company of the living and puts himself in line with the army of those who were on the earth and feels himself to be in an elect and numerous company. If he reads again more attentively, stopping at each name, he visualizes gigantic and solitary trees of ancient times, men who lived in contrast to their own generation. He will ask himself: how were they able to bear it? And he thinks of Abel, *alone*; of Enoch surrounded by an incredulous world, *alone*; of Noah who reached the maximum of corruption, *alone*; of Abraham in a prominent city in Asia, *alone*. And so on, he will see all solitary men, surrounded by men who had quite different ideals. What did *they* do? They had a vision, a calling they obeyed; they went forward many years in the midst of an indifferent world. They had no religious books, churches and the like. And thus they rise up in space at a distance almost like palm trees in the desert.

“By *faith* Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain; by *faith* Enoch was transported; by *faith* Noah prepared an ark; by *faith* Abraham went out not knowing whither he went; for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God; through *faith* Sara received strength to conceive, and delivered a child when she was past age.” These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but “having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them,

and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

And reading further: "By faith Abraham offered up Isaac; by faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau; by faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; by faith Joseph gave commandment concerning his bones; by faith Moses was led; by faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter...by faith he forsook Egypt... for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible; through faith he kept the Passover." And St. Paul remembers an entire generation in heroic moments. "By faith they passed through the Red Sea; by faith the walls of Jericho fell!" And, returning to concern himself with isolated individuals, he says: "By faith the harlot Rahab (marvelous how the Bible keeps certain titles that we would avoid in biographies). By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not when she had received the spies in peace." Only one person in a large city "perished not."

But it seems that the writer of the Epistle hastens to continue and he begins to name heroes in groups: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets. It is always the story of men who lived long ago, isolated, always with their acts of faith mentioned in a few lines. By faith they subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, etc. And he writes of more general recollections: "Women received their dead raised to life again," and even more general, "and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance. And others had

trials of cruel mockings and scourging, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment.”

“Others,” who are they? We know of some but most of them are the immense army of heroes who are registered in heaven but unknown in the history of religion; unknown but faithful men and women whom God has had at all times. And we add others who have suffered by faith, and we think of the thousands of martyrs of Christianity and many who suffered in missions among pagans, and others. The immense army of the faithful passes before us; for some, and they are many, it is said: “They were stoned, sawn asunder, tempted and were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented...” “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith (pay attention, pay attention!), received not the promise.” That is, they did not obtain anything on the way; their reward was in the beyond. But in life they suffered: needy, afflicted, mistreated, and faithful. Arriving at the end of the chapter, the reader sees before him the past generations and civilizations that have waned, from the antediluvian men to after the flood; from Egypt to the monarchies of Asia and the Roman empire; and from the ancient ruins he sees almost gigantic specters rising, this long army of faithful ones that pass before him with their backs to the past and their faces to eternity.

And then? —“Wherefore (the writer adds) seeing *we also* are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so

easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” “*We also.*” This list is not written for idleness. It’s as if the writer finally turns to the reader and uniting himself with him says: And we, what are we going to do, shall we remain simply repeating ancient facts? “Compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses.” It gives us the idea of one standing in an arena that turns to the amphitheatre and sees it filled with spectators; and they are not simply spectators, rather they are heroes, who in their turn have fought and suffered. They are witnesses (the original word is martyrs), not curious disinterested people looking at us. They are heroes that have left the bloody footsteps of their passage in the arena; they are numerous when seen together, but they represent different types of characters and various experiences. What is your part in the world? Are you poor, sickly, persecuted? Look around you among the witnesses that surround you and you will find persons who, in worse circumstances than yours, have suffered and resisted in everything “*by faith.*” “Wherefore, we also...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”

The idea is of one who has already undertaken to walk quickly but is held back along the way by obstacles, especially by the sin of incredulity, which was the sin of the Hebrews in the desert. Therefore, laying aside all that, which although not strictly a sin, but is an impediment, let us run quickly and persevere toward the goal.

However, it is not enough. The writer adds: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." You have this powerful incentive of the past, but it is not everything. One is missing from the list: the leader. You have seen the witnesses, now turn your eyes from them to another.

No one on the list was perfect. They were all brilliant for heroism and sacrifice, but none of them absorbs your entire attention. Therefore, from them look to another, to Jesus. In the original text *looking* is a compound word that means to look again with intensity, with wonder, with investigation. From the cloud of witnesses, turn your eye with attention on the One. "Looking again to Jesus;" it is an argument that can't be appealed, because after all, faith is reduced to contemplating this unique solitary person. "To Jesus, author and finisher of our faith." Forget everything, and the same witnesses, none of whom could endure a strict examination, and fix your eyes on Jesus. He is not afraid of scrutiny and criticism. He is the "author and finisher of our faith." But even if faith was not mentioned in all of chapter 11, all that has been said is a manifestation of faith. The prince had not been named yet: Jesus, the ancient and the last. Faith begins and ends in Him. Jesus is the ultimate limit of the ideal, beyond which it is not possible to go. Before Him the same "by faith" of the heroes grows pale; rather, the same faith is imperfect. Jesus is the finisher of our faith. Look to Him and complete your faith in the perfect faith of Jesus. He combines all the voices and partial heroisms of the succession of giants of faith, and completes them. And what did this leader do? Listen:

“who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” This personage had one passion for all of His life: the triumph of the kingdom of God; and for it He suffered everything, including the cross and the shame. It was as if He was looking past the agony and humiliation, beyond, beyond, to the joy of the redemption of sinners. As if, in crossing the troubled river, He would turn His eyes away from the water to the calm shore. The joy and happiness of the beyond made Him forget or rather not look at all at the rest. The writer continues: “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.” You have not suffered enough to vaguely compare with Jesus. Therefore, persevere, because He will remain above you in the conflicts and sufferings. Then, if the world abandons you and the named heroes seem deficient to you; if the environment in which you live does not satisfy you and you are not happy with yourself; if your faith seems to be weak, look. Look away from all that engenders discomfort, and look to another. Do not imitate anyone. Do not try to be the copy of a copy. Go to the original fount. Look to Jesus Christ; He is perfect and complete; be absorbed in Him and, forgetting all the rest, get rid of all that impedes you, and run, with your eye fixed on Him, toward the goal that is set before us.

Chapter 11

ENOCH

“And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah: and Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years and begot sons and daughters. And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him.” (Genesis 5:21-24)

“By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.” (Hebrews 11:5) “and Enoch also prophesied of these...” (Jude 14)

Give me a bone and I will be able to describe the skeleton from which it came, said a great scientist. This can be repeated also for the history of men. Of some we know very little, but just enough to determine their character and the principal aim of their existence.

Opening the fifth chapter of Genesis, I seem to enter into a gallery of pictures of equal dimensions, all bearing a single record. It presents the posterity of Adam, from Seth until Noah. Those men lived for centuries. At the bottom of each picture that I see, there are a few lines concluding thus: “He lived many years and then he died.” Walking around slowly adding up centuries and always reading that monotonous and dismal: “then he died.” I am about to immerse myself in a meditation

between that contrast of longevity and the inexorable "then he died," when I see on one of the mental pictures a different inscription. Before reading it I want to look quickly at all the other pictures up to the last one. The same inscriptions: "he lived many years, then he died." And then I turn to that singular picture to read the inscription at my leisure, and my eye goes hurriedly to the end, almost before reading the rest. A new conclusion attracts me. I do not read the words "then he died," but: "and Enoch walked with God; and he was not; for God took him." This constrains my attention. The gallery is very old, they are antediluvian men. Nevertheless, let us pause a little to study this singular personage.

Enoch means dedicated. Names often carry great meaning and great memories. I find myself in the presence of a man who dedicated himself to something. Before knowing what he dedicated himself to and how, I remember that every true dedication requires firmness and character. Enoch appears to be a man of will, who had a purpose. The record written under his name tells me that his ideal was God.

But all this is still quite vague. How did Enoch dedicate himself, how did he live and what did he do? We want to investigate. Let's try to do so with the scripture before us. I hasten to note that this man, like all the others of the gallery, had sons and daughters. That tells me he lived in human society and his dedication did not make him a hermit, avoiding his family. From another passage of the scripture I learn that he was a prophet, the most

ancient prophet. All this reveals more and more to me of a man who had an active existence surrounded by the seductions of the world and the struggles of life. In these conditions he was dedicated to the Lord. Neither his family nor the society that surrounded him distracted him. At this point we would like to divide his existence into three periods.

1: THE SIMPLE DEDICATION. “And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah: and Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah...” The fact that he “walked with God after he begat Methuselah” is worthy of special attention. The first period in the life of Enoch is distinctly recorded with the simple record like all the others. Looking at the list of patriarchs in chapter 5 of Genesis, we see that the age in which they are recorded as having children is greater than sixty five years. Only Enoch and another are said to have had children at sixty-five years. Enoch was also dedicated to the Lord in this first period, and had His purpose before him; and we will call this first part the program age. In fact, all the lives of some importance in history have had a period of hidden preparation: for Enoch it is in the record of his sixty-five years. For a dedication like his, a program required time and some experience in the world. In this period Enoch looked around and saw the world, and many things that he had to correct in himself, working out his dedication to the Lord, day by day. The time finally came when a change occurred in Enoch. Something new happened. Let us read: “And Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years, and begat sons and daughters.”

In the list of the patriarchs before and after him, the "after" is followed by "lived;" for Enoch it says "walked with God."

2. AFTER. This division of the life of the patriarchs into periods, and the repetition of the word "after" are not by chance. Every expression in the Bible has value. For the other patriarchs, before and afterwards of that "after" life, it was simply a life the same as that of their father; and from father to son there was the monotonous repetition of an almost uniform life. Not so for Enoch. Here the "after" marks a great point. At the sight of his first son, having become a father, Enoch came to the most energetic resolution of his life. Well, he seemed to say, up to now I have tried to serve God, but I have succeeded only in part; now I want to have a more intimate and definitive relation between me and God. And so, in the sixty-fifth year of his life, before his first son was born, the extraordinary part of Enoch's life began and the writer calls it: "walked with God."

3. THE WALK WITH GOD. At this point Enoch can be compared to a solitary tree; he was in the same surroundings but much was seen changed in him. And since the world did not understand him, day by day he found himself always more alone on the part of men, while he saw himself in a closer friendship with the One who is invisible.

A prophet has said, "can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3) In order to walk well with someone there must be agreement at the starting point

and agreement along the intermediate stations along the way. In the first sixty-five years of his life Enoch prepared himself for agreement on the starting point. Enoch understood that he lacked something that he could not find in the world, so he turned his gaze upward and sought in God the strength and inspiration to live; and as the company of men was becoming dangerous, he wanted to procure for himself a very different company: God. Before walking with God, Enoch made a pact that he would be in agreement. Of two who walk together, one must cede to the other and Enoch was the one who understood he had to yield to God. This yielding was long and continuous, but not without effort and danger. It's well to keep in mind that Enoch was walking with God, but he was in the world. He was walking with God, but in the world he was considered eccentric. I imagine that many times he was seen turning his back on those things most appreciated by his contemporaries, and often after work he could be seen looking for a solitary place for meditation. The dissent of others and being considered abnormal must have embittered Enoch, but he would regain vigor by the company of the Invisible One who was walking by his side. In the face of the growing iniquity that surrounded him, Enoch must have had moments of violent rebellion; however, they were brief because the invisible companion was suggesting patience and meekness to him. And thus Enoch was going forward, becoming always more intimate with the Lord and unlike the conduct of his contemporaries, he began to preach and to prophesy. His speaking bore the imprint of an unshakable conviction; the prophecy spoke of judgment. "Behold, the Lord cometh with ten

thousand of His saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." (Jude 14, 15) These words reveal a courageous preacher who was not afraid of his audience. And this man was faithful, not one year nor two, but three hundred years. Just think: three centuries of walking with the Lord. Suppose you walk ten, twenty years with a man; that is rare; and yet it is easy to hide oneself from a man; he does not read inside us, but God knows everything. And Enoch, whose hidden thoughts the Lord was reading, walked with Him no less than three hundred years.

But the reason that Enoch was able to persevere in that long walk, in the company of the Invisible One, was because he must have possessed a secret. And it was "Faith." Enoch had a continuing faith in the Lord; and with the faith, a continuing obedience. And faith and obedience are the password of the Christian life. The voice of God was speaking to him. Enoch was obeying, and each day the communion was becoming more intimate, until there was no longer any doubt; it seemed that God was walking by his side.

Enoch pleased the Lord. The world does not register anything heroic for Enoch. For others it is said they built cities or promoted arts and industry. The world does not occupy itself about Enoch, and even the Bible does not record much about him, only that he pleased the Lord.

Following a long walk we often like to look to the past. After three hundred years of walking with God, Enoch had learned many things about the kingdom of God; rather, he had become more qualified for the kingdom of God than for life among men. His beginning was on earth, but his end could not be on earth. An inner change had come about in Enoch and he felt the power of immortality. In this world he was preparing himself for the other world and day by day he had a growing revelation of the other world. The time came that Enoch really began to completely taste the joys of heaven. In his long and faithful walk he was always adapting himself to a life that was not destined to end like the others. He remained faithful to God, and the Lord did not want to separate himself and leave him. Enoch himself never wanted to separate himself, and remained close to that companion with the tenacity of a life entirely dedicated to Him. From revelation to revelation, he felt himself to be too light for this earth. One day they saw him leaving with an irradiated visage, like they had never seen before. They looked for him, or waited for him, but they saw him no more, because God had taken him. It is in vain to speak of heaven if we are not living in anticipation of the superior life while we are among men. After he was transported, the life of Enoch was a continuation of that which he enjoyed by faith at the side of the invisible companion with whom he had walked.

Nothing happens in isolation. Enoch was transported without seeing death, before the flood. This is a type of

the elect that forms the bride of the Lamb that will be translated without passing through the great tribulation.

A word: friend reader, have you had the experience of walking with the world? If you have, form a friendship with the Lord God this very day. Put yourself in accord with Him, and turn your face toward immortality. You will taste in anticipation the life that awaits you in heaven.

Chapter 12

SAFE IN THE ARK (Genesis 6, 7, 8)

The New Testament is "clear and insistent in referring to the flood and Noah. In the letter to the Hebrews we read: "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house, by which he condemned the world."(Hebrews 11:7) Peter says: "long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was a preparing;" and that He "spared not the old world, but saved Noah, a preacher of righteousness." (1 Peter 3: 20 and 2 Peter 2:5) And the Lord Jesus: "As in the days that were before the flood... so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matthew 24:38, 39) These references of the New Testament are so incisive that it is dutiful and necessary for us to look for at least a few of the lessons derived from the story of Noah and the flood.

In the midst of the universal corruption of the men of that time, one lived whom the word of God called righteous. His pious parents called him Noah: "He will comfort us." We know almost nothing of the life of Noah before the flood, and we can only guess that he spent many years preaching repentance, without conversions.

The world had reached a high level of material progress, but men were running after earthly goods, without entering God into their calculations. In such a time the preacher Noah was not encouraged in any way, yet he

moved forward, a solitary witness of righteousness and an apostle of repentance.

“Make thee an ark,” the Lord said to him, and gave him instructions quite different from that which human engineers would have counseled. “Make an ark” are words. Noah could have asked, “How shall I live?” But Noah hastened to obey. It was a sacrifice for Noah; perhaps he had to begin selling what he had. He may have had opposition from his family and ridicule from his neighbors, yet he obeyed. The construction of the ark went ahead very slowly. The Lord wanted to give another opportunity. It took Noah work and time to gather the necessary material, little by little, and to adapt it for the construction. But, notwithstanding the discouragements that came to him, he moved forward. And he did not discontinue being a preacher of the street. The ark was being formed slowly; each board that was being nailed seemed to say: “Repent, you still have time.” Finally, the work was completed, and for the last time Noah called people to repentance but they called him crazy; those who did not listen in the past did not care for his words now. One day the Lord said to him: “come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.” It must have been a little bit of a sensation when the neighbors saw Noah going into the ark with the animals two by two, but their interest waned quickly. Who knows what they were thinking: by what magic was Noah drawing them into the ark? To the neighbors, the construction of the ark must have appeared quite strange compared to

the buildings they possessed. Nobody cared to seek admission to the ark.

“And the Lord shut him in.” It was not Noah, but the Lord. The time of trial was over. The same power that was closing Noah inside, was leaving the world outside. Still, oh infinite patience of God! Seven more days passed by. If the people had asked for mercy, God would have spared them. Unfortunately, the unexpected happened.

“In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.”

Others have tried to describe, with vivid colors, the conditions of the men at the first downpour of rain; an English poet has artfully described the desperate attempts to climb the highest mountains, all of which were reached by the rising waters. We will speak only and briefly about the eight persons protected in the ark during the flood.

When the waters began to fall violently and beat on the walls of the ark, it may not have seemed to be solid enough, and perhaps someone in Noah’s family thought it would be safer on the vertex of some mountain. But the ark was the only method of salvation ordered by the Lord. It may have been unattractive and not too solid, but it was the only way of escape. Noah’s family was inside and they could not change anything; the Lord had

closed the great door. And the waters were truly unleashed: "the same day were all the fountains of the deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. In a moment the ark was lifted up on the waters." "And the waters prevailed and were increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters" like a small sting on the back of an infuriated monster; and the higher the mass of water rose, the more the ark was pushed toward heaven.

The rain was upon the earth forty days. This time must have seemed to be very long, and it truly was not a pleasing experience. The ark, pushed by the waves, must have given a continual agitation to those who were saved. Yet, however beaten they were, they could not drown, protected as they were in that enclosure of salvation. It seemed that the flood would last for an eternity; perhaps it seemed so for Noah's family, where everything was an ocean above and below with the ark in the middle. It seemed so, but the flood had to have an end, and in fact it did. "God remembered Noah;" truly speaking, He had never forgotten. That ark, coming out of the old world, was bringing to the bank of the new world the surviving thread of humanity. Yet, the sacred writer says "God remembered;" an expression relative to the saved persons. Many times men, even the most faithful, believe that God forgets them. Noah saw, he had the proof that God was thinking of him. The One who commanded that flood to come down, was able to close again and he closed again the fountains of the great abyss. "God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged... and the waters returned from off the

earth continually: and after the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters receded." After the flood a serene sky returned and a boundless but tranquil sea could be seen around the ark. It seemed they would have to live always on water; however, one fine day they saw a brief interruption in the even plane. It was the summit of a high mountain. That date could not be forgotten: "in the tenth month, on the first day of the month." The ark had stopped on the mountains of Ararat.

"And in the second month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dried. And God spoke unto Noah, saying, go forth of the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee."

And the solitary antediluvian patriarch came out followed by his family. On the earth baptized by the flood, Noah's first act was to build an altar. And the Lord made a pact with Noah that he would not send a flood again, and the sign was a rainbow. A new hope appeared for humanity, and on the renewed earth the dawn of a new and flourishing life appeared.

Friend reader, we have learned something in this brief exposition: Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, but He and the plan of redemption are not according to the reasoning of human philosophy. And yet, say what you will, Jesus is the only way of escape.

The Lord has said that the time would come which would be like the times before the flood. Our generation answers to the parallel: eating and drinking, selling and

buying without the fear of God presiding in everything. Noah separated himself from the world by faith, and by faith he built the ark, and by faith he waited; so the believer should have faith. The ark was the only possible escape, and Jesus Christ is the only Savior. Like it or not, accept it or not, there is no other way. Outside the ark the men of that time perished, and there is no hope for anyone far from Christ. Those who were sheltered in the ark had their experiences, and the life of the believer has its trials and shakings. However, the battered ark was always on top of the waters; thus Christ, forasmuch as He is contrasted, is always victorious in humanity. Closed in the ark Noah and his own were safe; hidden in Christ the believer is safe. The water could beat on the outside of the ark but inside everything was dry; thus in the life of the believer, as travailed as it may be, there is peace within.

Whatever your condition may be, oh reader, if you have faith and are in Christ, closed by Him in the ark of salvation, the storm will not be able to submerge you; rather, the same sorrows and conflicts will raise you up, always more, toward heaven. Perhaps much time will pass without seeing the sun, and you will believe you are lost in the waves, but fear not, because at the end, you will place your foot on the renewed earth, over which Christ alone will reign for eternity.

Chapter 13

ABRAHAM: PILGRIMAGE AND OBEDIENCE

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went...By faith Abraham when he was tried, offered up Isaac! And he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son. Of whom it was said, that in Isaac shall thy seed be called accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in figure.” (Hebrews 11:8, 17-19 and see Acts 7:3, 4)

Among the great figures of an ancient past, that of Abraham perhaps recommends itself to our veneration. Three great religious communities remember Abraham (Jewish, Christian, and Mohammed); and the abundance of literature created around the name of Abraham is truly surprising.

The cradle of Abraham was Ur of the Chaldees, a flourishing center of civilization in the country of Mesopotamia. Here Abraham, as a child, was able to observe the two tendencies of the people around him: their wide-spread interest in the goods of the world, and a profound idolatry. The Chaldeans had a cult for the stars; but Abraham understood that the stars themselves have been created, and obey a great law that guides and

directs them. Behind and beyond the movement of the stars, the young, meditative Chaldean saw an intelligent Creator, and began to lean toward Him with the power of his intellect and his heart. However, he was not to remain in Ur, and God said to him: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee." (Genesis 12; Acts 7: 3, 4)

Leaving Ur of the Chaldees meant leaving prosperity and abundance behind, but that was only the beginning of a series of separations. Relations and habits of his youth and love for his native places, all had to be sacrificed. Leaving a flourishing center, to which many were coming from afar, in order to become a pilgrim toward an unknown place could have and must have seemed crazy. Let them think as they wanted, Abraham emigrated.

But they did not reach the country of Canaan. When they reached Haran, they dwelt there. After the death of his father, Abram continued toward Canaan along with his wife Sarai and Lot, his brother's son. Haran was a half-way stop and a death was needed to send the pilgrim forward. It took the burial of the old man. It is also always true that misfortunes and afflictions from one setback to another, push us continually forward toward the Lord Jesus.

In the life of Abram we often find a tent and altar mentioned. Abram had no fixed place to live; he was

ready to pick up his tent and leave. With the tent he had the altar, a symbol of adoration and sacrifice.

“Go unto a land that I will shew thee.” Very often, the country of this pilgrim was only the sand of the desert. Abram left that which was visible and certain for great promises, but all in the future. He obeyed because he knew that God called him. Abram experienced other separations that we cannot read about without feeling the struggles and the tragedy of life. We are drawn to remember that the path of the pilgrim is continually made clear by sacrifices, like the eagle that learns to fly at the expense of its nest that is destroyed.

There are certainly mistakes in the life of Abram and they are interwoven in the intermezzo of his pilgrimage; but the evening of his day is as serene as the morning had been.

There are affections that he was called to sacrifice: Hagar and his son Ishmael that he sent away. Abram must have felt that his heart was broken, but the law of his life was separation. However, the bloody trial was still to come, and it was reserved for him close to the sunset of his career. It, more than anything else, reveals the faith and devotion of Abram toward the Lord.

And God said, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

Abraham understood that he had to kill Isaac. I doubt that if such a command had been given to him at the beginning of his pilgrimage, I doubt very much that he would have thought to obey even for a moment. But in the trials of our life, God allows the lighter ones to precede the heavier ones; the Lord expects certain sacrifices from us only after long years of discipline. However that may be, this command must have appeared enormous to Abraham. It would have been a bewildering demand even if it had come from a cruel monarch; how on earth could it come from God who had forbidden the shedding of blood? Perhaps we who know the end of the episode are not in a good position to evaluate all that Abraham must have felt. Many years had passed from a memorable night when God called him out of his tent and said to him: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, so shall they seed be." And now it was necessary to sacrifice the heir who was so solemnly promised and who came to him in his old age; also, Abraham had to walk three days, always thinking of the final scene, when, by his own hand, he would kill his son and see the bright red blood gushing from that innocent chest, and he, the failing parent, would have to contemplate the innocent pupils of the eyes of the child that would be painfully fixed on him before closing. And then he would have to complete the work, burning the body, and mixing the ashes with the wood of the sacrifice.

Could God have said to him: "Offer Isaac to me as a sacrifice?" Could it have been a strange vision, aside

from the interpretation that could be given as to where God sent him? There were many plausible objections to believing that command. Here are a few: how would Abraham be able to have numerous descendants if he were to kill the son of the promise? And what would his pagan neighbors say who had seen that child grow up and whom they considered a singular gift from the God of Abraham? "This is your God?" they would have asked him. And, above all, how would he announce it to Sarah, the affectionate and noble Sarah, who, like a true heroine had accompanied him since coming from Ur of the Chaldees and shared in all the life of the pilgrimage to which he had subjected her?

And how, how? So many questions that he could never have answered.

Should he leave, warning Sarah of the order he received, or should he tell her everything upon returning? Should he let Sarah know he was leaving with the child, or what would he say, or how would he be able to comfort her when he returned without the child, telling her of the tragic occurrence? And it would be Sarah herself who would blame him for that inhuman sacrifice, telling him that it was his own imagination of a divine order, and not God? And so many questions were rising in his throat, but he sent them back down and sealed them in his heart. He arose in time, made preparations for his departure, called two servants, awakened Isaac, and they were ready for departure. When Sarah asked where he was going, he answered, I imagine, without daring to look her in the face that they were going for a sacrifice to the

Lord, and he set out toward the place that God had told him.

For as many and what the difficulties may have been, Abraham did not put them before the command of God. The Lord gave that order and he had to obey without weighing the consequences. Oh! for such an unconditional obedience!

Abraham started out for the place of the sacrifice. There were three days of walking in which the old man had to suffer so much anguish, more than he had suffered in all his past life. It is difficult to live with the sure expectation of something bad. On the third day he could see the mountain. When they reached the base the old man said to his servants: "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." *We* will return; he did not say "I will return." They had come to the final hour and no counter-order had come, and yet Abraham said "we will return." The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews gives us the key to "we will return" in these words: "Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead."

He said, "we will return." "And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together." I believe that the strength of the old man failed, otherwise he would not have loaded the wood on his son.

At one point of the painful ascension, the boy who had always been docile, said to the old man: "My father!" Father (oh the word *father* in that circumstance!) And he answered: "Here am I, my son." And Isaac said: "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" It was the time now to speak, and to tell the secret held for so long a time; yet Abraham said, "My son, (always that tender expression "My son!") God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering."

And the biblical narrative continues calmly: "And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order." Oh! and then? He could no longer be silent. And Abraham spoke while he was making the last preparations. And then "he bound Isaac his son (note how many time the expression "son" is repeated, almost as if to say even though he was a son) and laid him upon the altar upon the wood." He tied those innocent hands and feet on the rude altar of sacrifice. "And Abraham stretched forth his hand (oh the biblical precision and the depth of thought that every expression hides!). "And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son." *Stretched, took*: every single act was piercing the heart of Abraham. In one supreme effort the old man gathered the will and the strength and stretched forth his hand. But... but, at the end! "And the angel of the Lord....."

Divine intervention: not a moment before, not a moment after Abraham had suffered enough; he had already killed and mourned his child in three long days,

and also enough was the trial for innocent Isaac who allowed himself to be bound meek as a lamb. "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him, for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." "Thy son, thine only son." God knows the infinite tenderness of these names "*son* and *only*."

The trial was finished. God prepared himself a sacrifice that was offered in his stead; and the two faithful pilgrims resumed their walk toward the distant tent, where there was an anxious heart waiting for them. "Now I know that thou fearest God." Truly, God knew the heart of Abraham, but the world did not know him, and following Abraham's obedience, the world can evaluate the great trust that Abraham had in the Lord and how he well deserved the two titles of "Friend of God" and "father of the faithful."

Abraham believed in the Lord. The center of his existence was a constant trust that God would accomplish that which He had promised. And Abraham not only believed, but he obeyed, without hesitation. When the command of the Lord is precise, hesitation is fatal.

Mount Moria leads one to think of Mount Calvary. God offered His beloved Son whose innocent hands and feet were nailed to the cross and God, who knew the heart of

Abraham, didn't spare Himself the greatest sacrifice that united and surpassed all other sacrifices.

Along the pilgrimage of Abraham there is the tent that is a remembrance of how he was waiting for a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God.

Our cities do not have foundations and we are reminded by frequent earthquakes. Along the way of Abraham there are continuous renunciations and separations, telling us that the way that leads to the city of God is paved with trials that may seem to be and often are painful, but have our perfection as a final goal.

Chapter 14

ISAAC

Patience of the Faith: "For he had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him. For all the wells which his father's servants had digged in the day of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac, go from us, for thou art much mightier than we. And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there." (Genesis 26: 14-17)

Someone has said that the life of Isaac is connected to three symbolic objects: *Altar*, *tent* and *well*. The altar indicates relation with God, the tent indicates relation to the world (traveler, pilgrim), and the well with himself (material need).

In writing about Isaac we desire to especially point out one of the least appreciated heroisms of life: the passive strength to suffer without lamenting. A service is much harder in the proportion that it is humble; the more limited the sphere of action, the greater is the sacrifice. There are no testimonies and no approval of men.

Isaac represents the patience of faith. He is not a character in great events; instead he moves in a passive zone of continuous renouncement. His childhood was a long series of suffering and abnegation, from the mistreatment and scorn by his stepbrother Ishmael up to

his nearly being sacrificed on Mount Moriah. At that age one desires independence, but Isaac obeyed. He left the house and walked three days with his father, climbed the mount of sacrifice, and allowed himself to be tied to the altar. In his own will, Isaac was already dead.

Isaac's passive life continued; his wife was selected for him. In his domestic life he suffered until extreme old age. He loved Esau preferentially, but he blessed Jacob with the birthright. Esau wept and Isaac felt his heart breaking, yet he accepted the error as superior will.

We wish to speak briefly of Isaac in his relations with Abimelech, and about the wells of Abraham that he dug up again. Let us open the Bible to chapter 26 of Genesis. Let us read: "And there was a famine in the land... and Isaac went unto Abimelech king of the Philistines unto Gerar. And the Lord appeared unto him, and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee... and Isaac dwelt in Gerar." Abraham had erred in going into Egypt: now, a second famine in the country was tempting Isaac. And as it appears, without the counsel of the Lord, he departed and went among the Philistines. No pressure of temporal needs should make us move without the consent of the Lord.

Isaac intended to go forward; he was thinking of Egypt, rich in resources and possibilities, but a prohibiting revelation impeded him. Could it have been a message from the Lord: "Go not down into Egypt?" Had he deceived himself? The voice that tells us to stop is

harder to hear than the voice that tells us to go forward. But Isaac was so submissive and used to yielding that he did not delay to recognize the will of the Lord in keeping him from Egypt and he stopped. "And Isaac dwelt in Gerar."

The Lord showed him that a good man can live anywhere and there was no need to go into Egypt.

In fact, let's read: "Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great; for he had possession of flocks, and possession of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him."

In these ancient times we find the same passions of our days: next to the prosperity of one there is the jealousy and envy of the other. "...and the Philistines envied him." But envy does not remain silent for long; it generates hatred, and hatred suggests persecution. "For all the wells which his father's servants had digged in the day of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth." There are different methods of harming one; an enemy does not always recur to extreme means of violence; instead, an enemy often prefers to annoy and create obstacles. A well was a possession of great value in the Orient, where water was scarce. By sealing the wells, the Philistines were making the life of Isaac difficult, if not impossible. But Isaac did not lament and it seems he found a way to resolve the problem.

The Philistines wanted Isaac to go away but they did not have the courage to tell him openly; however, when they became aware that he was not moving and didn't give them any cause of altercation, they felt constrained to take another step, in which there appeared not only the resentment of a robber, but also the ill-will of an entire people.

“And Abimelech, no less than the king, said unto Isaac, “go from us; for thou art much mightier than we.” In this evil injunction, we must acknowledge that there is a sincerity that is lacking in many who are unrighteous. Abimelech did not invent excuses for his reason for wanting Isaac to leave; he had no good reason, nor did he try to find one. The only reason was: “Thou art much mightier than we.” In other words, “free us from the pain of seeing your prosperity.”

Isaac could have had much to complain about; there were agreements made with his father; also, being rich, Isaac could have offered resistance. But he did not resort to resistance, and not even to the useless reasoning to an ear that hears only the voice of envy. Isaac had an admirable self-possession and the scripture tells us what he did: “And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there.” He had no motive or desire to leave, but because of what happened, he departed from there. Isaac found a place to stop, where his great parent had passed, leaving there the imprint of his activity.

“And Isaac digged again the wells of water which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them.”

Behold the occupation of a hero! And yet it was a very difficult heroism: patiently seeking the places where his father had been and reopening the sealed wells. In giving them names there was nothing that spoke of Isaac, but the names themselves were given by Abraham, thus demonstrating filial reverence to the memory of his father, because the altar to which the existence of Isaac was tied was mainly that of the family. “And Isaac’s servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water. And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, the water is ours.”

Isaac had distanced himself, but for the Philistines it was not far enough that they did not know of him or be concerned about him. It seemed that the patience and meekness of Isaac had not calmed them, and they sought a new occasion for contention. They said: “this water is ours.” There was no reason for their claim. Isaac’s servants had digged the well; but no, “this water is ours.” It was the well of the best water. “This is mine,” says the enemy. The enemy wants to appropriate the best that a good man can do. “I did it, it’s mine.” “I, I, mine, mine” rise continuously from human iniquities!

But Isaac did not lose his composure and resigned himself not to question. “And he called the name of the

well Esek, because they strove with him." And rather than remaining to contend with them he moved forward.

"And they digged another well." But the hatred of his enemies was not quieted, rather it grew, "and strove for that also." And Isaac, peaceful and meek, as usual, did nothing. He gave a memorable name to that well and moved on. But providence did not abandon him. "And he removed from thence, and digged another well; and for that they strove not." It seemed that the enemies had finally become tired of molesting them. Isaac had distanced himself even more. "And he called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, for now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

There was not a word of resentment against the Philistines, nor a lament toward the Lord; rather, Isaac saw the best that he received, and remembered only that God prospered him in that land.

But he thought better later on and resolved to go away completely from that area in order to avoid further litigation. "And he went up from thence to Beersheba."

After the separation: Out of the territory of the Philistines, we read of Isaac: "And the Lord appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant Abraham's sake."

In separating himself entirely from the Philistines, he had made a sacrifice by renouncing something, but it can be seen clearly that the Lord had not ordered him to go to the Philistines, and that, in the time of famine, Isaac could have remained where he was. But once he was separated, the Lord appeared to him again. And so it is in the life of every believer: God reveals Himself better after the separation from the world.

“And he builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac’s servants digged a well.”

It is not recorded that Isaac built any altar in the land of the Philistines; but as soon as he went out, after the vision of the Lord, there followed the altar and adoration and also a new provision of water, which was soon accompanied by prosperity. Now it was at this point of his life that Isaac had the experience of the beneficial influence he had over his enemies.

The king of the Philistines had not lost sight of him. The world observes our movements. “Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath one of his friends, and Phicol the chief captain of his army. And Isaac said unto them, wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me, and have sent me away from you? And they said: we saw certainly that the Lord was with thee.” We can never bless the world as much as when we separate from them. “We saw certainly that the Lord was with thee.” And it is when we separate ourselves from the world that they appreciate us more and look for us. They continued:

“and we said, let there be now an oath betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee; that thou will do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace: thou art now the blessed of the Lord.” Oh, that men may be able to say of us Christians that they see that the Lord is with us! The Philistines noticed that Isaac was prospering, notwithstanding the harassment of which he had been the target and the trouble of having to move from one point to another. Notice however the audacity. “We have done unto thee nothing but good.” Having annoyed him by filling in his wells with earth, they called that “nothing but good,” because they had not harmed him more than that. Isaac did not stop to argue whether they had done him good or not, or to become insolent now that they recognized his superiority; always meek and humble, Isaac treated them generously. “And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink. And they rose up betimes in the morning, and swear one to another: and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace.”

It is worthy of our attention that the Bible soon tells us: “And it came to pass the same day, that Isaac’s servants came, and told him concerning the well which they had digged, and said unto him, we have found water. And he called it Shebah: therefore the name of the city is Beersheba unto this day.”

As we have mentioned, finding water constituted one of the great riches. In the scripture, water is one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit. In the places Isaac stayed,

each new move and test of his meekness was followed by a material prosperity and a sign of approval from the Lord. And the greatest satisfaction was having won over the hearts of his enemies, who went far to look for him to tell him that the Lord was with him. But to arrive to that point, from the moment of the first spiteful action, Isaac must have possessed a great passive strength, enough not only to keep himself calm and tranquil, but to influence his numerous servants not to contend. Let us think for a moment how tenacious we are and how we want what we call "our rights" respected, and how easily we lose patience in our daily annoyances, and we can more appreciate these ancient heroes, and understand how daily patience and meekness demonstrated in the most ordinary things of life is among the rarest virtues of Christianity.

And from Isaac our mind races to Jesus Christ, of whom Isaac, in many points, is a type. We remember when Jesus was put out of Nazareth, distanced by the Gadarenes and rejected by the Samaritans, He did not display any anger. And still further on, He was meek and patient for that which was being done to Him personally until the end; so much so that the final tragedy is the complete illustration of the prophecy concerning the suffering Messiah: "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not his mouth; ... and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7)

Nobody has surpassed the patience and meekness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if this writing about Isaac is to

bring a benefit, let us run quickly to the Lord and we will receive from Him that patient strength to suffer with meekness; it is vain to seek this in our character. We have need of patient strength to suffer in meekness if we want our influence as Christians in the world to be beneficial and lasting.

Chapter 15

I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVETH (Job 19)

Seated in the ashes there is a man whose leprosy, in its worst manifestation, has disfigured him. Near him are three other men who demonstrate signs of condolence outwardly, judging from their torn mantles and hair covered with dust. Who are they? Who is that miserable man? The man covered with leprosy is Job, and the others are three friends who have come from afar to comfort him.

Job – What a contrast between his present state and his past fortune! Already a rich oriental patriarch, cheered by a numerous family and respected by everyone, Job has now seen his fortune torn away piece by piece, without a long interval between one misfortune and the next. His goods went first; his numerous children next and his health went last. And now, look at him, on the ashes. One could say of Job what a great writer of tragedy wrote:

“Only the memory remains to you
of that which you were, for greater
torment of that which you now
are...”

Looking at Job’s three friends we must acknowledge that something remained to him. One cannot be called entirely unhappy if he has even one friend. And so it

should be for Job, but I see a manifest impatience on his face; drawing nearer to him I hear that he answers his friends with irritation and I distinguish the words; he calls them annoying comforters and asks them to leave him in peace. Therefore, he has no friends, his lament says it. He has accepted the loss of his goods and his children with resignation: "The Lord has given, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord" are his words. He has seen himself covered with ulcers and has suffered the insult of his wife, but he has not rebelled. Job answered his wife: "What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" Finally, however, he lost his patience before his friends, and has felt his heart broken. "Why don't you leave me alone, why do you afflict me, why?"

These were painful conversations. The friends of Job, in turn, accused him of sin, and told him it was right for him to suffer. Job laments and describes his miserable state: "He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintances are verily estranged from me. My kinfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me... I called my servant and he gave me no answer... My breath is strange to my wife... Yea, young children despised me... My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth." And he cries and needs commiseration. "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me." It's a vain appeal; a cold smile appears on the faces of his three friends who look at each other twisting their lips in an attitude of contempt. Job noticed it and replied: "Why do ye persecute me as God,

and are not satisfied with my flesh?" Isn't it enough that you see me so reduced, and you want to torment me in the spirit?

And he would like his words to be remembered: "Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an an iron pen and graven in the rock forever!" In this way he might get justice. Job looks at his friends: the same ironic, accusing faces and he is alone. But, suddenly, from his profound misery, he recalls all his devout past and full of trust in God, he exclaims: "For I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth." (Job 19:25)

This cry of Job is not a vain expression: it is not the hope that he might have in some future reparation. He had no hope in this life; he said of the corruption surrounding him: "you are my father," and to the worm: "you are my mother and sister." Nor does Job's sure expression refer to a poetic future of humanity, to which he would be a stranger, as it would be strange to the sun for the unbelievable to happen, that from that light only the ashes could be revived. Here Job says something quite different and his words have a logical meaning only if we accept them as referring to Jesus Christ and to the Resurrection.

It is truly marvelous: a prophetic vision of a man who lived in remote antiquity and who, reduced to the extreme of misery, was able to exclaim: "I know my Redeemer liveth!" This is a sure language. I *know*; he

does not say: I imagine, hope, or suppose. Being old and reduced to misery, Job knew in an absolute way, and he knew it in making appeal to his own contrary experience of fortune and misfortune; he knew it precisely by that insolvable problem of the evil, for which his friends were tormenting him, and by which nothing remained to him but to look to the beyond. However it may be, he was able to say: "I know." What? That "my Redeemer liveth." "My" is a word of appropriation. He was not speaking of anyone strange to him. But that Redeemer was his: the expression "my" is the confident one of a son.

"Redeemer" is the same word used for a relative who had the right and was capable and willing to redeem persons and inheritance. This redemption came about by paying the debt. In the case of Job, we cannot speak of a ransom or redemption expected in this life, as we have said. The Redeemer invoked was none other than Jesus Christ.

"Liveth." This Redeemer is living. Not living only then, but gifted with a life that does not end. The best men do not live forever, and even wanting to help they are not able. The source of life is only in Christ. This redeemer was alive and powerful, and Job was calling Him his.

Is that enough? No, it is not all! Job continues: "And that He shall stand in the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another."

These words refer to the Resurrection. Job expects to be resurrected in a day that he cannot say precisely, but he knows that it will come. And if he did not mean this, his words would not ring true. And what would that victorious exclamation avail him if he did not also say and know that the Redeemer would resurrect him? Of what use would it be to Job for this living Redeemer to stand at the latter day upon the earth as an avenger of justice, if he always remained dust? What comfort was it, his speaking in such a sure way to his three friends? Job saw the resurrection. It seemed that he was saying: be what it may be of this body; if it perishes, or it can be said it is already destroyed. I myself, however, I shall see God; with my flesh I shall see God. I, I, Job, *with these eyes, I shall see.*

Blessed consolation! It's the only one that Job had. His relatives and friends despised him and by now he expected only the worst from men. He did not hope that a merciful hand would bring a flower on his grave. Mine, he thought will be the grave of the forgotten. And so be it, he seems to say. Abandoned as I shall be, One will not forget me. My ashes will not be dispersed and neglected always. They are entrusted to my Redeemer. He will pass on the earth, and I shall be revived, and *with these eyes, in my flesh, I shall see God.*

This was the comfort of Job; and this is the comfort of every believer. Sickness, poverty, abandonment and death all disappear before the triumphant, but sure, cry: "I know that my Redeemer liveth. Yet in my flesh shall I see God; mine eyes shall behold Him."

Chapter 16

LOOKING FOR JESUS

“But they, supposing him to have been in the company went a day’s journey; and they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances. And when they found Him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him. And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple...” (Luke 2: 44-46)

At the age of twelve years, Hebrew boys were called “sons of the law,” as they were already taught by their parents and in the Synagogue in the knowledge of the law. It was the custom to celebrate this twelfth year of the new “son of the law” on the occasion of the Passover. A sacrificial lamb was selected for the ceremony and kept apart for three days and on the fourth it was roasted on two spits. At a certain point of the ceremony, a son of the family would ask for an explanation of the meaning of this ceremony.

Jesus was twelve years old. He had become “a son of the law.” Joseph and Mary and the child went to Jerusalem for the Passover. “And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it.”

“But they, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey; and they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances. And when they found Him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him.

And it came to pass, that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the temple leaders, both hearing them and asking them questions, and all that heard Him were astonished at His answers, and when they saw Him, they were amazed: and His mother said unto Him, Son why hast thou dealt thus with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And He said unto them, how is it that ye sought me? Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business? And they understood not the saying which He spoke unto them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them."

In these few words of the Scripture there is much to meditate from various points of view; but with the help of the Lord we will try to limit ourselves and concentrate only on one: the attitude of Joseph and Mary with regard to the child left in Jerusalem, and supposing Him to be in their company in the beginning, and of their seeking Him afterward.

1. "But they, supposing Him to have been in the company." The feast having ended, the people left Jerusalem, and the pilgrims, in little caravans were leaving in the direction of their villages. And the company to which Mary and Joseph belonged moved toward Nazareth. In the confusion of the departure and the shouting, no one became aware, not even Mary that the child Jesus was missing. She thought He was in the company and with no one paying attention to ask, the pilgrims proceeded towards the mountains of Galilee, carrying on friendly conversations and singing hymns

and psalms, as we like to imagine of people returning from a religious feast. Whatever may have happened during that first day's journey, even if there had been, as it should be, a short pause, no one occupied himself about Jesus. In the midst of so many people, among whom there must have been children more or less of the same age, for lack of a special attention, no one became aware or thought of Him.

Evening came and the tired pilgrims stopped to lend a hand in the preparations for spending the night. The caravan was dividing itself into little groups, remaining close to one another, but each one formed from the most intimate circle. Everyone hurried to raise their tents, in order then to light fires and prepare food, after which the various families were to rest a few hours before resuming their trip.

Joseph and Mary also stopped. A twelve-year-old child is also a help in a poor family; however it may be, each group came together and the two looked around, waiting for the child Jesus; at first without anxiety, because they supposed He was in some nearby group that was being formed; but since He did not appear, they began to call Him, and inquire among the closest ones. Where is He? Where has He gone? But I haven't seen Him today. Nor have I, were the answers. Has that other child seen Him, our neighbor? Nothing. No one had seen Him. Oh! Truly. We haven't seen Him. We have not paid attention. Oh! But what has happened?

“We supposed He was in the company.” “I did too, I believed,” and so it went. They were calling and no one answered, the boy was not coming. It was late. Supposing no longer mattered. They had supposed enough that Jesus might be in the company, but He was not, and they began to look for him.

2. A boy is lost. And what a child was lost! From supposing during the day that He was in the company, to now imagining Him lost, what a step! They began to seek him anxiously among the pilgrims, repeating painful questions and receiving the same answer. Try to understand the sorrow of the mother and the fear of the father! That child on whom the greatest hopes were concentrated, and for whom Mary remembered and kept in her heart everything about Him, had disappeared. Who knows what happened to Him.

It was necessary to turn back as soon as possible, and take again the same road toward Jerusalem; but it was night and painful hours must pass in order to wait for the daylight when the two pilgrims can start to go back. What a return! They looked to the right and the left on the road, hoping to meet Him. They saw nobody and went forward, not paying attention to their tiredness. Finally, Jerusalem appeared clearly before their eyes. They returned into the city and went to the place where they had been in the days of the feast, asking anxiously. Nobody. Those who met Joseph and Mary asked themselves: What is it with these villagers?

They looked for Him for two days. They went up and down all the streets of Jerusalem, asking the same people many times, and always in vain. At the end, being disheartened, they were about to renounce further investigation. But the two asked each other painfully: where did you last see Him? They searched their memory to pinpoint exactly the precise moment and place they last saw Him. But they could not remember having seen Him outside of the temple. But why should He have stayed in the temple when the feast had ended? Well, let's go to see. And thus, perhaps with no or with very little hope, they went to the temple.

3. Looking for Him in the Temple. We ask the reader to keep in mind the three methods of their inquiry: first, among friends and relatives; then, in Jerusalem; and last, in the temple.

Returning from the painful trip toward Jerusalem, the first building that Joseph and Mary saw was the temple, with its gigantic walls and imposing towers; going around anxiously in search for Jesus, they looked in that direction many times and perhaps passed in front of the temple. And yet, only at the end did they think to look inside, after repeated attempts to find Him elsewhere. But that is exactly where Jesus was, in the temple in the midst of the temple leaders, listening to them and asking them questions, and causing them to marvel. Therefore, it was not Jesus who was lost; it was Joseph and Mary who did not notice that he remained behind. The two tired pilgrims are in the temple; they seek anxiously, and their steps are directed toward a special place where they

came to know there was a meeting of temple leaders. As they are going they distinguish a child in the midst of the white-haired men. It is He! What is He doing here? They go forward and stop before the group.

In her joy of finding Him, Mary exclaimed: "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." But He said unto them: "How is it that ye sought me? Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" Take notice of "thy father" and "I sought thee" and Jesus' answer: "I must be about my Father's business." The consideration of the question of Mary and the answer of Jesus would take us too far from the main theme of the present writing. Jesus joined Mary and Joseph, and all three took the road back to Nazareth. The two pilgrims were not enjoying the company of the rest of the caravan, but Jesus and His Mission were traveling with them, so there was nothing to be afraid of while traveling.

Permit us a few reflections that arise from what we have written: have we at some time felt that we have lost everything in religion? We have in fact lost something, and it is Jesus we left behind, even though we believed to have Him in our company.

Friendships among men last if they continue on the basis on which they began and our relation with Jesus lasts on the same basis as when we first met Him.

We may lose friends by an accumulation of circumstances for which we may not have been

responsible, but *we cannot lose Jesus unless we are to blame*. It is not easy to renew friendships of the world that are changed or broken; we or the friend are not in the same place as the first encounter, but it is easy to renew your friendship with Jesus because His heart does not change, and He always loves us. The losses in the world are often irreparable; man's verdict of disrespect often lasts an entire life; it's not so with Jesus.

Is there someone who may have lost Jesus? It is not easy to appreciate the loss if we have never had Him in our heart. But one who has enjoyed the intimate communion knows what it means to lose Him even for one moment. The Psalmist asked the Lord for the privilege "to behold the beauty of the Lord." (Psalm 27:4)

And yet there is something even more serious, and it is to lose Jesus and to believe to have Him in one's company. Many suppose they are still Christians. They walk together with many pilgrims, and, in the distraction of the trip, they do not realize that the main companion is not with them. Those who realize in time, before the end of the pilgrimage are fortunate!

Some, however, realize they have lost Him! They are persons who were enthusiastic and happy at one time and have reached a certain point at which it cannot be said of them precisely what happened, but one thing is certain is that their spirituality has diminished; their prayer is no longer regular and fervent.

Something has happened; and they hasten to find Christ again; but most of the time they do not look for Him where they should. They go among their friends, and they do not find Him, not even among the benches of the church, not even among books. Go back, go back. Mary lost Jesus in the temple, and there she found Him, at the place where He was left. There He waits.

We can be part of the best religious congregations, sing the best hymns, and not have Jesus. Let us determine immediately where we are in our relations with Him; let's not be distracted by other voices. By going back, David found the face of the Lord again after his repentance, and the prodigal embraced his father again when he returned home.

Friend reader, if you have lost the Christ of one time, tonight, before the day ends, make your accounts with Him. If your faith is not ardent like before, return to Christ, seek for Him in the temple of your heart, one on one. Perhaps you have distanced yourself from Him, but *He has not lost sight of you, and has always waited for you.*

Chapter 17

THE SINFUL WOMAN AT THE FEET OF JESUS

“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

The Pharisee... “Spake within himself saying, this man, if he were a prophet would have known who and what manner of woman...” And Jesus said: “Simon, I have somewhat to say to thee: A creditor which had two debtors... and when they had nothing to pay, he forgave them both, and He said unto her, thy sins are forgiven. Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” (Luke 7:36-50)

“Woe unto thee Chorazin, woe unto thee Bethsaida... and thou Capernaum, which are exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell, for if the mighty works which have been done in thee had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today.” (Matthew 11:21-23)

And, perhaps having arrived at this point of the discourse, Jesus, in looking into the crowd, distinguished a face agonizing with pain and repentance and the tone of His language changed into a tender expression of thanks to the Father, because He had revealed these things to little children. Jesus continued: “come unto me, all ye that are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:25-30)

Two among the listeners were more impressed than others by the words of Jesus, and they hastened to seek Him, by different ways, and with different aims. These two represented the extremes of the social chain of that time. They were Simon the Pharisee, and an unnamed sinner.

“And one of the Pharisees desired Him that He would eat with him. And He went into the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to meat.” Jesus answered the request of the Pharisee by accepting the invitation, whatever the motive may have been that prompted it. He loved the Pharisees; it was they who did not love Him. Jesus went anywhere, even though the desire to have Him could have been motivated by a curiosity that needed gratification or by the desire to observe Him up close; yet Jesus went.

“And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment.”

This woman was among the crowd and, more than others, she understood the invitation of the Lord Jesus and accepted it for herself, feeling herself as one who labored and was heavy laden. Desirous of finding peace she followed the Master. She learned that He was invited to eat with the Pharisee; and, to be more precise in the expressive language of the Scripture, when she knew, following accurate information, where Jesus was, she

decided to reach Him. She had to make an effort, because she knew of the prejudices of the Pharisaic caste toward her and knew that she would be exposed to contempt; but the invitation of Jesus was stronger than any other force, and she wanted to go.

But she did not want to go empty handed. She had to bring something to that marvelous personage, from whose mouth alone she heard words of true comfort, and a thought came quickly to her. She went home, and took from among her most costly objects the best that she had: an alabaster box of ointment containing an odoriferous oil of great price. Thus, she thought, at least I will present this object to Him, and carrying it tenderly she hurried to the house of the Pharisee.

In Oriental countries dinner hours were spent out in the open air, in the shade of a tree or a pergola, in view of the public. The woman drew near to Jesus, but did not have the courage to speak to Him or to offer Him the gift she had brought; instead, she fell on her knees at His feet, and in that humble posture, not finding words, began to cry: "And stood at his feet behind Him weeping, and began to wash His feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed His feet, and anointed them with the ointment."

It was a torrent of tears that came from the abyss of a heart torn by the sense of sin. And remaining thus and weeping, she was wiping the feet of the Lord Jesus with the hair of her head. The attitude of this sinful woman is sculpted in these few words. The weight of her soul had

almost taken away every other reserve and boundary of expression in her humility. It was devotion and love. She was kissing the feet of the Lord, washing them with tears, wiping them with her hair. From attentive care of herself she had passed to the most humble abasement. She dared ask nothing, and all that she had thought dutiful to say to Him vanished in that unique display of tears, devotion and penitence. She observed nothing around her, not even the anything but benevolent look of the spectators, fixed as she was in that place and in that position. The scene was taking place in silence on the part of all, but the attitude of three persons was delineated even more: she who was remaining at that place, Jesus who was receiving the homage, and the owner of the house.

“Now when the Pharisee which had bidden Him saw it, he spoke within himself, saying, this man, if he were a prophet would have known who and what manner of woman this is that touched Him: for she is a sinner.”

To the Pharisees members of a designated class were called sinners. The Pharisee who invited Jesus was on the lookout, waiting for the moment to better expose Him; and, before that scene, he felt scandalized. The Pharisee thought: I have been entirely deceived in regard to this one, a friend of such people; He does not even hesitate to receive her here, in my presence. And if He is not her friend, He should know who and what manner of woman she is, if He were truly a prophet. But what prophet! After all, I invited Him and have remained within the limits of prudence with Him. The

Pharisee continued in these thoughts; but his face, like a mask, was hiding his thought. The meal proceeded with cold dignity. At the end, as a perfect gentleman, the Pharisee would accompany Jesus to the door, without reprimanding Him, but promising himself to never again let Him cross his threshold. In the meantime, the woman remained in the same place, silent and weeping.

“And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon I have somewhat to say unto thee.”

Jesus answered the thought of Simon. The impenetrable Pharisee was not able to hide from Jesus. Our thoughts speak and leave wounds. Jesus followed the Pharisee in his silent soliloquy. He follows our thoughts. “Simon I have somewhat to say to thee.” Jesus requests attention. You are saying so many things in yourself, but I must say something now; don’t speak alone.

“And he saith, Master say on.” In the language of polite society: “go ahead; you may speak, I will listen to you.”

And Jesus said, “There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: one owed five hundred pence and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both.” They were two debtors who owed different sums of money but both were debtors, both insolvent, and by law both of them could be condemned and sold to their creditor. Their debt was different, but because it was impossible for either one to satisfy it, the identical danger existed. But the creditor forgave both. “Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?”

Simon thought: what a question! At any rate he answered: "I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most." And Jesus said, "Thou hast rightly judged."

In this comparison Simon and Jesus were in agreement, but the Pharisee did not understand His purpose. And Jesus turned to the woman, and said unto Simon: "seest thou this woman?" Up to then Jesus had not turned, showing apparent indifference. Many times He appears indifferent. However, the woman, notwithstanding all that was going on, remained always in that position.

"Do you see this woman?" What a question! *Do you see this woman?* Certainly Simon saw her, and unfortunately, it was her presence that prompted his unexpressed judgments. And yet Jesus said to him: "Do you see?" As if to say: observe attentively. In fact, many things that we do not see pass under our eyes, or we look at only with the reflected light of our judgments. See! Pay attention. Look at this woman, and listen to what I have to tell you!

"I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she has washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head." "Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet."

"My head with oil didst thou not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment." Notice the contrast: *thou, she*. The Pharisee and the sinful woman; the extreme links of the social chain had come together

and every comparison, *thou, she*, was a blow to the proud heart of the Pharisee. And it was not all. In this contrast the Pharisee and his invitation was judged: there was not a single note of affection, not even those attentions that were customarily given to guests in the Orient. Thou: no water for my feet, not a kiss of welcome, no oil for my head. *Nothing*. She: not water, but tears for my feet, kisses for my feet, and odoriferous oil for my feet. "See Simon, this woman!"

Indeed, Simon did not see her like that; above all he did not understand seeing her compared to him in a comparison entirely advantageous to her, coming immediately after the question about the two debtors. After that great contrast: "thou, she," Jesus continued: "Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." That woman loved Jesus much, believed much and received much.

But thou, but she: this contrast was mentioned three times. Simon and the sinful woman were both sinners in different measures, both insolvent, but not both came to the feet of Jesus. They were equal in quality as sinners but not in quantity; they remained unequal by their different attitude toward Jesus. "I say unto thee, (Simon was obliged to hear it said to him) her sins, which are many, are forgiven." The Lord paid no further attention to the Pharisee, who wanted a Messiah measured on the standard of his prejudices.

“And He said unto her, thy sins are forgiven.” Finally, He had a word for that woman. He turned to her with majesty and a tone that is possible only to imagine, but not describe. Jesus added, “thy sins are forgiven.” “And they that sat at meat with Him began to say within themselves, who is this that forgiveth sins also.”

There were others at the table, silent observers, friends of the Pharisee, rounding out the banquet. They were people of uncertain background who are always present where there is something to be enjoyed and nothing to be risked. A whispering and a murmuring passed among them: “who is this that forgiveth sins?” Hostile by hate and by the hardening of their hearts, they remained in the same attitude toward Jesus from the beginning, making the barrier of separation always more visible. Jesus no longer answered and continued speaking to the woman.

“Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” The great judge absolved her. Who will dare to condemn? The woman of many sins was safe, safe at the feet of Jesus, where she had deposited the best gifts, and more than the gifts, her warm tears of repentance. “Go in peace.” Peace, the last limit of the blessing. Peace in God. Up to now she had not known peace. She stood up. She went out transformed in the new horizon created in her by repentance and by the compassionate and forgiving love of the Son of God.

Chapter 18

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO

“From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with Him. Then Jesus said unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered Him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (John 6:66-69)

The discourse of Jesus held in the Synagogue of Capernaum is memorable for its content and for its effects. The occasion that suggested it to the Lord is also memorable: the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves.

Jesus attempted to explain the significance of the miracle and to reveal Himself as the true source of life, using bread as a figure, virtually teaching the incarnation. The discourse had been received with murmurings, questions and interrogations. What was this impalpable bread of which they heard Him speak? Could it be of any practical, immediate use?

Jesus spoke with Calvary before Him, envisioning the Cross: “And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” “And the Jews strove among themselves saying, how shall this man give us His flesh to eat? Jesus said to them: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son

of Man, and drink His blood; ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up in the last day."

For a long time the people were accustomed to looking for a political Messiah. The enthusiasm of the multitude continued during the signs and the miracles, but spiritual teachings were received coldly. Who had ever said such things? At the end, they had stopped questioning and interrupting; they believed there was no use. Now something new happened that signaled an important moment in the career of Jesus, like one of the steps in the descending scale of His humiliations. One by one, they turned their backs and the synagogue became empty. And, more painful, the group of those first converted had been reduced. "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him."

He was not the man that they had dreamed of and rather than discussing and asking, they left Him completely. They were tested by the fire of the truth.

It was a very painful moment and it was an occasion to examine the faithfulness of the twelve disciples. Jesus, with a tone of voice that reflected an intense pain, asked this brief, but significant question: "Will ye also go away?"

The tone and the expression of this question could have sounded unwise in that hour and circumstance, in the presence of the only group that remained, but the Lord Jesus is not afraid to speak clearly. After all, it was time

to know who the ones were who wanted to remain willingly, because those who remained unwillingly would also leave at the first occasion. And in order to know a clear will better, there was nothing better than a frank and resolute question, which had a double effect: if the disciples were sincere, it would reconfirm them; if not, it would make them decide to leave immediately.

A little of this courage in the Church of Christ would have wholesome effects, unmasking the false and faint hearted and confirming the faithful, because it is always true that profound and spiritual truths are liked by few.

The question seemed to say this: You heard my discourse, you know better what my program is; don't be under any illusions. You see that I am no longer followed by enthusiastic crowds. It is time to decide definitively and quickly. "Will ye also go away?"

The answer of Simon Peter, who believed he interpreted the thought of the other disciples, followed quickly. "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It is worthwhile to consider these noble words with regard to the disciples and to humanity.

The order of thought is noteworthy: "Lord." Jesus was always called Lord. Others began by calling Him "Rabbi" when they looked for Him in Capernaum and ended by calling Him "this man." However, the disciples

reserved the same title, "Lord," for Him even without the multitude. Lord before, Lord now, whatever may have been the extension of the meaning they were giving to the word. And the constancy in calling Him Lord reveals an assurance of opinion about Him. A question followed: "to whom shall we go?" and an affirmation that is the motive of the question: "Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Believed, are sure: we have believed and have arrived to the assurance. At first we simply had faith in you that was like an anticipation of the assurance; an experience followed: we have been near you, have seen your works, heard your words that are life, and, from day to day, we have confirmed our faith. Now we no longer follow you for *believing* but because we are *sure*; and we are sure because we have examined.

Day by day, in dealing with Jesus, the disciples had occasions to make silent comparisons and had always found themselves to be inferior, always far from Him, to whom they were always devoted and respectful. And by a discernment that is granted to simple and sincere persons, they were able to understand that Jesus was not like other men, instead, He was quite a different person, rather unique. "Thou, none other, art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And what matters most is they understood they had need of Jesus, and without Him life would be incomplete. "Thou art." Therefore, if you are, and not another, and we have need of that which you are, to whom shall we go?

To whom shall we go? A few of the twelve had been disciples of John the Baptist, whose memory had remained sacred in their heart and in that of the multitudes. But they remembered how the same John the Baptist had drawn himself into the shadows at the appearing of Jesus and had pointed Him out: "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world."

John had died, and even if he were alive, they would not return to him because he sent them to Jesus. Under the preaching of fire of John, they had begun to understand what sort of people the important men of their generation were. People of all classes and conditions had trembled before the cry of that preacher who was austere and unadorned: "Repent." But the Baptist himself felt small before Jesus. Therefore, what were the men of their time before Jesus, if they had seemed small before John the Baptist?

Return back to whom, to whom then? And Scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees in the light of the Master seemed to be pale shadows. What doctrine, what creed would they embrace? "To whom," and it seemed that in looking around, Peter and the disciples were seeing the emptiness outside of Jesus. To whom shall we go? To sin, to the devil, to atheism? And so on. Perhaps they could go to no one. Take note of the strange hypothesis! There is not a following of no one.

Someone affirms that it is possible to live following or imitating no one, but the desire to imitate someone is a simple affirmation and is innate in the human soul that

wants and has always wanted to look to a head. And those who believe themselves too big to seek for their ideal on high, then become so small that they look for it below. They pretend to be so free that they disdain to obey God, and then become slaves, yoked to this or that man or party. Thus it has been, and such is the world.

It is necessary to go to someone. But the important thing is to decide to whom to direct oneself. If such a question is serious when it is made before meeting Jesus, it is absolutely solemn after we have known Him.

Before meeting Jesus, there are various rosy hopes in life that fall one by one. Yet many drag themselves feverishly from one ideal to the other, always believing, at the end, to find something that satisfies them. But when one has found Jesus and has had a certain experience in life, then the question: to whom shall we go? becomes serious; leaving Jesus is truly very serious.

At one time it was customary to repeat resounding words like these: humanity, equality, liberty, brotherhood, etc. With every new knowledge it seemed that perfection was reached; but after meeting Jesus, the things that attracted us before seemed to be either lacking in significance or outright frightening. After coming to Jesus, and getting to know Him, we see that He is the only one of whom we can say that the first good impression does not diminish after having met Him. If we turn our back to Him, to whom would we go?

Should one go to the various systems that debate the concept of being and of the creator? To go insane? Should one go to those who say there is no God, in order to remain in the desolating truth of the evil that envelops humanity, without hope of equilibrium or reparation?

Should we go to some religious system? To which? How could we be satisfied after having contemplated the God of Love in Christ Jesus?

Should we return to old associations we cherished so much at one time and then brought disappointment, and would we return there with the increased intuition that enables us to better evaluate good and evil? One has sharper intuition if one has been in the school of Christ.

To whom shall we go if we leave him? I don't know and if I stop to think my mind is confounded. It would be better never to have met Him, than afterward to err far from Him!

Reader, have you known Jesus? If you haven't known Him, don't dare to talk about Him, without having looked at Him up close. You will never be able to know anything of Him if you have not first gone to Him in faith. The world wants to know first and then believe (or rather they pretend or imagine to follow this norm); with Jesus it is resolutely said: believe first, then know. And if you arrive there, you will arrive to know Jesus, and you will see that it is one thing to have heard of Him and another to have met Him directly.

If you are able to exclaim: "I have heard of Thee, but now mine eye hath seen Thee." If you arrived at this point and then would want to turn back and leave Jesus, have, in your interest, the awareness to ask yourself: to whom shall I go? Face this question resolutely; return with your mind, one by one, to your past experiences. Don't delude yourself and do not avoid the question. It is necessary to go to someone. If you question yourself in this way, in the light of the knowledge of Jesus, you cannot help but look back again from every other point to seek Jesus intently in order to fall again at His feet and say to Him; Lord, I want to remain here; You have the words of life. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And I want you as King and Lord.

Chapter 19

IF ANY MAN THIRST, LET HIM COME

“Jesus stood and cried, saying, if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.”

(John 7:37)

In observing the more or less showy religious feasts of our people, many times I am drawn to melancholy reflections; they express eloquently the always unsatisfied thirst for something that satisfies spiritual needs. Feasts and processions follow each other, and when they are over, people remain what they were before, eloquent witnesses of their uselessness.

The Jewish people observed, among others, a very important feast; that of the Tabernacles. The feast occurred in autumn, and besides signifying a thanksgiving for the harvest of the year, it tended to replay in the minds of the people their deliverance from Egypt and the pilgrim life lived by their ancient fathers before entering the promised land.

The feast of the Tabernacles had a high, grandiose significance. The feast took place every year, with imposing solemnity, and culminated in the ceremony mentioned by the Evangelist. The feast lasted eight days, and on the last day a truly imposing spectacle took place. An immense number of pilgrims from afar who came from various parts of Palestine would gather in the temple and around it. At a certain hour a procession of

priests and Levites proceeded, with golden vessels, to draw water from the pool of Siloam, and these vessels were then passed from hand to hand in the line of Levites and priests and poured as a libation to God in the sacred courts of the temple. And they sang the words of Isaiah, "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:3)

Jesus was in Jerusalem unannounced and was present at the feast. The ceremony was taking place solemnly during the general commotion. There was a religious silence, broken only by the singing of the choruses; meanwhile, the people considered the rich past of deliverances commemorated by those ceremonies, while thinking about a future even richer in blessings and prosperity.

It was precisely in that solemn hour that something disturbed the profound attention of the crowd. One, rising up, firm and sure near some column of the temple, or positioning Himself in a prominent place that would make Him more visible, stood and cried: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."

That unexpected and loud cry shook everyone. Yet no man dared lay hands on Him, not even the soldiers who were sent to the feast to look for Jesus and arrest Him. Centuries had passed and that was the first time that anyone dared to interrupt the solemn monotony of that ceremony. A profound and almost unexplainable

impression invaded those who heard. A varied and rapid murmuring swept through the crowd as they learned that the One who dared to cry out in that way, in that moment, was the famous Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet of Galilee.

“If any man thirst;” it is noteworthy that this form of invitation expresses the limitation of the number and examines the veracity and seriousness of the desire. *Any*, not all; Jesus never hoped that everyone in this dispensation would go to Him. That *any* is so expressive of the forming of the church of Christ, which is made up of faithful people who are taken one here and one there from the world. And not just *any*, but *if*; as if to say: I know that you aspire to something better; now, if anyone feels an urgent need to know the entire significance of the ceremony and truly wants to satisfy his thirst, let him come to me.

If, and this “if” is at the base of everything. The world can never satisfy your thirst for the divine. If truly you are thirsty, if you truly seek to satisfy your thirst for that which is divine, if, in reality, you have a burning desire, it can be satisfied.

In fact, no one has honestly and sincerely sought God without finally finding Him. There are many who say they want to know the truth and to draw close to Jesus, but they do not have a profound and sincere desire; they remain, throughout their life, uncertain and unsatisfied. In this moment, oh reader, you can find Jesus if you want Him. He is near you.

Thirst is an urgent need of our nature. We all know about thirst, and almost all of us have heard about people who died of thirst and would have given treasures to have a glass of water. But this physical need is an image of another more profound need of the human soul, which is always anxiously seeking for something that can never be found in the goods of this world. Humanity runs from one place to another in search of peace and does not find it because the world cannot give it, and the more one enjoys the world the more unsatisfied one remains. Our soul is the highest creation of God. Our ultimate need is the Creator Himself; but sin has separated us from Him and that's why many seek elsewhere for that which only God can give.

A drunkard wants to satisfy his thirst, but only increases his parching thirst and recurs to the stimulants. The worldly man seeks satisfaction in a whirlwind of pleasures and finds only bitterness and delusion. The joys of this world seem to satisfy for a little while; but they last only a moment, followed by a reality that is so much more painful for how much greater is the disappointment than we had imagined.

A great writer tells the story of a poor mother who lost her only daughter and lost her mind by the pain. She was collecting pieces of clothing that belonged to the child and formed a bundle with them. She held the bundle lovingly in her arms, calling it by the name of her daughter and was passing the time under this illusion. But at times, it seemed that a flash of light penetrated the darkness of her mind and revealed the truth to her. The

unhappy woman would jump to her feet looking at the deceitful bundle with dilated pupils and push it away violently; and with painful sighs, she called anxiously for her lost daughter. The image of humanity lies in this episode. We run from one object to another, but one after the other, we must push these objects away from us in disgust, always going forward in the feverish search for an ideal that can never be attained in this world.

The Lord Jesus was speaking to a people who had the greatest religious knowledge of the time. All of Judaism pointed to a new personage and those feasts and ceremonies were only symbols. In appealing to "any man," Jesus refers to Himself as the prototype and the ideal person to whom all Judaism was pointing. "If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink."

Christ is the one we need. In Him we will always find the spring that never runs dry and satisfies our soul, leaving in it the imprint of peace and love. But, as the sight of a fountain of water on a torrid day increases our thirst, thus, after we have found Christ, the thirst of our soul becomes more ardent; however, it is always satisfied in Him. This fountain of water is near us and follows us, like the spring of Horeb followed the Hebrews in their difficult and lengthy crossing of the desert.

"Let him come unto me, and drink." Water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit; a living communion between us and the Lord that transforms the horizon of our life into something better. The soul rests in Christ and doesn't

ask for anything else, only an intimate spiritual communion that continually increases until we can say that Christ is *in us*.

“If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.”

This communion with the Lord has its fruits, rather, it is said that it must absolutely bear fruits. If a pure stream of water ends in a container it becomes stagnant and from the benefit that it was, it becomes a cause of ruin. This fountain of water must have an outlet; when we have Christ and live in communion with His Spirit, we cannot help but pour out on others the blessings we have received. A life redeemed by the Lord Jesus must be spent for His service, among the humanity that surrounds us.

One who has the love of God in his heart and does nothing for others and stops in egoistic contemplation of the divine, ends, after not too long a time, by losing what he received. Because of the superabundance, the fountain of spiritual water must have an outlet; provided there *is* superabundance.

There is a magnificent vision in chapter 47 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel. The vision is of a river coming out of the sanctuary that becomes deeper as it runs, watering the arid desert. Forasmuch as we believe in a future existence of such a river, it is true that it also has a spiritual significance. The Christian existence that draws

from the river at the foot of the Sanctuary runs like a beneficent stream in the midst of the desert of the world.

On stormy nights, sometimes there are flashes of great light that for a moment illuminate frightening scenes. In the midst of the sad pages of the history of Judaism contemporaneous with Jesus, the words of the Lord seem like flashes of lightning. He uttered a cry that no one else would ever dare to utter. And if we could imagine one who would cry out in a feast as Jesus did, we could imagine the absence of effect of that appeal. But the powerful cry of the Lord Jesus: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink," has surpassed the confines of space and time. The temple of Jerusalem was destroyed and that civilization ended with all those people and those feasts. And yet the appeal of the Savior remains eternal, engraved in the Gospels.

And while I write it seems to me that Jerusalem has become the entire world. In it, some are busier than others in seeking remedies, and for a moment it seems that humanity believes to truly have found rest. It is only a moment of illusion. But there is One, an unseen spectator, Who silently and unnoticed by the great majority, still cries the words that the centuries have not suffocated or silenced: Are you truly seeking rest? "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink."

Chapter 20

POWER AND PERSEVERANCE OF PRAYER

“O woman, great is thy faith.” (Matthew 15:21-28)

The disciples marveled at the power of the prayer of their Master and, on one occasion, they asked: “teach us to pray.” They did not say: teach us to preach. It is true that it may not be too difficult to deliver a good discourse, on the basis of the doctrine and courses in eloquence, but it is not possible to pray effectively without an ardent faith in the Lord.

Pray is a profound word that synthesizes all the needs of our weak nature. Who has not prayed? From the whimpering of a newborn to the trembling supplication of the white-haired old man, humanity has always been in search of help it could not find in itself.

There are those who do not believe in humbling themselves to pray to God; but it is exactly they who bow down to implore ineffective or momentary help from other men, and often, what is worse, precisely from their oppressors.

“And behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto Him, saying, have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David...”

“Cried;” we read this expression many times in the scripture: “they cried to the Lord,” almost as if to

indicate a moment of extreme pain and of help invoked with tears. The cry of the pagan woman came from a heart torn by having her only daughter ill. She did not know the God of Israel but heard that the prophet of Galilee was passing in those places and had, everywhere along His way, disseminated blessings and love. Armed with the courage that is the only companion of extremely difficult moments and despairing of any other help, the mother made her way through the streets. She had spent many sleepless nights and could see the young life being extinguished before her eyes. She found the strength to rush out into the street, make her way through the crowd, behind the steps of the Lord Jesus, and cry out anxiously: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David! My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil."

That was a brief prayer, but one that entirely expressed a need and the voice of the one who offered it possessed a moving intonation that we are powerless to describe. "Have mercy on me, Lord..." "But He answered her not a word..."

What novelty is this? Was He deaf to the cry of a mother? Many times, from a distance, Jesus heard and understood the voices that were asking for help and had always lifted His hand to bless. Did Jesus, the One who went around doing good, moved by compassion for crowds wandering and dispersed like sheep without a shepherd, become insensitive?

The woman continued to cry behind Him without receiving an answer. However, the silence and

indifference that would have silenced the most ardent prayer did not diminish the faith of the poor mother.

Meantime, that same rendering cry: "have mercy," reached the ear of the disciples. The disciples were amazed by the indifferent attitude. This was new and incredible in such a man. Finally, the disciples were conquered by a great compassion, and ashamed to suggest advice or exhortations to their Master whom they loved and feared, they said to Him, beseeching Him: "send her away; for she crieth after us." Their suggestion was useless, as the Lord Jesus, with a brisk gesture, and with severe words answered: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This time it was too much. Not only was He deaf to the cry of pain, He who had always had so much love for the suffering, added that His beneficent work was limited only to one people? Who knows how others may have answered this affirmation. Perhaps they would have answered the unjust affirmations, with words of fire, and cried: "you are a false prophet..." but the heart of that woman was not occupied about her own person; her existence was entirely contained at the bedside of her daughter, who was perhaps in agony in that hour. Forgetting everything else, she fell at the feet of Jesus and worshipped Him, and repeated still, among the gasps: "Lord, help me."

Oh, this time, the disciples are sure of it, the word of salvation will be pronounced and His hand will be lifted up to bless. The moment is solemn and they wait. But

nothing? To the indifference shortly before, there followed injustice, and, for a full measure, contempt must also be added. "But He answered and said, it is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs."

These were horrible, monstrous words. Jesus, making Himself an heir of the hatred the Jews demonstrated for pagans, echo of a thousand insults with which His people had qualified strangers, hurled such atrocious words in the face of that unhappy woman who was appealing to Him in such a way, and, more savage than the savages, ended by tearing the heart, already too ulcerated, of that unfortunate woman. Yes, this time the heavy word had gone beyond even the power of hatred for the difference of nationality or of race. The disciples who, perhaps shortly before, may have felt a sense of pride at the affirmation that the Lord had come only for the lost sheep of Israel, could not imagine that their Master would make such a statement. The disciples feared that a riot would take place. The woman was exhausted by suffering, weakened by the indifference, embittered by the injustice and covered with mud. The last insult was made even more cruel by the presence of spectators. The disciples feared that, in her extreme desperation, the woman would find the extreme strength to stand on her feet, gather a fistful of mud from the street and mixed with words of fierce resentment, throw it in the face of the One who should not have been deaf to so many prayers and treated her so inhumanely.

But no, she is still at the feet of Jesus, and, continuing in her painful cry to implore for help, and hugging the

knees of the Lord, finds the strength to say: "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Meaning to say, treat me even as a dog and throw me the remnants from your blessings.

It was then, suddenly, the disciples saw a new scene unfold. The face of Jesus became irradiated by joy and by an immense light; and turning toward the supplicant, He exclaimed: "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt." The disciples had finally found the Master again and understood the secret of that hardness. "Great is thy faith." They were learning from that example, brought to them by a pagan woman, what faith meant, such as to overcome the triple test of indifference, of injustice and contempt. They began to understand more every day that the mission of their Lord was much more vast and profound than they had understood at the first encounter.

At the cry of the woman for mercy, Jesus had answered immediately in his heart, with a note of His mercy; but He had to suffocate, for a moment, the tenderness that wanted to burst forth from His soul, thus giving a lesson to His disciples. As soon as He was ready to heal the daughter, He had an extraordinary word for that rare woman, and said to her: "O woman, great is thy faith." It was an immense statement that compensated the heroism of that mother and raised her to greater dignity. "Woman, great is thy faith."

And she hastened to hurry toward home. The mother left her daughter agonizing and now was sure of finding the

flourish of life and joy on the face of her daughter. "And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

And the Lord Jesus departed toward the shores of the Sea of Galilee where other suffering people were waiting for Him and where He would leave other blessings in His passage.

Chapter 21

IF THOU WILT

“If thou wilt, thou can make me clean” (Matthew 8: 1-4)

In these verses, the leper is an unhappy Oriental traveler, wandering from one sanctuary to another in search of health; even today a leper is considered by Mohammedans and Indians to be guilty of abominable sins.

A traveler recounts that a leper remained near a station three days, unable to move. He could hear the running water from a nearby fountain and cried out for someone to give him some, but no one cared for him, until a Christian passed by and found a shelter for him, where he died after a little while.

The Superintendent of the Asylum for lepers in Allahbend, India, recounts: “I was about to leave when I saw a leper lying down in the dust in the shadow of a tree. He was an old man and was breathing with difficulty. What was left of his hands and feet was in a horrible state of decomposition. He did not even have enough energy to chase the flies away. It was the most disgusting and repulsive being I had ever seen. I remembered that he was my brother, and in that poor body there lived a spirit like mine.”

These are contemporary descriptions, in the light of the charity of the 20th century. What conditions may have

been for lepers at the time Jesus walked in Palestine, we can only imagine. The law ordered: "and the leper in who the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, unclean, unclean." (Leviticus 13:45)

The greatest doctor appeared in Palestine; He was not licensed by any school, did not ask for compensation and sent no one away without a benefit. He healed various infirmities of those who came to Him or were brought from afar. No examination of the sickness, no taking a pulse, no examination of the tongue, no prescription for medicines; none of this. A word and the sick one was cured.

A crowd almost always formed at the passage of this great doctor who was moving from one place to another as a pedestrian traveler. He was not only a great doctor but spoke words that no one had ever heard. Many went to Him just to listen to Him.

Jesus had been on a mountain and had spoken; when He came down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. At a certain point, they saw one in the crowd, hardly able to move, dragging himself. The crowd opened up to make way for that creature. He was a beggar, deathly pale and a leper. How is it that the crowd allowed him to go forward, without throwing stones and other objects at him, according to their cruel custom? The crowd was absorbed in contemplating Jesus, and at the sight of the leper they moved away to make room for him. There are cases when a crowd

easily divides to make way for someone; either for a person of great importance or for someone who carries the signs of a nauseating and disgusting illness. Therefore, the miserable one was able to go forward, and, having arrived to Jesus, he prostrated himself at His feet and said: "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

"If Thou Wilt." He was the first leper who came to Jesus; afterward, we read of others who were cleansed. But this one was the first to have courage in his misfortune and to reach the Master. He first appealed to the will of Jesus: "If Thou wilt, Lord." He did not doubt His power, because many sick, even in desperate conditions had been healed. He was not, however, sure of the will. Why? Because his case was different from those that had experienced other healings: he was a leper.

The unfortunate learn very quickly of the laws and customs that are against them. That man may not have known many parts of the law, but he knew very well of that terrible injunction: "and the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering on his upper lip, and shall cry, unclean, unclean;" and he knew even better of being an object of contempt, because his condition was considered to be a punishment of heaven.

The poor man expected no mercy; yet, knowing that Jesus was passing by, a ray of hope sprang up in him, because Jesus was rich in compassion. I will also go, he

said to himself, perhaps He may have mercy even on me. And he went. But, once at the feet of Jesus, the sad passage of the law resounded in his ear: "And the leper..." No matter how merciful Jesus might be, He was a Hebrew, and according to the leper's judgment, Jesus had to approve the customs and respect the laws. Will He have pity on me? Will He have pity for one who is cursed?

The leper decided to attempt it. It seemed that he was saying with his cry: I am here, Lord, I know my position and do not dare to ask you for it directly; but if you want, if it pleases you, I know that you can cleanse me. Do not judge the leper's "If Thou wilt" harshly.

Nineteen centuries of Christianity have passed and many still doubt the love of Christ. Especially in Latin countries, there are persons who believe Jesus is a severe judge; and there are entire populations that do not know His love and believe there is need for merciful intercession to supplicate Him so that He does not unleash His anger on men. As if there is a love more compassionate than that of Jesus. It is Jesus Himself Who intercedes for us!

And there are many who have faith in the *power* but not in the *will* of the Lord, and they repeat to themselves: Yes, He can do everything, but will He want to be concerned about me? They do not know that His compassion is for those who appeal to Him, and the more the penitents realize they have no merit to obtain His mercy, the more ready Jesus is to grant His mercy.

"If Thou wilt," said the leper. Mercy inspired the leper and Jesus had mercy. "And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean."

The touching of one whom everyone was afraid to approach was an act of rare consideration. It was forbidden to touch a leper; but Jesus was not contaminated because in His presence every impurity flees. There was no need to touch the leper to heal him. Jesus healed many simply with a word, and many at a distance. That touch was the expression of the most profound human sympathy; and before answering to "if Thou wilt," the merciful hand had touched the miserable flesh of the leper. "Yes, I will." Note the energetic reassuring expression: "Yes, I will."

At this point I would like to transcribe from news about missions in Madagascar. Some boys were shouting: "leprous, leprous" to a poor woman who had already lost her fingers because of leprosy. A missionary who was passing by drew near to her and placed her hand on her back, and asked her to sit near her on the grass. The leprous woman began to sob and cried out emotionally: "a human creature touched me; for seven years nobody touched me." That missionary understood why it is recorded in the Gospels that Jesus touched the leper.

"Jesus touched him: and immediately his leprosy was cleansed." There are touches that kill, but the touch of Jesus heals and saves.

Reader, think of that man who, a moment before was covered with sores and eaten by disease, and was now whole and vigorous. How many years he suffered, isolated from everyone and far from his dearest ones, we do not know. I think that he was dying slowly, without hope. Now look at the compassion of Jesus who touched him, assured him, and healed him; then consider if it must not bring pain to the heart of the Lord Jesus to doubt His love for even one moment, and to still say "if Thou wilt."

Looking at His history from birth until Calvary, and knowing that Jesus has followed us compassionately during our career of misery and sin, we offend Him if we doubt He wants to help us.

Being conscious of the love of Christ was the secret of the power of many, especially St. Paul. Jesus said: "Yes, I will." This affirmation tells us that the prophetic picture of Isaiah was fulfilled in Him: "Surely He hath borne our grief and carried our sorrows... But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities." (Isaiah 53:4, 5)

Reader, *believe* because He *wants, wants, wants* to help you.

Chapter 22

BUT WHOM SAY YE THAT I AM

“...But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16: 15, 16)

It is not our aim to treat this subject from an apologetic point of view, be it in relation to the divinity of Christ, or in the face of the pretense of a large number of people who ignore how many books are in the Bible, and are ready to cite a few verses of Chapter 16 of the Gospel of St. Matthew.

The scope of our meditation is to examine briefly, with all devotion, Christ's question to His disciples; especially, to study the way the question was addressed, and to consider also how the same Jesus addresses the same question to us today, as we live in the midst of fluctuations of human opinions.

At a certain well advanced period of His ministry, the Lord Jesus thought it opportune to interrogate the disciples concerning the opinions they had of Him. It was one of His favorite methods of teaching: addressing some question. In this manner He wanted to awaken interest in the hearers so they would feel the need for His words.

The ministry of Galilee had finished and Jesus, in the company of the twelve, had gone to Caesarea Philippi.

At a certain distance and a short lapse of time from events that had attracted entire populations, Jesus waited for the contagious effects of the enthusiasm of the crowd on the disciples to calm down. He thought that it was now time that at least the twelve should know Him better than in the past. Certainly He could not be considered a man like all the others; therefore He asks: "Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?" The disciples were able to repeat the opinions people had of Jesus because they had been in contact with the people, especially when, in the name of the Master they had gone out for their mission. They answered: "Some say that Thou art John the Baptist, some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets."

As a whole, the judgment made by those people was not unfavorable because prophets were held in high consideration. And if it is possible to learn something about His character from the opinions of people, a light shines on Jesus even from these popular judgments; that is, He resembled John the Baptist, Jeremiah, or some other prophet. It is a precious light, because it presents the Master in certain aspects which we, generally speaking, are not accustomed to considering Him.

There was a strength that made them think of those prophets; but it was not everything, and the opinions of the people were in discord. At times the judgment of the crowd, in general, may know the truth, but they do not analyze and don't know how to draw conclusions. Jesus was above all the prophets. Although benevolent, the popular opinion was not rendering justice to that

marvelous personage. At times, Jesus was an austere preacher like the prophets, but He always demonstrated a note of infinite tenderness. Jesus left the heroes of the Old Testament way behind. The extraordinary quantity of His miracles, His strength and gentleness, all that was marvelous in His deeds and words had never been seen, not even imagined.

Perhaps the Pharisees could have enlightened the people, but they hated Jesus, and so the common opinions remained in their infancy and incomplete.

What do they say? What are men saying, gossiping about me? Making rash judgments or repeating the opinions of others without ever having one's own opinion is the easiest thing in the world. "Behold John the Baptist," some had said; and many repeated that He was John the Baptist without understanding it, and so on.

We can only guess the impression that Jesus had of those answers. Jesus could not have been satisfied. That torrent of light and beneficence passed among the multitude, pouring out love and blessings, and was not understood. Perhaps it was appropriate to repeat the words of Isaiah: "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for naught, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God." (Isaiah 49:4)

Jesus had His twelve disciples around Him. He had a close friendship with them, and to them at least, He must have appeared in a clearer light than to the multitudes. After hearing the opinions in vogue about Him, He

turned to them. "He saith unto them, but whom say ye that I am?" This translation seems to us to be more precise: "But you, whom do you say that I may be?"

But you. As if Jesus were saying: you have reported the opinions of others, now give me yours; or with unequalled skill he suggested: this is what others say of me, however you cannot repeat the same, you who know Me much better than the multitudes who are enthusiastic today and indifferent tomorrow. He was asking for a direct judgment.

With His precise questioning the Lord Jesus was obliging each of the disciples to face his own thoughts and to have a personal decision. Each of them had to know who Jesus might be, destined as they were to the enterprise of Christianity, and to have their ideal well defined. Whatever concept they would have of the Master, such would be the height of the Christian ideal and consequently, such would be the power of action they would exercise in the world. And a clear individual judgment was much more necessary since the popular rumors were varied and unsatisfying. Jesus displayed a marvelous method of questioning where the first part was: "what do men think of me?" The second part was: "but how do you think?"

Originality in making judgments is very rare. Among the weaknesses that afflict us, there is one that we will call mental laziness, when we are easily fascinated by the opinions of the majority, that, under close examination, may be nobody's opinion. If this danger exists in the

world of natural phenomenon, it is much more serious in the religious camp. Whatever may have been the case, Jesus wanted to know the mind of the disciples.

Nor should we be silent about another consideration. We have said elsewhere that Jesus was greatly misunderstood. He lived a solitary life among men all the way to Calvary. After the bitterness of the crisis of His ministry in Galilee, it pleased the Master to appeal to the heart of the disciples. He knew what others thought of Him, and He knew also of the unfavorable judgments that the disciples had feared to report, especially the bitter ones of enemies that were attributing His works to the devil. They were judgments suggested either by hatred or dictated by superficial enthusiasm caused by indifference. He wanted an answer in which love and gratitude were transparent. You, my disciples, that I have selected among all, and that form my family, and for whom I have said at other times: Who is my mother, who are my brothers; you who are for me, mother and brothers, you, intimate part of my life, what do you think of me?

Permit us a brief digression at this point to remember some great unhappy event in which, although persons were victims of ingratitude and misjudged by everyone, they spent their days, even in exile, cheered by the affection of some dear souls that did not want to abandon them until the end. By contrast, there comes to my mind the pitiable case of an innocent Russian merchant who was accused of killing and robbing a rich man who had slept in a room next to his in a hotel. The evidence was

overwhelming because everything seemed to be against him, and the merchant, who up to then had enjoyed an honest reputation, was believed by all to be a murderer. He declared his innocence to no avail; even his wife, who admired him for many years as an exemplary man, no longer believed him, and said to him one day: "but do you still persist in denying it to me?" And it was then he felt the coldness of abandonment in his life, and became aware that he was alone in the world.

We can imagine what the Lord must have felt, and what need He must have had to take refuge, in that intimate hour, in the affection of His disciples. As if He was saying: I don't care so much for what others may think of me; what you think of me is closer to my heart. And therefore that question so absolute: "But whom say ye that I am?"

The disciples had the experience to make a personal judgment. They had followed the Master in hours of great popularity and observed Him with reverence in solemn moments of solitude and prayer. The figure of Jesus grew immeasurably for them every day.

And it was Simon Peter, who believing to interpret the thought of all, answered: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus liked this answer. The words contained, at least in capsule, all the articles of faith of Christianity. It is true that the disciples had not yet understood the cross, and later on, they did not believe immediately in the

resurrection; but it is undeniable that for the experience they had, the answer seemed to be sufficient for Jesus. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was clear that He was not to be confounded with the prophets. He towered solitary above them being the anointed of the Lord, the Son of the living God.

I would be going beyond the confines of this meditation if I went on to the examination of the answer of Peter and the reply of Jesus. Only allow me to call attention to the word *living*. Son of the *living* God, a power in action in our hearts, revealed by means of His Holy Spirit, and not a good store of knowledge or a cold deism. He is God, life of humanity, known by each one of us in the depths of our life. Jesus, son of the Living One is He Himself life and light for us if we make Him the center of our existence.

And, you, reader, what do you say of Jesus? Do you have a personal answer, by intimate experience? The religion of many is that of their ministers; that is, many say what their ministries are saying, and the beliefs of others are the vacillating one of the various theological schools.

I want to repeat the victorious cry of Job: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee."(Job 42:5) What do we think of Jesus? This question is important. Our answer must be decisive. What others think will not save us; on one hand, there is the varied, unsatisfying judgment of the world; on the

other, our judgment is shared, perhaps by a scanty minority.

The answer: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," suggested by the Holy Spirit had become life and blood in the disciples. Let us remember it!

Have we followed Jesus in the marvelous works of the multitude, in the solemn solitude of prayer and intimate communion? In that case, even we will be able to repeat strongly: Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!

A great evangelical missionary, whom I esteem affectionately, told me a little anecdote regarding this subject: A cab driver had attached to the back of his cab a piece of paper on which the following words were written in red letters: What do you think of Jesus?

In paying the fare, a gentleman said to the driver: I thank you for the nice sermon you gave me during the trip. What sermon? replied the other, who no longer paid attention to that writing. Here they are, continued the traveler: What do you think of Jesus? Now allow me to ask you a question: What does Jesus think of you?

This is an ingenious anecdote that constrains us to the meditation of prayer. Jesus is being judged by the world; this is man's day. But the world will be called before the judgment of Jesus: that will be the day of the Son of God.

The two questions are related: What do we think of Jesus? What does Jesus think of us? If Jesus is for us the Christ, the Son of God, and if this revelation is in us by the intimate work of His Holy Spirit, such a conviction and faith cannot help but profoundly affect our life. Jesus, with His Spirit, will accomplish that work of sanctification that we would never be able to do by our efforts. Perhaps it is a slow work; maybe in the midst of many struggles, but we will be victorious at the end, and by His work of sanctification we will be able to meet the Son of God in the shelter of the cross.

Chapter 23

FOLLOWING JESUS

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto Him, Lord I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head. And He said unto another, follow me. But He said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.

And another also said, Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, no man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 7:57-62)

“When the time was come that He should be received up, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive Him because His face was as though He would go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51-53)

Please allow us to assign the place of this meditation to the place where St. Luke puts it; that is, after the messengers Jesus sent were not received in a village of

the Samaritans. A great light comes to us regarding the severity of Jesus with the three potentially new disciples.

The title of this meditation and the transcribed words are a painful record and a constant warning that in the work of evangelization we will experience many disappointments. In fact, one who has been involved as a missionary for some ten years knows about the scarcity of the fruits of his labor. But it is a comfort to us to know that the One in whose name we are working has gone before us in the difficult way.

Another word: "Following Jesus" is not easy. Men prefer to go after their own inclinations. *Following* implies renouncing ourselves, and though it is essential, it is the virtue of few. That being stated, we come to the text of our meditation.

The Oriental people are imaginative and emotional, more than other people. In the times of Jesus, and in the places where He was active, it didn't take much to arouse a religious enthusiasm, although the same was easily extinguished later in indifference.

The Lord Jesus was almost driven away by Samaritans in a village whose name we are ignorant of due to the charity of the Evangelist. Jesus continued His walk with the squad of disciples before Him. A wandering Master followed by a small company exercised a certain fascination on many minds; moreover, this Master was One who possessed in His person all the gifts that one can easily imagine to be given to One who is not stained

by sin and whose voice and words had great power. The group went forward in short stops. In each of the stops, we can suppose, people came around them to listen to Jesus, and in one of these stops it seemed that the audience was more attentive than ever. A certain admiration had spread; among the listeners was one who had a resolute aspect, with the appearance of one who made a great determination; this person approached Jesus. He was a scribe, and said: "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest." The Scribe did not know the final destiny of Jesus, but he was putting himself in His hands for the future. He saw in Jesus the Messiah that would soon be triumphant and would rise to great power, or he saw in Christ a prince of the rabbis who would found a new school and he would voluntarily accompany Him in the controversies in the synagogues and in the temple. Perhaps that scribe, looking at the aspect of the disciples who were already following Jesus, noticed the great distance that separated them from the Master and thought that he would be an important personage in that company. Animated by emotions and hope, being ready and happy, he came forward with his offer: "Lord, I will follow Thee." Notice the "I," it appears that an important personage was coming to enrich that company.

There have been many occasions in the life of Jesus when He did precisely the opposite of what His disciples were expecting; they were indeed looking at the appearance of things. The disciples remembered the refusal of the residents of that Samaritan village, and the harshness on the part of the enemies of their leader

promised to become more acute day by day, so they were pleased that a man of the law, a Scribe, would come to enrich their company. More or less, these are the evaluations in every age; a man of influence is considered a great acquisition, because, as a rule, men look at human means. But this was not the opinion of Jesus.

It is true that Jesus made widespread invitations for everyone to follow Him. It is true that He was the same Jesus who called Matthew, the Publican; but it was also true that He never dissimulated the dangers the disciples would encounter. And now, more than ever, with His face turned toward Jerusalem, and, it can be said, on the direct way to Calvary, now, more than ever, every easy emotion was in sharp contrast to that which awaited Him. Jesus read immediately what was in the heart of the Scribe. The Scribe's very great promise could in itself resound as lightness and thoughtlessness, and Jesus has the power to read the most hidden thoughts. The impetuous disciple did not know what he was promising; and Jesus hastened to make him understand that going after Him was not a matter of emotions, or of creed, but of a daily life of sacrifice, often difficult and monotonous. It is easier to suffer heroically than to live many years attending to the continuous duties of life that are often unattractive.

Jesus did not say anything that would directly discourage the one offering to follow Him. He did not tell him that he was not sincere; perhaps the Scribe was sincere in that moment, and was trusting in himself too much as many

do. Jesus believed the best answer to that promise was a rough ascertainment of his material conditions: "And Jesus said unto him, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head."

This was the noble answer of One who never sought favors from man. This, in a word, is the condition of the Master you propose to follow. Jesus' answer did not preclude a positive answer on the part of the Scribe, but his enthusiasm froze suddenly and the golden dream was interrupted; he remained a little between marvel and surprise, and then, without saying anything, he disappeared.

Jesus was on the way to the cross; emotion without fruit cannot bring one up to the cross. Tears of repentance and renouncement are different from tears that are from mere sentiment. The best cure for emotionalism is the daily work of sacrifice for Jesus. Without this, emotionalism is fatal and ends in itself. That is the way the emotionalism of the scribe ended.

"And He said to another, follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, let the dead bury their dead but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."

It has been said, and very well said, that Jesus never appeared so royal and majestic as He did on His way toward Calvary. Let us remember that Jesus was moving toward Jerusalem, which signified the end of His career.

And yet, it was precisely in this conscious, determined moving that Jesus pronounced the words now transcribed and that at first seem harsh to us, coming from the mouth of One who always had extreme sensitivity in all His duties and acts of tenderness.

There is a time when the kingdom of God has absolute need of disciples, and of certain disciples. But life is intersected by relations and duties, and almost always, the following of an ideal brings one to the renouncement or to the sacrifice of other ideals.

There was one who was capable, suited to announce the kingdom of God, and Jesus called him directly. He did not answer with objections on the kingdom itself, but proposed only one excuse that appeared quite legitimate, humanly speaking. He had an old father, perhaps sickly: how can I leave this old man? O Lord, first permit me to close my father's eyes, then I will come. Could there be a more human request than this? And yet, notice the answer: "Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."

We desire to remember the two words "dead" and "dead" in this verse contrasted with "but thou." While the disciple was speaking of death, Jesus was concerned with life, about a kingdom that required prompt and efficient service. He seemed to say, when your father dies, people to bury him will not be lacking, and the walking dead will bury that dead one. I do not see the danger that he will remain without burial. Sacrifice this duty of filial affection and tenderness for a greater and

comprehensive one for which very vast interests are at stake. "But thou (not dead) go and preach the kingdom of God."

"And another also said, Lord I will follow Thee, but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

This proposal, after all, was an expression of the affection of the disciple: "bid them farewell, which are at home at my house," a legitimate joy, if we wish, for as painful as it is to say farewell in order to follow others who knows where. The Lord Jesus, however, by going directly to the heart, does not discuss the farewell, oh no; but sees that irresolute disciple is between two directions, one backward, and one forward. There was nothing bad in itself in going home to say farewell, but this one, besides slowing down the simultaneous movement of the company, implied a serious danger that he would not have come back to Jesus; and where are you going now, his parents would have said to him, stay here. Who knows where that Master will lead you... and as we would say in these times: "stay home, you can love God anywhere, your heart is enough," and the irresolute one, already weak in himself, yields to these pressures and turns back, and does not realize that he is going away from the kingdom of God.

“I will come, but *first*.” In that “*first*” lies all the danger. Nothing should come before Jesus if He is truly the Lord of our life!

Those who escaped from Sodom were not to turn back, but the wife of Lot had part of her heart in the city that was to be reduced to ashes; she turned to contemplate it and was lost. We must look forward and not backward in order to be fit for the kingdom of God; behind, there are things that are not always evil, but are an impediment. There is not time to lose in stops. “No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” Three classes of Christians are presented in these three disciples who cannot be directly reproved for any evil, but who for three different reasons are unfit for the kingdom of God. To the first one moved by emotion, Jesus spoke of the cross; to the second, He spoke of renouncement, even of that which is sacred and human; to the third He said that it is impossible to follow Christ with a divided heart.

After many years of Christian life there are few who remain faithful. After a long time traversing a boundless ocean, only Columbus did not lose hope and courage, because, until the end, he alone had the intuition of the truth. Reader, the kingdom of God requires sacrifice, promptness and an honest soul. Whatever the fluctuations may be around you, decide quickly for the Son of Man and follow Him until the end.

Chapter 24

MARTHA AND MARY

“...Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:30-42)

Bethany was a village situated on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, and both mountain and village are remembered by history for the hours of rest conceded to the Son of Man toward the end of His career.

The incident that we are about to consider took place in Bethany, toward the final period of the life of the Lord, after He had set his face toward Jerusalem. “Now it came to pass, as they went, that He entered into a certain village;” and here a reception was waiting for Him that was quite different from the refusal received some time ago by a village of the Samaritans. Bethany was a sweet and serene stop for Jesus with the background of a panorama that day by day was becoming cloudy and gloomy.

Toward the end of His life it would be the only quiet retreat to temper the atmosphere of the bitterness of the days spent in Jerusalem. Bethany will remain an eternal remembrance to demonstrate that even Jesus strongly felt the need for human sympathy: different than the needs of His disciples and the public feelings of the multitude.

The narrative written by Luke seems to us a parenthesis, a scene of family, in which three persons are moving, Jesus, Martha and Mary. This has always attracted the reflection of those who study the scripture, and although variously interpreted, it always inspires a high level of interest.

“A certain woman named Martha received him into her house, and she had a sister called Mary.” The art of the scripture in presenting new persons is unique; and, almost at the beginning of each narrative, the primary characters appear to be put in a secondary light. In presenting the two women they are mentioned as they were regarded in Bethany; that is, Martha was the owner of the house, and as such she is first, and it is simply said that it is she who receives Jesus in her house, and Mary is presented, we say almost by chance. “And she had a sister called Mary.” However, as the narrative continues, the secondary becomes the primary, immortalized by the incomparable touch of the sacred writer, by which the plane of impressions is quickly reversed, and the one who was at first to be of greater importance is barely remembered and perhaps only in reflection of the other, who at first seemed neglected.

Martha was on the threshold of the house to receive Jesus. She certainly was courteous and happy to receive Jesus, and behind her, almost in the shadow and perhaps not very expressive in motions and words, there was another person whom the historian presents to us simply thus: “and she had a sister called Mary.” Hospitality is sacred, especially in the Orient, and we can imagine how

much Martha wanted to treat this extraordinary man who honored her house in a special way. And she began her preparation; and if we read what follows correctly, she took her sister with her in order to have help.

Up to a certain point Mary remained hidden in the shadow of Martha; however, at one point something new happened. Mary left the preparations which she thought were already enough, and went to Jesus who remained alone, and, sitting at His feet, was listening to His word.

There are some people who have exercised a great influence on others, not so much for what they have accomplished, as for that which they have not done or said, or rather for the passive work of forgetting themselves for others. Truly, one of the great needs of our existence is to find a soul that understands us: or when, as a rule, everyone desires to speak, but there are few who dispose themselves to listen. We know of a very great genius who was reading his compositions to a dear soul whose profound interest was sweeter to him than the glory he received from a nation. And the Son of Man was not a stranger to the need for this profound sympathy: to be understood.

Of the two who came before Jesus, one seemed intent to provide Him a material comfort, while His soul felt the weight of the world. Mary, without any outward display, read in the face of Jesus the profound care and a moral need that surpassed, by far, His need for rest or food; and as soon as she was able, Mary "sat at Jesus' feet, and heard Him."

It is not right to pass over certain expressions of the Bible hurriedly. "Heard His word," does not say that she began to discuss or that Jesus was answering Mary's questions, but simply that she sat at His feet, and in the most humble attitude of a devoted disciple, was listening, almost avidly, devouring the words of the Master.

The scripture is very brief and perhaps we would like to know what Jesus said; but it is certain that He who had such a great work before Him, at that time more than ever, had His eyes fixed on the terminal point of His career and had much to say. He was misunderstood by almost everyone, and had found a creature who, above all else, had taken, at His feet, the humble position of receiving teachings and listening. Listening is a very rare virtue that often requires renouncing our ideas, an emptying of ourselves, in order to receive what another says. Mary, who read the thoughts of Jesus, was listening; keeping silent, with admiration, while on her meditative countenance there was reflected as in a mirror the intimate tragedy of her interlocutor. And on His tired countenance there passed like a wave of deep satisfaction, because a soul knew how to read Him, and above all else, had surmised that what He wants more than anything, is communion with Him. He who loves us so much and has the plan of our existence in His hands, wants us to spend more time at His feet to listen to His words. Oh, the anxiety of many souls who live thirsting to find someone who understands them. And the happiness of some, even in exile and poverty, who have found a tender and sensible person!

With the emphasis of contrast that is the prize of great writers, and that is natural in the Bible, we read: "But Martha was cumbered about much serving." If we read these words opposite the others, "Mary... sat at His feet, and heard His word," we cannot help but feel like a discord in the midst of a peaceful harmony. It seems that from that serene and calm horizon created by the Master and His disciple we pass abruptly to the bitter and noisy shrieking of the business of life. We need to pay attention to the words used by the Evangelist. "Martha was cumbered about much serving," and weigh them, because otherwise we will not be able to rightly judge what follows and carefully evaluate them in the interest of the same Martha.

It does not say what she was doing; it is certain that her occupation was understood to be for the reception prepared for the guest. But the preparations seemed to go beyond measure, almost as if to prepare a little food for a man it was necessary to put the house in utter confusion, running here and there feverishly preparing many things. And meanwhile, she did not think that a simpler reception would have been more to the liking of that man, and perhaps she did not know that people of an elevated nature take only what is necessary of the goods of this world, and in the simplest and most frugal way. And more importantly, she herself was losing the opportunity to enjoy that visit.

But she had not read the soul of Jesus; while she was anxiously trying to take care of material preparations, she did not know that He had need for peace more than

noise and an internal communion in the house of friendship and rest, more than a quantity and diversity of foods. Martha was preparing a great meal, running up and down, from the garden to the house, from one room to another, as if she had to feed who knows how many people, and in passing by repeatedly, she did not become aware that the Master was more intent than ever in speaking and Mary in listening.

At a certain point Martha lost her patience, forgetting the very reason for her preparations; after all, leaving someone to entertain a guest was elementary courtesy. "But Martha... came to Him and said, Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me." And thus her reception of Jesus changed at this point into a reprimand, almost neutralizing her services by the rough way she addressed Him. Jesus was the reason she was working so hard. "Dost Thou not care?" As if to say "are you indifferent that I'm working for you?"

Even a good soul can become immersed in too many services and cares, even for Jesus, without appreciating, in the right limits it's understood, the contemplative life and communion with Christ. Fortunate indeed is one who maintains the right equilibrium.

And the answer of Jesus came. It was a serious admonishment for the laborious but too busy woman: "And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one

thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

In one of his novels, Jules Verne describes a watchmaker, “Master Zacharias,” who was so immersed in the mechanism of his watches that the pulsation of his heartbeat slowed down in time with the watches. The watchmaker was almost going mad because of new inventions; he saw his old ability fail entirely in a moment. None of his watches were keeping good time. Master Zacharias was reduced to desperation: What should he do? He had one last resource: in order to build a grandiose clock, with perfect machinery and of long duration, he was ready to sell his soul to the infernal spirit. The clock was built and was loaded for a century; but at the first ringing of the hours, the spring of the grandiose contrivance broke, and at the same time the soul of Master Zacharias left his chest.

There are many Master Zacharias’ in this world, persons who basically are not bad who risk tying their souls to speculative schemes and daily cares!

“Hurry up, keep working.” It’s more than the necessary work blessed by the Lord. It is the painful diligence that absorbs all one’s faculties and does not leave room for the spiritual life and leads to a restless existence. And it is this hastiness and worrying oneself about life that causes many people who are not basically bad to become, little by little, indifferent to the spiritual problem; these people are not to be compared to the foolish rich man, but they lose much, and can lose

everything, alas, if in carrying out business they have no time or breath to find Jesus, and to sit at His feet and listen to Him.

“Many things.” Life needs very little, unlike the meal that Martha was preparing; many foods were not necessary. People do many things, and they are not always bad; however, only one thing is truly needed; that is our undivided heart and the constant idea that unites us to always more intimate communion to Jesus, continually growing in understanding the Master, and remaining at His feet.

“Mary has chosen that good part.” It was not a question of temperament but of will; she had deliberately chosen: “Chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

At the end all will be taken away from us, even many good things, and there will remain only the choice made at the feet of Jesus, to listen to His voice and to grow in the communion that does not diminish with the years; rather it takes us to the border of this life with a clear vision of the beyond.

While dying, Holy men of God who had forgotten everything did not lose their vision of Heaven, and while they could no longer pronounce the names of their dearest ones, one name alone remained on their trembling lips: “Jesus.”

Chapter 25

MEN OF NO VALUE

This time I'm going to speak of "men of no value;" that is, those whom the world considers such, and I include in this class those whom the world has already condemned. Infamy is not hereditary and delinquents can be rehabilitated, but ignoring the law and what is worse, ignoring the Gospel, we put the stamp of dishonor on anyone who had the misfortune to be born in a poor neighborhood, or who, in a moment of his life, happened to make a mistake.

It is not so in the word of God. "Men of no value" have a great place in the Scripture, perhaps among the most important. And so, friend reader, whoever you are, bow down with me, in the dust, and send a salute with me to those "of no value," many of whom are called to be first in the kingdom of heaven.

The subject is vast and I will limit it. I should say why it is that precisely those "of no value" often become very great in the sight of the Lord, and explain why some tragic experiences uplift, and how almost all the greatest were great sinners at a certain time of their lives. But such a psychological-religious study would take us far from our theme.

Through the sacred pages we meet several of those that the world would despise and run away from. For example, among the first records of the life of Moses, we

read about a homicide. No missionary society would have hired him but God selected him as a leader of the people of Israel out of Egypt.

In the book of Judges the manner in which the sacred writer presents Jephthah is noteworthy. "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was... the son of an harlot... And his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman. Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tab: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him." (Judges 11:1, 3) It was this son of a harlot, helped by men *of no value*, who later delivered Israel.

Let us read what the Bible says about those who later became the leaders in David's army: "David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave Adullam... and everyone that was in distress, everyone that was in debt and everyone that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them..." (1st Samuel 22:1, 2) At first, David himself had been considered to be insignificant by his father and his brothers. And without quoting other examples, we will fix our attention briefly on these bandits who later became the best friends of David.

"Then the spirit came upon Amasai, who was chief of the captains, and he said, thine are we, David, and on thy side, thou son of Jesse; peace, peace be unto thee, and peace be to thine helpers; for thy God helpeth thee.

Then David received them, and made them captains of the band." (1st Chronicles 12:18)

Amasai and those captains were among those men of whom we have spoken; they gathered around David who was being persecuted by Saul. And it is worthwhile to study their qualities because they risked their lives for their captain and contributed in crowning David king.

They were men of the worst class, but David found heroic virtues in them. They became important personages, gaining their place of respect in the history of Israel and in the divine book. They were courageous people, capable of self-denial. Let's read: "And the three brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: but David would not drink of it, but poured it out to the Lord, and said, my God forbid it me that I should do this thing: shall I drink the blood of these men that have put their lives in jeopardy?" (1st Chronicles 11:18, 19)

This record alone would be enough to immortalize their memory as heroes capable of immense affection for their friend and leader. They were men who were fearless and ready. It is people of like strength of character who guide great events, and are needed to face the critical moments of life.

They were skillful in the use of weapons such as spears, slingshots, and arrows. Many times prayer has been compared to using a bow and arrow; the man of prayer

must have a tenacious will and forcefully launch his requests to God.

Worthy of mention is the record of the scripture that these men could handle weapons with their left hand as well as their right. (Judges 20:16) Some are only right-handed, as to say in ordinary circumstances, when all goes well, but if they are faced with unforeseen events, they fall apart. The kingdom of God has little to expect from such, and much from brave defenders capable of using both hands. These, wounded in one arm, would fight like lions with the other.

There is more: "These are they that went over the Jordan in the first month, when it had overflowed all its banks; and they put to flight all them of the valleys, both toward the east and toward the west." (1st Chronicles 12:15) This act can truly be called daring, but is there anything truly great in life that cannot be called daring? Society has little to expect from men that say "but," "if," "we shall see," etc. They were born more to nibble their piece of bread quietly than to do good to others.

And it is not all: they were *loyal* men. Yes, precisely those bandits were loyalty personified. They promised their support to David and they kept their word. They were men who had been educated in the school of need, and, despised many times by their peers, they had to learn to depend on their own strength and had concentrated everything in themselves. Now a concentrated life is irresistible. Such men could easily

push their way in the midst of enemies who were superior to them in numbers.

They had ready and energetic natures similar to those powerful rivers that open a gigantic course between the rocks, dragging along everything in their passage. Also, these men *of no value* were always men of order and great discipline; they voluntarily took a subordinate place. There comes to mind the great discipline of Elisha who lived an obscure life serving Elijah for more than twenty years; and Joshua, a servant of Moses, showed himself to be a lion as the leader of Israel. There is not much to expect from people who are in a hurry to make themselves known; they have not learned by long experience how to obey before commanding.

These then, formed the glorious band of main warriors of David, whose heroic acts the scripture records minutely. It is noteworthy that the Bible, so brief in its records, employs entire pages in speaking of these heroes. The Lord Jesus said: "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." (Matthew 21:31) Why does the Bible occupy itself so much with these people of no value? They humble themselves more easily, since they are already humbled by the contempt of society.

David, a good judge of men, saw in those bandits a fistful of heroes and made plans for the future. Jesus looked at the depths of the souls of those of no value who were part of His life and judged their future, not their past. Oh the greatness of many of "no value!"

When I see an unhappy one, dressed in rags extending his hand to ask for alms, and the poor people who offer an indecent spectacle in the streets, I feel like taking off my hat to them, because I feel they have virtues and capacities which if compared to me, I should, perhaps, feel ashamed.

If I had the honor to count someone among the readers as being of "no value" I would exhort him to take courage by the remembrance that among men that society regards important, Christ was not considered important. Reader, continue to go forward and expect the recompense from Him.

Let us offer a salute to those bandits who crowned King David, and another salute to that army of "no value" that will form the elect bride of the Lamb, and will proclaim Christ King.

Chapter 26

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN (John 4:3-42)

Rough paintings often reveal art treasures when examined closely. Paintings of great price do not gain our admiration at first sight, but observing them closely with reflected light, they reveal incomparable beauty. The episode of Jesus and the woman at the well of Jacob apparently does not have anything supernatural; the whole chapter is about common places, natural tiredness and the encounter of the woman. Any yet, such incidents, passing under a masterful hand, have resulted in superior results. A woman was converted, a population was drawn to meet the Messiah, and a great chapter was written in the Gospel to give light and consolation to many who are seeking the truth.

Two persons, common persons, are at the well of Jacob: one is a dusty traveler, the other a woman who came from the city to draw water. In the beginning, they appear to be indifferent to one another and separated by a distance deeper and wider than the ocean. Later, a world of spiritual revelations will be accomplished between them.

Let us take a step back in our mind to the places and the times, and let's follow the narrative. "He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee. And He must needs go through Samaria." There were other ways between Judea and Galilee that were being used by the Jews, because of existing grudges with the Samaritans and

because of religious prejudices; but Jesus had no grudges and prejudices; rather, He purposely selected the route through Samaria. He arrived about noon in the vicinity of Sychar and stopped briefly at the well of Jacob.

He needed rest, as we understand from the expression of the Gospel: "wearied with His journey, sat thus on the well." "Thus" reveals the abandon of one who is very tired. In that place, in that hour, in those conditions He was a needy one that had to seek the soil of Samaria for a stony seat and a little rest: He was fatigued, tired and a petitioner. He had to go through the experience of a pilgrim, and He did. Human sympathies are remembrances, and, many times, Jesus remembered His tiredness at the well of Jacob.

At that hour the heat rendered the place a desert. Suddenly, there appeared a woman of Samaria coming to draw water. The pilgrim, as she might have expected, lifted His head and said to her: "Give me to drink." It was a real need, really a supplication.

A traveler in the Orient at that time almost always received a cordial and prompt answer to the request: "give me to drink," but the request of the pilgrim surprised the woman who recognized His nationality by His manner and language. She said, "How is it that Thou being a Jew, asketh drink of me which am a woman of Samaria?" You ask a Samaritan, and moreover a woman? She asked this because it was common knowledge that a proud Jew would rather die before asking a favor of the despised Samaritans, much

less would he humble himself to speak to a woman because they believed it to be indecent to speak to a foreign woman. But Jesus did not feel humiliated in asking for help from the enemy of His people, nor did He believe it to be inconvenient to ask it of a woman. He needed water, but beside that He sensed the condition of the one who was speaking, a condition rendered difficult by the triple barrier created by human prejudice; she was a woman, of a different people, and in a special condition of her own. Jesus was gently watchful for the opportunity wherever and however it presented itself to Him, from a common level and from the place of the supplicant, He intended, step by step, to elevate the soul of that woman to spiritual needs; not paying attention to her observation about race and nation, He said: "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, give me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water."

Living water, thought the woman, as she looked at the deep well and reconsidered the pilgrim who did not have a water pot and bore the signs of tiredness from the long walk. She had a moment of unbelief, but held back an expression of irony because of the favorable impression she had of the face of the traveler. Without hiding her marvel, she answered: "Sir, Thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast Thou that living water?" And still considering that strange claim, she continued: "art Thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?"

Certainly, it was an answer of unbelief, but one that allowed a benevolent impression to transpire from the tone of her words and from the title, "sir," she used to address the stranger. Before they dazzle us by their fame and social superiority or intellect, people who are truly great awaken a chord in our soul that responds to the benevolence the good soul inspires in us. The woman did not see a Rabbi before her then, and much less the Messiah, nor did she follow the height of the thought, but she sensed the exquisite tenderness of the interlocutor. Other pages of the life of the Master reveal to us how, first of all, He would inspire faith in His grace and tenderness.

Jesus continued to speak to her. He did not give a direct answer; but He was elevating the conversation by degrees, without wasting time, not wanting to distract her in secondary arguments. Jesus selected the point close to the course of His thoughts in her words. The closest thought between the words of the woman and what He was about to say to her was in the goodness of the water of the well. The observation "greater than Jacob" was personal, and Jesus did not deal with it, leaving it to her to judge the donor, later, from the greatness of the gifts. This is advice that teaches us to do good without entering into discussions about our personal qualities.

Jesus answered: "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall

give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

Jesus did not say that the water of that well was not good, but only that it would not quench thirst forever. "Always thirst:" all the anxieties and needs of human nature, in various gradations, are understood here. There is only one joy, only one good that never wears out and is eternal: the water that He gives. The calmness and assurance of Jesus impressed the woman; she did not answer the spiritual significance of the words, but she understood that she found herself in the presence of someone who was greater than He appeared. Overcome by a strong curiosity and a sudden determination, she exclaimed: "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw." She became the one who was asking: "Give me." It was the moment for Jesus to take a step forward; up to now He sought to awaken an increasing interest; at this point He believed it opportune to make a direct appeal.

"Go, call thy husband, and come hither." In every soul there is a weak point and many times one word suffices to stir up a tempest of sorrows. The woman's enthusiasm fell. She had exclaimed: "give me this water," but at the answer of Jesus she felt she was struck by lightning. She was impressed and she felt constrained to tell the unknown one her condition, and said to Him: "I have no husband," and did not add anything else; perhaps she was preparing to withdraw her water pot and retrace her steps on the road by which she had come.

But Jesus did not allow the discourse to fall. He had not placed His hand on the wounded soul to then send her away humbled. He touches the wounds of the soul only to heal them. Jesus said unto her, "Thou hast well said, I have no husband." In the original language, the word *well* is very expressive, suggesting *beautifully*, or *with frankness*. The interlocutor still had to reveal more of the woman to herself, but He used a gentle expression, a prologue to a bare affirmation of truth, because He continued: "For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly." It's not necessary to imagine a life broken by scandals. Five husbands can make us think of five divorces, knowing how these were granted for the slightest pretexts, and make us think that the latest condition of the woman was due to previous misfortunes; she appears to have been a victim of social tyranny. Something very compassionate must have appeared in the look of Jesus and the tone of His words. He knew, with fine tenderness, how to put His hand on the wounded soul. And then, after her dark secret, it didn't take much for Him to comfort the woman. She saw that a prophet was before her but she did not want to continue an unpleasant conversation and changed the subject. We can understand and excuse her. In fact, we avoid burning questions and recur to arguments and religious differences. But she didn't ramble on in vain questions; she thought immediately about the question currently under discussion regarding the superiority of worship in Judea or in Samaria; it was a serious question she felt she could ask the Jewish prophet who had told her the unhappy side of her life. She said: "Sir, I

perceive that Thou art a prophet." There had to be a pause after these words; the Lord waited and the woman herself broke the silence, continuing: "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship;" and she remained in suspense, evidently wanting to add: who should I believe?

Jesus followed the changed discourse. Emphasizing the moral aspects of her condition would have made the wound worse. He said to her: "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is when true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

He answered briefly, but clearly: Judaism had the oracles of God and salvation had to come from Judaea. However, the question of the place of worship disappeared before the teaching that God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

The woman was touched; yet she did not see sufficient credentials to accept the explanations that were bringing a revolution to the religious ideas in which she was brought up. Something else would resolve this and other questions; and to them she referred and the stranger did likewise: "The woman saith unto Him, I know that The

Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when He is come, He will tell us all things." They were expecting a grandiose Messiah, who would appear suddenly in a solemn moment. The final decision belonged to this Messiah. He is sufficient for everything. "He will tell us all things."

And then, based on her increasing interest, her appeal to the Messiah and the trust that she had that He would explain all things, Jesus felt that the main point of the conversation had been reached. "Are you looking for the Messiah?" He seemed to say, truly, there is no one who sincerely seeks and does not find. In fact, you have found Him: "I that speak unto thee am He." That's what He said. I, this beggar who asked you for water, and who did not appear in a spectacular way, I who speaks to you, although I am a Jew and you are of Samaria, and although I know your life, and because I am the Messiah, to you I speak; "*I am He.*"

At this point a curtain fell on the scene and we know nothing else. That was a solemn moment and it wouldn't be right to conjecture on the future. There are grandiose and amazing revelations in life, but there has never been a more marvelous revelation than this: that poor, tired traveler was no less than the Messiah. No doubt crossed the mind of that woman. "I am He." We read the words and we feel a profound emotion; and spoken by Jesus, the words were irresistible and carried the strength of omnipotence. "I am He." Along with the words there was the voice, that voice of Jesus, and with the voice there was the look, the pure and luminous look.

Everything was human, it is true; and yet how divine He was in His humanity!

There was no doubt He was the Messiah; the most absolute certainty possessed the woman. What did she say? Did she fall at the feet of Jesus? How should we think? Particulars are not revealed to us. Souls have their great transactions in the solitude of the world. The hour of the penitent person with the Savior is sacred.

However the woman did not remain in doubt as to what she should do. Let's read: "The woman then left her water pot and went her way into the city, and saith to the men." She went on her way speaking as she was meeting people. She said, "come see a man, which told me all things I ever did." And she was not ashamed now, how by her own words, others would think again of her condition. And she added: "is not this the Christ?" The words had to possess conviction; they were communicative. And the insistence and affirmations constrained trust. The new missionary was saying: "Come, see." And the people were not deaf to that invitation. "Then they went out of the city and came to Him. They besought Him that He would tarry with them; and He abode there two days. And many more believed because of His own word; and said unto the woman, now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."

Oh generous and ready messenger, a woman rehabilitated by the conversation of Jesus, and consigned

by the evangelist to the memory of centuries! O merciful love of the Master, and humility of the beseeching pilgrim! Oh blessed word of life, oh revealer of hearts, Who is never loved enough: Lord Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God!

Chapter 27

**THE KNOWING OF THE PHARISEES AND THE
KNOWING OF THE MAN BORN BLIND**

“...We know that this man is a sinner. He answered and said, Whether He be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind now I see.”
(John 9:24, 25)

Chapter 9 of St. John is all about a single miracle of Jesus. In this exposition, as in a profound drama, society is very well represented. Each person or group has distinct characters that we will try to describe briefly.

A man who was born blind was met by the infinite compassion of Jesus Christ and received the gift of sight from Him. Only a perfect eye can rightly discern a sickness and heal it. However, Jesus did not use a logical cure; it was anything but logical because one would expect mud to irritate the eye; but the blind man did not offer any observation; he was sent to wash in the pool of Siloam and he obeyed. He returned with his sight. His faith was rewarded.

The onlookers. This event could not pass without being observed. The blind man was known as a beggar and those around him began to ask themselves if he were the same man. A few people doubted that he was the same man, others affirmed it, and the man who had been blind said: “I am he.” They had to content themselves and accept the extraordinary deed that happened to that man,

whom they knew very well. And yet, they renounced their experience and went to the Pharisees for an explanation.

It seems to us that these onlookers represent the great majority of men quite well; people who, even while crying "liberty, liberty," they love, in fact, to be slaves of the imposition of others. And so these onlookers, trembling before the Pharisees, ended by denying what they knew of the one they had seen many times and said: it cannot be that he has gained his sight; since he now sees, he never was blind. Superstition and fanaticism lead to denying the truth.

The parents of the man born blind: The parents represent a more important part in the narrative than appears to the superficial reader. They are the type of those men who struggle between duty and fear; and, although they seem to be good, they become iniquitous in their conscience.

Before the eyes of the father and the mother it is their son who was blind a short time before, a pitiable spectacle of human misfortunes who was now enjoying perfect sight. They should have been the first to forcefully cry out the truth, to speak clearly to the Pharisees and to the people; however, they were afraid of being put out of the synagogue, and at the expense of preserving religious appearance, they stained themselves with the abominable sin of ingratitude.

They represent also that gray zone of society that does not have the courage to hurt directly, but who permit evil to happen; evil that they could prevent by intervening in time with an honest and courageous word.

The Pharisees. They were the obstinate enemies of Jesus and swore to destroy Him; no amount of reasoning could change their sentiments. Hatred is blind, and they did not see that living witness of an immense work that was accomplished; hatred is deaf and they did not hear or understand the clear testimony of the man who had been blind. As is the habit of those who are wicked, they first put into evidence the unfavorable side of an incident. When Jesus performed the miracle it was the Sabbath; therefore, He was a sinner. No matter that the work had been beneficial. It was the Sabbath! Here was the weak point of the work of Jesus; and they believed they had grounds to accuse Him. Instead, some of them, more crafty, and no less wicked, observed that a sinner could not perform such miracles, and they suggested another system of combat: deny the fact, since discrediting Him would not work. Take the position that Jesus did not do anything.

However, denying the deed without silencing the witnesses is not possible. The onlookers need not be feared; they don't speak of miracles; nor do the parents because they have assumed a prudent attitude for fear of being put out of the synagogue. There remains the question of the man who had been born blind, and who now sees. What should they do? Violence? No, never; they must use the cloak of scruple and religion.

The Pharisees wanted to listen to the particulars of the deed and the details were repeated to them with such precision that they were stunned. They said to the man who had to be young: give glory to God, that man is a sinner. But their insinuation was not effective. The one who had been blind gave a crushing answer; he does not discuss, rather affirms again, and with greater strength, what he knows; that is, he has received his sight.

And the Pharisees, an example of the patience that the wicked possess for perverting the truth, ask again. They spoke of Moses whose law they said they knew, and added that they did not know Jesus. Even this was a useless trick, because the man who had been born blind was persistent and was there ready with an answer that eliminated further inquiry, with words that proceeded to accuse the Pharisees of ignorance. "Why herein is a marvelous thing; that ye know not from whence He is. Now we know that God heareth not sinners." And he went further. "Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind." (v.32) It was too much. The astuteness of the Pharisees was not working. That man, like a bronze statue, was throwing back in the face of the attackers the stones that they were throwing.

Then the Pharisees availed themselves of the extreme step: excommunication. "Thou wast altogether born in sin... and they cast him out." (v. 34) In order to put him out they needed to give somewhat of a reason. You are all sin, this is the reason. He goes out of the synagogue. Whatever an excommunicated man may say, he is no

longer believed. Thus the Pharisees tried to suffocate the truth.

The man born blind. His attitude full of simplicity, faith and courage surprises us. Jesus applied on his eyes a remedy that is harmful rather than beneficial, and the blind man did not rebel; sent to wash himself, he obeyed and set out immediately. Having recovered his sight, he was subjected to the curiosity of those around him but he did not lose patience and candidly told them all that was done to him. He did not speak of his obedience or the trust he had, but attributed everything to the worker of the miracle, while it was also true that he made the miracle possible by his obedience. The power and compassion of Jesus stand out spontaneously by the genuine and artful description.

“Let’s go to the Pharisees,” those around him said. He answered: “let’s go even to the Pharisees.” He was not frightened. He repeated to the Pharisees what he had already said to the others; when he was asked for a judgment on the One who had put the mud on his eyes, he did not hesitate to answer what he felt: “He is a prophet.”

After the parents were questioned, he was called again and an insidious exhortation was addressed to him to give glory to God. It was an insinuation that the miracle worker was a sinner. The healed one, knowing himself to be ignorant, did not enter into discussion; however, he affirmed forcefully that which he knew: “*I was blind, now I see.*” The Pharisees wanted him to repeat the

particulars of the deed; he marveled at such insistence and reprimanded them because they did not want to hear. He was insulted but did not defend himself; he used a simple and powerful language that made the figure of Jesus and the injustice of the Pharisees stand out better. He was cursed and put out of the synagogue, but he went away tranquil and serene.

Jesus heard the Pharisees put him out. Jesus had not abandoned him and hastened to rejoin him. I would like, at this point, to have the ability to describe such an encounter. The Son of God, alone, who seeks for an honest man, put out and alone. Jesus asked him: "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" (v. 35) These were new words to that ear, but the man does not attempt to investigate, and only hastens to ask: "who is he, Lord, that I might believe on Him?" And Jesus answers: "Thou hast both seen Him, and it is He that talketh with thee." Then he exclaims: "Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him." At first he judged Him to be a prophet, and after the declaration of Jesus, he recognized Him as Son of God. No observations at the first encounter; no observations at the second; equal faith, equal obedience. The first time he hurried, groping his way, to look for the pool of Siloam to wash himself; the second time he prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus and worshipped Him.

The work of the Lord is extraordinary, yes; but the participation of the man born blind is also great. An immense faith yields immense effects. The first time,

Jesus gave him his physical sight; the second, his spiritual sight.

The Pharisees excommunicated him; those around him will point to him as cursed. What does it matter? He has two worlds in which he lives and enjoys: his eye has a light that it had never before enjoyed: his soul lives in the heavenly atmosphere in the company of the Son of God.

“We know.” These are the words of the Pharisees. Those around the blind man knew the pretended knowing of the Pharisees, who were even judging that Jesus was a sinner.

Opposite their knowing, however, there is that of the man who had been blind. The latter avows his ignorance: that which you say, speaking to the Pharisees, I know not (he does not say he accepts it; anything but) but one thing I know: and that is, not theories, not learned or accumulated doctrines, but only one thing I know, and that is: “I was blind, now I see.” Of this I am absolutely certain. Who truly knew? Not the Pharisees, but that sincere man who was affirming what he was certain of by personal experience. If he had tried to reason with the Pharisees, they would have knocked down his arguments one hundred times. He did not discuss; he stayed with one point alone, and remained there solid like a rock of granite: “I was blind, I see.”

Another brief consideration. Truth has had its enemies at all times: a great unknown said that truth is in the minority on the earth. Many men do not believe the things they cannot prove and close their eyes to the light, because they cannot explain the light.

We Christians have to learn a great lesson of eloquence from the unwavering testimony of that man who had been blind, and, that is, no one will be able to speak of Christ, if he has not known Him intimately and has not had their eyes opened by Him, in such a way that he will be able to repeat the monotonous cry: "I was blind, now I see." Our words, forasmuch as they seem logical to us, can be surpassed by the ability of others that believe themselves to be or are more logical, but our experience can never be destroyed. The one who writes knows an elderly man quite well; this man barely knows how to read, but when he speaks of Christ, everyone pays attention, learned or ignorant. His convinced word is convincing; he says, and demonstrates: I was a delinquent, Christ has transformed me. And so much so that there is no argument that can destroy it. But, in order for us to be able to say that we know that one thing, it is necessary that we truly know it. This I know: I was blind, now I see.

And if we do not know it yet, a man that had been blind and mendicant, teaches us the way, and it is: at the feet of Christ, with faith, in order to accept the light from Him, so that we in turn may be able to repeat: I was blind, now I see.

Chapter 28

REND YOUR HEARTS, NOT YOUR GARMENTS

(Joel 2:12)

Lighthouses are placed along the stormy shores of the ocean; similarly, the gigantic figures of the prophets rise across the dark pages of the history of the Hebrews. Joel is, perhaps, the most ancient prophet whose writings we have. His message is brief but powerful. We are in the times of King Joash, who betrayed the good expectations people had of him. Locusts had invaded the country of Judea, causing a terrible famine, such as had never happened in their past history. The prophet Joel, from the sad picture of the present, had the distant but clear vision of the terror of the day of the Lord, and made a powerful appeal to all the people urging them to repent. His message reached its peak with the words we have selected for our meditation: "And rend your hearts, and not your garments..." But, like a hurricane that falls after reaching the maximum of its raging, so the anger of the prophet is quieted and the verses that follow end in a tender exhortation; in delineating a perspective picture of abundance and blessings, the prophet also discerns distant epochs of prosperity and well being.

Later on, another, after issuing a bitter cry against impenitent cities, sweetened His message with the most profound tenderness in the words: "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Next to the severity there is love; rather, the same explosion of severity ended in the expression of an

infinite love. Let's go on to the subject of our meditation, "and rend your hearts, and not your garments."

From the brief record that the prophet leaves us, if we are mentally able to reconstruct the scene on the occasion the words of our text were enunciated, a very desolate scene appears to us.

A famine was raging and there was a general lamentation in the street crowded with people running to the temple. In the midst of the desolation of this sinister scene there appears the majestically savage figure of the prophet Joel. The people gather in front of the temple to listen to him; he raises a menacing gesture and with a thundering voice makes of the famine a picture that was, perhaps, more dismal than the reality. He directs, in a bitter and incisive language, a sarcastic appeal to some: "Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine; for it is cut off from your mouth." Continuing in his message, he sees the day of the Lord, in which the Jews will experience a fear greater than the actual conditions warrant. At this point it seems the sense of sin is being felt by the crowd of listeners and he exhorts them to repent: "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning." The fiery appeal is effective. The crowd is moved, a general weeping can be heard, many are making almost insane movements, and some are tearing their clothing. It is then that the prophet, still calling the crowd to solemn attention, having reached the peak of his discourse and seeing the

insane movement of hands tearing clothing, cries out: "And rend your heart, and not your garments." The habit of tearing clothing as a sign of great sorrow was customary in ancient times among oriental people. The diligent reader will find in the scripture various cases in which important men, on the occasion of serious sorrow, or of great calamity, tore their garments, and covered themselves in sackcloth.

We read the in the book of Job (1:20): "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground and worshipped." And of the friends that came to comfort him we read (2:12): "They lifted up their voice and wept; and they rent every one his mantle."

And we could cite examples in which people and sovereigns, barefoot with head uncovered, went around covered in sackcloth, emitting mournful moaning.

We cannot be silent about some customs of funeral etiquette. Some of these strange habits survive even today, and not only in the Orient. A large company of friends, acquaintances, and paid criers would accompany the funeral procession. The lament grew, and as it happens many times, the people who were the most indifferent were the ones most ready to manifest exaggerated sorrow. Perhaps the reader may have seen one of these funeral processions passing in which the sanctity of sorrow is almost made ridiculous.

Such strange habits rendered the manifestation of repentance almost a ceremony. However, true repentance, like great sorrows, does not have awkward, exaggerated manifestations.

Most of us have reverently contemplated the image of profound and tragic anguish visible on the face of a mother or father near the bed of a dying child. Immense sorrows are almost silent. A poet was relating events whose remembrance was breaking his soul; he wrote: "yes, my insides became petrified."

The prophet cried: "Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning."

The prophet saw before him the insane acts we have described; he knew well that many of those manifestations were superficial, that true repentance did not exist and he reproved his audience with that fierce cry: "And rend your heart, and not your garments."

And we also repeat: "*and rend your hearts.*" Let us give importance to each of these words. Be converted with weeping, fasting, mourning and in the depths of your soul, *rend your hearts*. "Rend" is a savage expression: there is pain and anger in this. From the heart proceeds good and evil. Your heart, the prophet wanted to say, contains much evil: tear it, with a vigorous and sure hand. Tear it in pieces, so that its iniquities may be uncovered. This is profound repentance. I do not know more energetic words to

indicate this. The tearing is often accomplished without words, like true penitence. And we too have seen superficial manifestations, an almost methodical penitence; and, not to mention other things, we have observed groups of people beating their breast with a rhythmic motion, and, upon leaving church, they forget everything and continue their old ways.

Victor Hugo, in one of his masterpieces, describes a dark and gloomy scene that I will try to present to the reader in a few lines. Some bandits fled from the English coast, leaving a ten-year old boy on the mainland. Some time before they had deformed him in order to make the boy appear to be always laughing. The boy was exposed to the fury of a hurricane and the desolation of the night, but the bandits fared no better. They were on the high seas exposed to a snowstorm. The writer masterfully described its terrifying aspects. For many hours the bandits battled the sea and handled the ship with masterly skill and courage; they resisted the fury of the waves and finally, the storm ended and the bandits again saw the tranquil sea at dawn. However, the ship lurched and ran upon the rocks where it began to take on water. Those brigands escaped the hurricane on the high seas but they saw their ship going down with no hope of being saved. All attempts were made to prevent the water from entering, but the ship was condemned to disappear slowly. Everything was thrown out in order to lighten the ship, but it was useless.

During the entire scene of the storm, one of the bandits, an old man laden with years and with crimes, had retired

into a corner and was thoughtfully meditating on his past in sadness. When the last object had been thrown out to lighten the ship, he cried out: "Is there nothing else to throw out to sea?" "Nothing," answered the bandits in desperation. Then the old man, breaking his silence exclaimed: Let's throw our sins into the sea!

The old brigand, in those extreme moments, observed that the hand of God had finally reached them, and they were paying for the tortures they imposed the previous night on a poor creature that they had abandoned to the terror of hunger, the night and the hurricane.

"On your knees," exclaimed the old man. Those ferocious men fell on their knees and repentant sobs could be heard from many of them. Their time for brandishing the dagger of an assassin and carrying relics in their pockets had ended. They had deceived themselves and in the face of death they truly felt, not the sound, but the meaning of the cry of the prophet: "and rend your heart, and not your garments."

Reader, one more word: the repentance mentioned by the prophet had to be sincere, and only after this could they expect the blessings of the Lord.

The edifice of salvation is built on a heart torn by penitence, and there is no conversion where there is no sense of sin and where the voice of the prophet is not obeyed: "and rend your heart, and not your garments." Christianity is presented under the serene and sweet side of the Prince of Peace and of His meekness, but it should

always be remembered that, centuries later, John the Baptist repeated the cry of the prophet Joel, and Jesus began His preaching at the point where the Baptist stopped. Let's not deceive ourselves; at the door of the entrance into Christianity are the words: "Repent," a distant echo confirming the cry of the prophet: "and rend your heart, and not your garments."

Chapter 29

THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS

“Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (John 11:25, 26)

The above words have been burned in my memory: they were the text of the first sermon I heard. While I write I can see the venerable figure of the old evangelical pastor, and I read on his honest face how he believed in the words of Jesus in a sure way: “I am the resurrection and the life...” There are certain impressions that accompany us throughout our life.

When I read chapter eleven of St. John, I cannot help asking myself some questions. Was it not enough to record two resurrections; one of the daughter of Jairus, and one of the son of the widow of Nain? And should not the resurrection of Jesus have been enough? And I observe: the two resurrections preceding that of Lazarus have two special characteristics: in the first, a child that had just expired and not yet removed from her death bed was called to life; in the case of the son of the widow of Nain, the dead one was just being brought to be buried, but Lazarus had been buried some days. Besides, the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow were both in the prime of life, when one has not yet tasted the deep bite of sin. Lazarus was a mature man who must have tasted the bitterness of sin and the trials of life. Without

the resurrection of Lazarus, perhaps a vacuum would remain that would not fill the gap either of the resurrection of the two young people, or that of Jesus. In fact, I need to see an ordinary, average man resurrected of who it cannot be said that he is without sin, even though he may be an exceptional person. I find this man in Lazarus; and in his case, better than elsewhere, I read the destiny of humanity.

The Lord Jesus had retreated, with the disciples, beyond the Jordan, where John first was baptizing. It was here that he received a brief message one day from Martha and Mary: "Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick..." Nothing else was said; just the bare statement of a fact with no expressed prayer. Jesus said: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." The words of Jesus seem to be a soliloquy rather than an answer. In fact, the messenger did not receive a true answer.

"Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus;" and yet He did not run. "When He had heard therefore that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where he was." "He loved, therefore He abode still." There is also a beneficial and providential absence of God although often it does not seem to be so. The return of the messenger to Bethany could not have brought joy to the heart of the sisters of Lazarus; while Jesus was staying near the Jordan, Lazarus was dying. The sisters believed they waited uselessly, but Jesus had not delayed without a purpose.

“Then after that saith He to His disciples, let us go into Judea again. His disciples say unto Him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone Thee, and goest Thou thither again? Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours in a day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world... and after that, He saith unto them, our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said His disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death; but they thought He had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then Jesus said unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless, let us go unto him.”

“I am glad for your sakes.” If Jesus had been in Bethany, His very presence would have cured the sickness. Now He had a deep desire to prove to the disciples that life is not all here. Healing of a sickness is not proof of immortality. He saw in the death of Lazarus an occasion to glorify God, because one cannot believe in the justice of God if one does not have faith in the other world.

“Let us go unto him.” The time for delaying was over. From the place where they were it would take ten or twelve hours of walking to reach Bethany. Jesus with His disciples traveled that distance and arrived in Bethany, where they learned that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. “And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother.” And the Lord Jesus arrived so late that even He must

have seemed to be a sad visitor, coming to offer condolence for an irreparable event.

Jesus and the disciples must have been well known in Bethany, because the news of their arrival reached the house of Martha and Mary immediately. "Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him: but Mary sat still in the house."

It was at this encounter that the greatest recorded dialogue took place. As soon as Martha was in the presence of Jesus she could not help but exclaim, almost in a tone of veiled reprimand: "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." The woman knew with certainty that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been in Bethany, and now He was coming too late. "But I know," continued the afflicted one, "that even now, whatsoever Thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee."

What did Martha mean to say with this affirmation? That everything was still possible? So it would seem, if her other words did not reveal her trembling soul, in which hope and doubt were alternating painfully. There was a personage before her whom she had always considered very powerful, and in His presence a vague hope was born in her heart that something extraordinary could happen; however she did not ask for anything directly. "Jesus saith unto her, thy brother shall rise again." This answer was testing Martha's faith, but she limited that promise to the future.

“Martha saith unto Him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Yes, she wanted to say, he will rise again, but in the general resurrection, who knows how many centuries away; and meanwhile, death is death – “In the last day.” The Lord Jesus, with calm and singular majesty said: “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he was dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

His words meant: Martha, you are speaking of a resurrection to come, and you don't know that you have before you the very actual and living power of resurrection. Don't seek far away, don't look to the future. “I am the resurrection and the life.” Rising again is not enough; but it is necessary to rise again to eternal life. There was and there is death, but Jesus assures us that He has the power to give a life that triumphs over death. And what is death, after all, for one who believes in Jesus? “Though he was dead, yet shall he live.”

The verb that we translate “be dead” has a rich meaning. It means “a putting aside.” Although there may be for a time “a putting aside,” he shall live. But in reality, one who believes in Me shall never die. The encounter of Martha with Jesus is two ideals coming face to face. In their dialogue there is a voice of the old and a voice of the new way of contemplating death. The believer in Christ will live even in the hour of death; rather, in one part of his being he will never die. That which we call

Death is transition of life. Jesus gives a life that does not end. The condition is: trust in Him. This is the essence of Christianity: Jesus is resurrection and life to those who are in Him. "Believest thou this?" This is a direct question that asks for trust in His affirmation, no matter how extraordinary it may be. Jesus declared what He is; our answer is the only limit of His power in us. It is a direct question, absolute and personal. *Do you believe?* That is, do you accept in faith on My word, and without any doubt? *You*, each one must have a personal faith, and must not be moved by the opinions of others. *This*. That is, what Jesus has said: He is the resurrection and the life—"believest thou this?"

There is no wavering, there are no opinions between you and Jesus; there is no example of others. Jesus isolates us and asks us one by one: *Believest thou this?*

And Martha answered: "Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." Even in sorrow the sisters reveal their different characters: in Mary, her affliction was demonstrated in quietness.

"The Master is come, and calleth for thee," Martha said to Mary. "As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him." "Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying unto Him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Mary had the same lament, but expressed it in a milder attitude; she fell down at the feet of the Lord. "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping,

and the Jews also weeping which came with her, He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, where have ye laid him? They said unto Him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept."

Humanity has asked about the groaning and tears. Jesus had groaning and tears although He knew that in a few minutes Lazarus would be resurrected. Why cry, why groan? But Mary and the Jews were not the only spectators: to the vision of Jesus, humanity past and future was appearing, covered with a great cloud of misery and the saddest note was the distance from His Father in which humanity was living, and the false concept of death. His cheeks were lined with silent tears that were saying: life must be sad for those who know the great truth about the resurrection.

There are dark passages even in the most luminous roads. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, but men live undecided and without faith. "Jesus wept." "Then said the Jews, behold how He loved him! And some of them said could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?"

There are contrasts that perennially follow human life. Some saw love in those tears. And they could have said, with better reason: "How He loves us," because the tears of Jesus were more for the spectators than for Lazarus. Others saw a contradiction or impotence. If it is true that He loved him, and if He is powerful, why didn't He prevent Lazarus from dying?

A similar contrast about the compassion of Jesus has persisted from that time forward. Believers say "How much He loves us." Unbelievers of the present day say "Why is there evil," why this and why that if He loves us.

Jesus saw those two lines of thought: He still sees them today. "Jesus therefore again groaning in Himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto Him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days." Take note of "the sister of him that was dead." What need was there to qualify her thus? Keep in mind the observation that Martha made to Jesus after what had been said to her and asked of her. The sister of the dead speaks: "Lord; he stinketh." "Jesus saith unto her, said I not unto thee, that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" Jesus said it, it is true; but humanity is reluctant to believe it.

"Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up His eyes, and said, Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me." Nothing visible had happened, yet Jesus was already thanking that He had been heard. "And I knew that Thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou has sent me."

"And when He had thus spoken, He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus come forth." It was an immense and majestic cry that resounded; in that cry there must have

been all the strength and power of the resurrection: "Lazarus, come forth."

"And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, loose him and let him go." Jesus raised the dead, but the bystanders also had to do something.

Lazarus had been resurrected. In Jesus, all will be given life. He will call them with a loud voice. All the generations will come forth, they will rise from the sands of the desert, from the ruins of the cities, from the depths of the seas. Slaves and their oppressors will rise, and at the sound of that voice everyone will march before the irresistible force of the Son of God. "Lazarus, come forth!" Humanity, come forth from the sepulcher.

"Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on Him." Christian brothers, we have not seen anyone arise from the dead, yet we believe in Him. We have the experience of a resurrection in our heart, and have felt the enlivening breath of the Spirit of the Lord; therefore, we live in the assurance that if we die without having first met Him, He will raise us up.

There are events that are imprinted tenaciously in one's memory. The resurrection of Lazarus was the culminating miracle of the career of Jesus and news spread rapidly, to Jerusalem and to the enemies of the Lord. The empty tomb of Lazarus called for the closure

of another monument. For His enemies the resurrection of Lazarus was the final incentive they needed to determine to kill Jesus.

The miracle occurred in a solemn way. It has remained written in the memory of the inhabitants of the region. Bethany now has another name: "El-Azir." The people who live there are Arabs and El-Azir is the Arabic form of the name Lazarus. Thus, the memory has survived time and upheavals, like the work of Jesus is the only thing that remains across the mutations of human things. His words are blessed and reassuring, and they must remain written in our hearts. "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he was dead, yet shall he live."

Reader, do you believe this? It is a solemn question: answer alone; Jesus is asking you.

Chapter 30

THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

“And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto Him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. And He answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.” (Luke 19:39, 40)

“And when He was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen; saying, blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven and glory in the highest.”

It is the only time that Jesus enjoyed the honors of a feast and a triumph; the words of the prophet Zechariah were fulfilled in Him. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”

The enthusiasm of the disciples was at its peak. Jesus was being made the center of the demonstration of affection and devotion. This was truly unique in His earthly career and He was savoring that joy that is a type of the peaceful and glorious future kingdom of the Messiah. It seemed that in view of His imminent death, that demonstration would be of immense comfort to the

Lord. Unfortunately, there is no joy that does not have its reverse side, and it is only too true that the hatred of His enemies was to not give Him an hour of rest. In the midst of the cries and the festive applause of the procession there also appeared the fierce and sinister side of human ill-will. Upon the happy scene, illumined by the morning sun, the Pharisees appeared here and there; they, too, came out, called to the light of that unusual feast and they were spectators of that triumph.

It is easy to imagine what the Pharisees must have felt seeing Jesus surrounded by affection and devotion. A crescendo of miracles, increasingly important, had ended in affirming the name of the prophet of Galilee. Jesus had risen now to the maximum of popular admiration. However, they did not show their hatred openly, nor were they so imprudent as to go against popular sentiment. They were astute, and in the past, they had always found a pretext for the explosion of their hatred, manifested here and there by some malicious insinuation or tendentious question. But on the occasion of that feast, they did not have an easy pretext; and yet, more than ever, those happy and innocent manifestations and those "Hosannas" were a contrast to the blind envy that vibrated in the dark depth of their souls. They were not thinking of impeding the feast, even if they could; they wanted, if possible, to slow it down, or to reduce it to almost nothing. They were thinking that if those troublesome cries of "Hurrahs" etc. were not being heard, the procession would pass by almost unnoticed, and the enthusiasm would soon dissipate.

What should they do? Telling the people not to cry out would be useless, besides imprudent: their wicked motive would be discovered. So they decided nothing should be said to the people. The resources of hatred are truly innumerable; they decided to try to hide their intent under the pretext of caring for the dignity of Jesus; surely in this way they would achieve their purpose. And so, assuming a polite attitude, almost as if they were tasting that joy more than others, they drew near to the Master and their attitude seemed to say: "Hail, Master." We are happy about this feast, but we would like it to remain serious and solemn; therefore, because we respect you, we do not approve of this noise and these deafening cries. It's not good; it's better that they remain silent, and so, it's better perhaps that you command them not to cry out. And they thought that at least for modesty He would have to obey them. In their heart they were saying: We shall destroy by silence that which our furious cries of hatred would never be able to suffocate.

"Tell them to be silent," they insinuated gently, then added: "rebuke them!" almost as if blaming those innocent workers who were jumping for happiness and shouting Hurrahs for their Lord. But it was then, to the extreme marvel and pain for the Pharisees, Jesus answered: "I tell you, that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out."

This answer merits some brief considerations. *I tell you.* Many times, Jesus has said these words: *I tell you.* The words are the expression of a divine omniscience. It was

as if Jesus wanted to make the Pharisees understand: I know the aim of your request, these cries give you pain. In addition, a more accurate translation of the text gives us a greater light, guiding us to still more reflections, even if I would be able to impede them from shouting. It was not Jesus who commanded them to cry out. The Pharisees were wrong in thinking, even for one moment, that the feast had been artfully prepared between Jesus and the disciples. He was the object of those manifestations, but He had not suggested them. The manifestations were spontaneous and sincere. They should not and could not be silenced. The solemn and serious Pharisees had to listen with patience that time.

But there is more in that answer. The implication is that if people are silent, and that it may be useful to make them keep silence, you will not gain anything by their silence. Something so extraordinary would happen that you would be really terrified; that is, if these people keep silent, as soon as they stop shouting, stones will shout the words that they are shouting. It seems that Jesus wanted to say: It is so much in the will of my Father that the feast must happen, that even if one succeeded to keep them silent, the elements would speak. Now if Jesus had such great power it was clear that, even in the feast and in the joy, He assumed a very humble and meek attitude. It remained then to select between the shouting of men or stones. And if the stones should cry out, my glory would be greater and your envy would be much more provoked.

What value did the Pharisees assign to the words of Jesus? It is certain that they never dared to answer the words of the Master. Jesus had, at least for the moment, reduced them to confusion and silence. On the other hand, they had been present at so many marvelous works done by Jesus that, perhaps they were really afraid that something much more extraordinary could happen and cause His popularity to increase even more. But whatever their impression may have been, they did not add one word; they were silent, and, with heads bowed, macerating themselves with anger, they reentered the city, waiting for the moment when the enthusiasm would end because enthusiasm ends quickly, whereas hatred is tenacious and waits for the opportune moment to do its work. And yet, if the Pharisees, instead of disappearing had remained near Jesus, later on, in the advancing of the procession, in sight of Jerusalem, they would have seen Jesus weeping, and would have understood that He was not deceived by that feast. His vision went far beyond the present hour, and in His immense heart there was a place of love even for the Pharisees who hated him so much.

And they would have observed that "when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, if thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!"

There are, among others, two ways of doing evil; to speak or to be silent. There are moments when silence is a crime. The Pharisees, that time, did not do anything directly against Jesus, but they wanted to suffocate the

good, to cover the name of the Master with oblivion. "The stones will cry out," Jesus said to them. Those words truly had a prophetic significance.

Let's follow Jesus to Calvary. "Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent." The elements were rendering testimony to that unique death. (Matthew 27: 50, 51)

Let's continue. The hatred of the Pharisees and priests persecuted Jesus even beyond death. They wanted to make the sepulcher secure so they sealed it with a stone and had soldiers stand watch. It was in vain, because later "there was a great earthquake; for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it." It was the prophecy of the Lord! "The stones will cry out." Further, when the disciples, at another time, terrorized and mute, were brought before the Sanhedrin and ordered to be silent, they shouted and testified with even more strength. And still another reference: In the jail of Philippi, the enemies of St. Paul wanted to paralyze and destroy his work, but their hatred and envy was useless. Let's read: "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken..."

Take note of the energetic expressions: "*the earth did quake and the rocks rent; "there was a great earthquake, the foundations of the prison were shaken."* These words make one think of an extraordinary power

intended to rouse humanity that is somnolent and ungrateful before the truth of Christ. *The stones will cry out.* Christianity was persecuted in the first centuries and has always been fought against, especially by indifference. Now, more than ever, there are attempts to cover Christianity with silence, but it is always alive and eloquent.

Good cannot be destroyed. It is powerful and resembles fire that cannot be hidden. Observe a gigantic volcano, covered with snow almost up to the highest vertex. That frozen mantle hides in its bosom an ocean of fire. But at times, that enormous force shakes the mountain, forcefully throwing out lava and fire from the bowels of the earth. And this is a pale image of the immense force of Christianity, a great fire destined to change the hearts of men. Let the scoffers attempt to cover Christianity with contempt, and let the Pharisees of every age urge: "quiet, quiet," "don't make noise;" "excessive manifestations are not necessary." Age after age, the great voice of humanity, like the noise of many waters, answers: "Hosanna to the Son of David and Son of God."

The voices of men are extinguished and the enemies of Christ pass with bowed heads and are reduced to silence. We believers of the cross look ahead with faith. We are reassured by the triumphs of the past that were prophesied by Jesus. When He was near Jerusalem He said: "I tell you, that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out."

Chapter 31

THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM

“... and His disciples came to Him to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, see ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.” (Matthew 24: 1, 2)

Jesus and the disciples had barely traversed the ravine of the Chedron. They began the ascent of the Mount of Olives and arrived at a point from which they could see the grandiose temple of Jerusalem in all its majesty. It was the pride and honor of the Jewish people whose history it personified. The temple was truly an admirable work on which all the royal magnificence of Herod the Great had been lavished.

The disciples had certainly admired this temple other times; but on that occasion they were seeing it more gigantic and, perhaps they considered it imperishable. They remembered the words of the Master of a few days before, relative to Jerusalem: “And shall lay thee even with the ground and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation;” but what they saw was the faith in that prophecy. (Luke 19:44) The disciples could not help but turn to Jesus and call His attention to the solid and massive structure of the temple, especially the walls, in which stones of colossal dimensions could be seen.

“And His disciples came to Him to show Him the buildings of the temple.” Words were not necessary. They were pointing to the visible and gigantic edifice and seemed to be saying to Jesus: Don’t you see this solid construction, destined to withstand the ravages of time? Silently and perhaps unconsciously, they recalled the apparent absurdity of a few days before when Jesus said that one stone would not remain upon another, or at least that act was an expression of curiosity, as if they were waiting, without expressly asking, for a detailed exposition of future events. In the soul of the disciples, perhaps, the present reality of the massive structure took away their vision, and their faith in the future became uncertain.

The Lord Jesus understood the thoughts of the disciples. He was quite used to the weaknesses of the disciples and did not immediately measure their every action. He abstained from insisting or citing particulars, and said to them: “See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.”

See ye not? Consider these things even better; admire these buildings even more than you do now. In that brief question Jesus was exhorting them to contemplate the powerful construction even better. After a brief pause, when the disciples had examined more closely and followed the gesture and the eye of the Master, He continued: “Verily I say unto you.” Here is the contrast: on one hand was that which seemed indestructible to the eye of simple men; on the other hand, there was the sure

word of the One who alone could say "I say unto you," accompanied by the resolute affirmation "verily." It seemed that Jesus was saying: of all that which you admire, and that I counsel you to consider even better, because it is even more solid than you believe, of all this there will not remain one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down; even those enormous stones that to you seem immovable.

Nothing else was said; the disciples were silent. Jesus left the fulfillment of the prophecy to time. For the moment, those words were enough to remove the danger of the disciples looking too much at human things, thus losing the vision of on high.

For now, we will leave aside an examination of the possible impressions of what Jesus said; it is not an idle examination, and the reader will be able to do it on his own and will go on to remember some events relative to the temple of Jerusalem.

Tito Vespasian wrote the history of the destruction of Jerusalem. It is very sorrowful, but the culmination of the misfortune was the ruin of the temple, which, in addition to being the religious center, was also the principal fortress of the city. The story of what led the Jews to an ill-advised rebellion and to a desperate resistance against the Romans would be worthy of a critical study. In the annals of history, never did a people provoke so powerful an enemy, and offer so much discord in their resistance to an enemy. It would be of historical interest to follow the deplorable ways the

Jews prepared, little by little, for that fatal war that ended in the complete destruction of the city.

Between the years 49 and 66 A.D., Jerusalem was the theater of bloody scenes, caused by the parties that existed there; the fanaticism of one part had brought crimes in large proportion as far as into the temple and political unity was breaking up more every day. The great Sanhedrin abandoned the temple; continuous scandalous and frequent insurrections provoked by those who were zealous caused a lack of security. And according to a tradition referred by the Jews, the signs of the mercy of God had ceased appearing in the Temple.

The series of events by which Jerusalem was going its way toward total ruin constitutes a sorrowful Iliad. Since revolutions were raging everywhere, fugitives were gathering in Jerusalem. The city had never been so beautiful, populated and strong. And yet that agglomeration of people of various factions in the capital brought civil war.

The Roman people did not want war. Emperor Vespasian waited two years before ordering a siege of the city. And it was not until the year 70 that the emperor appeared with an army under the walls of Jerusalem. He made a last appeal to the inhabitants to surrender themselves and pay taxes. The Jews refused all negotiations and prepared an obstinate defense, building wall after wall. Willing to attempt anything to save the city, the Roman emperor again asked them to

surrender. One of the Jewish leaders replied that the holy city could not be destroyed.

It was during this memorable siege that the most unspeakable horrors were manifested in Jerusalem. There was discord, pestilence, and hunger. A woman killed and devoured her own son, a sorrowful fulfillment of the words of the prophet.

The last place where the Jews took refuge in their obstinate defense was the temple. In homage to Princess Bernice, the emperor wanted to spare the temple, as he had decided to occupy it and not destroy it. But it was in vain, because by an unknown hand, notwithstanding orders to the contrary by the Roman general, a fire was started in a part of the edifice. The Roman leader immediately ordered the extinction of the fire, and he himself ran to help, but he did not succeed. The Jewish priests were standing on some walls not yet enveloped in the fire, and were waiting together with the false prophets for their Deliverer, the Messiah to come from Heaven. "Do not let the priests survive their temple" was the command of the emperor. The glory of the Jewish people had departed forever.

About one million people died in that siege, and almost another million were taken prisoner, not counting the rebels who were crucified. Many were sold as slaves and many perished in the arenas. Judea was divided into lots and the remaining exiles began their sad pilgrimage in the world; they were condemned to wander without rest like the Hebrew of the Legend.

The temple of Jerusalem had fallen morally a long time before and was profaned by pagan sacrifices. The temple had been condemned to perish some time ago. But, finally, the prophetic words of Jesus were fulfilled: "Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down."

We could end at this point, but we want to say another word about the temple of Jerusalem.

There was a time when it seemed that Judaism would flourish again; it was at the time of the emperor Julian. His goal was to limit Christianity as much as possible and to protect pagans as well as Jews. He used to call Jesus with the nickname Galilean and His followers Galileans. He wanted to challenge the prophecy of the Master, and ordered grandiose preparations for the construction of the Judaic temple in Jerusalem, that had already become a city of Christians. Everything was prepared; the materials and the workers were in place. But when the workers began to work on the ruins, an enormous fire exploded from the ruins and many lost their lives. This was repeated many times, so much so that they had to desist from working. It is strange indeed that an undertaking led under Roman direction had to be stopped at the beginning, when the persistence the Romans had for completing works they started was well known. The fact of the fire is documented by pagan and Christian writers, and is accepted by Jewish historians. The latter explain it by saying that the explosions were due to gases that had been compressed for a long time. This explanation seems reasonable but it is insufficient,

because in many other ancient ruins construction was not impeded; even later, on the ruins of the temple, other edifices rose up that were not temple-related.

The fact remains: the temple of Jerusalem could not be reconstructed. The emperor Julian was mortally wounded in a battle. As he lay dying, he pronounced these last words: "Galilean, you have won!"

With the story before us, we have determined that which is evident, that the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, and it was not possible to build it again as a temple of Judaism. Will it ever be reconstructed and when? All this belongs to the future, just as fulfillment of the rest of the prophetic word belongs in the future. We have faith in the Scripture, and the facts of the past authorize us to have faith in the words of Jesus: "there shall not remain one stone upon another."

More fortified by a faith that appears always more reasonable in the light of the revelation of history, let's go forward announcing the Gospel with power, for the glory of God.

Chapter 32

THE SENTENCE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

“Pilate...washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us and on our children.” (Matthew 27: 24, 25)

Pilate understood that they put Jesus in his hands because of envy. He resorted to several attempts to free Him, but it was useless because the Jews wanted Him dead at any cost. Barabbas, the designated prisoner, was preferred over the innocent one. And even after such a choice, Pilate insisted: “Why, what evil hath He done? But they cried out the more, saying, let Him be crucified.”

The crowd knew that Pilate served at the pleasure of the Roman emperor, so, in order to intimidate him, the crowd said, “If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend.” (John 19:12) This was a very clever ambush because the emperor was a ferocious, suspicious man called Tiberius. And yet, strangely, Pilate did not yield and made a last appeal: he washed his hands, declaring himself to be innocent of the blood of that just one. It was useless: Jesus had to die.

Let us stop to consider the figure of the Roman governor before proceeding. This serves to clarify our subject. Pontius Pilate felt the horror of permitting the death of

Jesus and even risked compromising his position: his hesitating, let alone refusing, could have led to an accusation that could have been enlarged by distance and by hatred. And Pilate attempted to free the prisoner. Perhaps that governor abhorred the shedding of blood? Oh no.

Pontius Pilate had seen many unhappy people die, and he himself other times had shed innocent blood. What cannot be explained is why he tried to retreat now, in the presence of a single prisoner, accused with such insistence, facing serious danger to his own person. What did one life, more or less, matter in the history of so many crimes? Why then? What did Pilate see in Jesus, besides seeing that He was innocent?

We can make suppositions that have a basis. Jesus, even in that condition, did not appear like an ordinary prisoner. He was not invoking deliverance and manifested a serenity and meekness that found a sense of sympathy even in the depths of the corrupt heart of that pagan. And Pilate, who had closed his ear many times to the voice of mercy and was deaf to the cry of who knows how many unhappy people, it was precisely he, that time, to invoke mercy for an innocent person to be spared.

Permit me to open a parenthesis: In the history of the banditry of a region that I will not name, there is registered a truly horrifying episode. Some ferocious brigands took an entire family prisoner and having robbed them, they killed all except one. They left a little

child a few years old, so beautiful with a gentle aspect that would soften the hardest heart. They wanted to spare him: one like them, who had financial interests with those scoundrels, and yet he did not seem to be a ferocious man, said to the bandits: if you are horrified to do it, I will cut this child's throat.

Pontius Pilate had no more things to try. There was a big party; he called a slave, had him bring water and washed his hands in the presence of the multitude. With a tone of voice and a behavior we can only imagine, Pilate exclaimed: "I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it." (Matthew 27:24)

Let's measure these words attentively. They seem to say: I, Pontius Pilate, whatever may be the concept you Jews have of me, I, and in that *I* there is a history of cruelty: I, bloodthirsty, vile and all that you think that I may be, I tremble before this man. He is not an ordinary person, rather, He is a just man. I am innocent of His blood. I feel that I cannot be blamed for this assassination. If you Jews believe as you believe, see ye to it.

Have we reflected on the terrorizing power of this appeal? The blow was decisive: we would expect all the people to tremble before Pontius Pilate who had a horror for blood, and would expect them to say: But we, Pilate, are more scrupulous than you. We would truly expect that the Jews would not allow themselves to be outdone by others; they should have learned from their laws to abhor blood. We would expect them to finally yield; if Pilate had a conscience, they too should have

had one. We would expect the people to be horrified and cry for Jesus to be saved. And we wait.

A dark, deaf, angry voice like the howling of a hurricane was heard. A cry issued from hundreds of breasts; it was the answer to the protest of Pilate. Listen. "Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us and on our children."

It was such a tragic answer that we can't evaluate its weightiness. There was no reply to the protest of innocence. Innocent or not, just or not, for this man, it doesn't matter. If you, Pilate, have scruples, we do not. Whatever may happen, this one must die; his blood be on us and on our children. Pilate was conquered; he gave in to the furor of the multitude. Jesus passed toward the cross of Calvary and passed the sentence on the head of the Jews. And considering the dark pages in the life of that people, the historian finds the explanation and the key to sorrowful events in that cry: "His blood be on us and on our children." The Greek word that stands for blood means homicide. And in the original text there is no verb. The Jews were in a hurry to answer and to see the executions.

Permit us a brief historical remembrance. Frederick II asked his chaplain for a brief demonstration of the truth of Christianity. Sir, answered the chaplain, Israel is the proof of Christianity: read the history of the people of Israel.

A very intelligent Jew used to say to the one who is writing this meditation: read the history of the Jewish people, by Graetz, for example, and believe, if you can, in your Christianity. The writer had no peace until he read that history, but at the end he exclaimed: the proof of Christianity is truly Israel.

The Jewish historian considers Jesus only as a teacher, perhaps even lesser than Jewish leaders Hillel and others. When he arrived to his narrative of the crucifixion, he exclaimed: "For no man has so little been done during His life and so much after His death. He is the only mortal whose death has been more efficacious than His life. And how many dead people have followed Him! Millions have not yet paid the tremendous expiation. Golgotha has become the new Sinai..." (V. Graetz, History of the Jews, II, ch. VI)

Friend reader, do you know the story of the Jews? For eighteen centuries this people has suffered. They have been dispersed and persecuted in all the world, condemned to wander without rest like the wandering Hebrew of the legend. There is not one year, from the fall of Jerusalem until a short time ago, when the Jews have not been victims of persecutions some place. It is a sad story and one needs courage to read it; they are dark pages. The sorrowful episodes and moments of exceptional misfortune of other peoples are nothing before the Iliad of the Jews. The Jews are a unique people, and especially unique in having suffered much. There is not a Jew wandering through the world that does not remember scenes of horror in which his

ancestors were victims. In some places, in the middle Ages, they were killed by the thousands, chased from country to country like wild beasts. Elsewhere, they were put ashore on solitary islands and exposed almost naked to inclemency and hunger, after the most indescribable horrors; elsewhere, they were imprisoned in churches and burned alive en masse. Everywhere, it can be said, they were made the butt of bloody crusades. They were subjected to laws different from those in effect in the places where they lived; they were constrained, sometimes, to wear a special sign to be separated and exposed to universal hatred; wandering, and always imploring, they had even lost the courage, as anticipated by a prophet, to raise their voice. They have been persecuted in the East and in the West; there has not been a race that has not mistreated them. As soon as they began to flourish in a country, persecutions began again. They have been in exile in every land. Exile? But when they were prisoners in Babylon, in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, they at least had a homeland for which to sigh. But after the fall of Jerusalem they no longer had a homeland, and even if they had been able to remain in Palestine, they would have been more in exile there than elsewhere. It seemed they were not being put out of one country, but from all the earth. The successors of what religion are responsible for this? To say that it was only the Christians would be a historic error; Mohammedanism is also responsible, not to mention others, for persecution of the Jews. And it should be noted how the Jews behaved in Arabia; it is not the purpose here to examine why and how they tried to protect themselves during the dawn of Islamism. They

were hoping, but it was useless. There was a time when they were persecuted by Mohammedans and Christians equally. I say Christians, and ask forgiveness of the reader for the improper use of the word. I mean to say those who *called* themselves Christians.

It is a story that makes one shudder and cry. Say what you will and discuss as you will, but facts are facts. It is certain that the prophets said they would suffer so much and so bitterly; it is certain that the prophecies about them have been fulfilled up to now.

From these two certainties a third springs forth: it is certain that what was prophesied of them and has not yet occurred will happen. But if one who is studious of the scripture feels his heart ache at the picture of the past, on the other hand he is made glad by the prospects for the future of this unique and marvelous people.

The sentence: "His blood be on us, and on our children" has been accomplished. The centuries have measured the length of execution and the entire theater of the world has been the place in which it has been carried out. But after the sentence, there is the promise of restoration. And now Judaism is flourishing with the partial and continuous return to Palestine. The entire movement toward a homeland is for this people like the appearance of the dawn that announces the rising of the sun. The plan of God will come to pass. And the time will come when we will see and know many things that now seem mysterious to us.

In the meantime, let's investigate the scriptures. The history of the Jewish people guides us to move a step forward toward the Christ the Son of God, the ultimate hope and desire of the historic religious movement of humanity.

Chapter 33

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

“Then were there two thieves crucified with Him, one on the right hand, and one on the left.” (Matthew 27:38)
“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, if Thou be the Christ, save Thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly... but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord; remember me when Thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23: 39-43)

There are no pictures painted by men that attain the level of the portrait of the thief on the cross. No artist could imagine so much contrast of misfortune, malediction, faith, prayer and love. The Biblical gallery is needed in order to present such pictures in which the extremes touch each other.

I have reflected many times on this episode, and I have always felt insufficient to evaluate it in all of its importance. Fixing my eyes squarely on that dying thief, I see a rapid transformation of that man who, from the misery of his state, rose to the height of heaven. Penitence, faith, testimony and prayer take place in a short time and present themselves successively on the canvas.

“Then were there two thieves crucified with Him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.” “Then;” that is, after they had crucified Jesus, and placed the writing, “This is Jesus, King of the Jews,” then two crosses were lifted up at his sides, on which were nailed two thieves.

This is the company: three who are crucified. One is made the butt of scorn and derision; it is simply recorded that at His sides were two thieves. What are their names? We don't know, but how important was their name? As if it was important to know who a crucified one might be. Similar scenes of crucifixion were being repeated at brief intervals. The announcement was enough. They were two thieves; two disgraced, rejected creatures, that's all. Jesus was given the company of those two unnamed ones. Such was the torture. Everything concurred to render Him more ignominious and to cover Him with infamy and shame.

And those two were crucified one on the right and the other on the left. The Evangelist is specific in establishing this; let's repeat it: one on the right and one on the left. It almost tells us that in planting those crosses, the executioners, looking at Jesus, were thinking: this is right for you; you in the middle, and these two on your sides; one on the right, the other on the left. Not both on one side, Jesus in the middle.

The cross of Jesus divided two beings, equally condemned by the law; and in those two beings humanity was seen separated into two parts; both condemned by the law, one on the right and the other on

the left. And these two parts were both guilty. A great innocent one divided them.

Those two thieves apparently had the same importance, and for the crucifiers, they did have, but, in fact, they represented two different destinies, diametrically opposite; they were destined to start from the moment of the cross on two different lines, one toward heaven, the other toward perdition. Both of them deserved the cross, but they had a different attitude toward Jesus and their different behavior toward the crucified one is the reason for their different destinies. One rose from his state and lifted himself to heaven; the other, crowning his life with an insult to the great martyr, precipitated downward. Such is precisely the picture of humanity; we are all sinners, notwithstanding what can be said about so called honest men, and we are raised on high or remain down according to our attitude toward the cross of Calvary.

Let's see the different attitude in those two thieves: "and one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us." "If;" the eternal *if* of the tempter never gave Jesus rest, from the desert to the cross, and was then attempting to poison the agony. And here there is more than doubt. The Evangelist tells us: "He railed on Him." Despite the torments that were afflicting that thief, he had a fierce pleasure in insulting another who was suffering like him. You the Christ! You indeed! Your power can be seen. To the scorn of the passers-by and the soldiers there answered, like an echo, the insult of the thief—come down off the cross! And the words possessed a

mocking expression that words cannot express. It was a tragic psychology of sin that rendered him crueler toward a companion of misfortune, and urged that unfortunate one to become ferocious toward a Martyr.

Such was one of the thieves. "But the other answering rebuked him, saying..." The contrast begins here: I say that it begins to be noticed, but there was a hidden contrast a moment before. "The other answering;" the other had reflected and having arrived at this point was speaking and his answer was twofold, to his companion and to himself. He was answering himself. I would like to have the ability to bare the heart of that thief from the moment he looked at Jesus until then, and trace the painful soliloquy of his soul until the exploding of his answer. He measured himself and all that separated him from his crucified neighbor that he found to be so different from himself when he heard Him ask forgiveness for His crucifiers. And while others were mocking, he was thinking; and perhaps, listening to the words of Jesus expressed to his mother, he was reflecting that he also had a family; who knows to what point his sins may have affected them. He had, or was remembering a mother who was desperate because of him; and, in the contemplation of that companion, he was reviewing in his clear and sharp memory, the story of his past, a sad past; and from this memory there arose a sharpened sense of penitence and sorrow, so acute that it tortured him more than the nails that were driven into his flesh. And in his consideration, Jesus was growing greater than men, and he was looking at Him, while with a swollen soul he was meditating on himself.

At this point, perhaps, he heard the words of the other thief and he listened and saw the scorn of that insult: "If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us." He could no longer remain silent. He was nailed and could accomplish nothing else; but his tongue was not nailed and in an impetus of tenderness and infinite sorrow for Jesus, he began to rebuke his companion. "Rebuked him saying;" rebuked, reproved, almost attempting to suffocate the insults by his rebuking, and in this way spare further torment to that man who for him was extraordinary and that did not have a word or any response to the offense. He said: "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

He had no fear, even of God. Those two thieves knew each other. They had not feared anything in the past, but then one was saying to the other: you have not been afraid of anyone till now, not even of God. Your audacity goes so much beyond. And so much beyond goes the audacity of many who have no fear, even of God! For him, that dying man was God; it could not be otherwise, and for this reason he could not understand how the other did not fear.

"And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." We receive the due reward of our deeds; not one alone, but numerous crimes. It seemed the entire past was appearing to his imagination, a sequel of errors and shame; our deeds. A penalty, but all our life deserved it. This is our place.

“But this man hath done nothing amiss.” We, our deeds, all our life; this man has done nothing. And from the little that he knew he could sense an innocent life spent by Jesus for others. “This man hath done nothing amiss.” And after he had thus judged himself and his companion in contrast to the innocence of Jesus, from the abyss of his misery, he had a revelation. It seemed to him that a lifeline was leaving the heavenly throne and reaching to him on Calvary. Jesus was that lifeline. In that dying man he saw the Savior, destined for heaven, and he turned to Him with his heart and with his voice. “And he said unto Jesus, Lord; remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

It was a brief and powerful prayer. A great writer said: I believe this is the most extraordinary case of faith in the Bible. Abraham and Moses cannot compare. That man had no reason to believe that Jesus was God. There were no signs of His kingdom. Who called Him king, Lord? He was the only one who up to that point called Him “Lord,” giving true meaning to the word. Where were the disciples? And what was the very mother of Jesus thinking while she saw Him on the cross, bloody and dying? To her, was Jesus the Lord? From the entire humanity a single voice was lifted to confess the dying Jesus as Lord, and it was that of the thief. And so, while others were mocking, others had fled and others were crying without hope, a single word of faith and testimony, strong and sure, was raised. It was a thief, one of those unnamed ones, one on the right and the other on the left.

"...remember me." It was a brief, precise prayer. There is no reasoning. He did not deserve anything. Everything depended on the grace of the Lord. "Remember me." When? When you come down from the cross? No, he understood that Jesus would not come down from the cross. Here on this earth there is nothing to hope for. He had a precise vision of the beyond and his prayer was all for the beyond.

"When Thou comest into Thy kingdom;" yes, that crucified young man had a kingdom. A king, greater than all the kings, appeared to him even in that humiliation. How and where the kingdom might be the thief did not care to know.

Although others may have called Him king in mockery, the thief recognized Him as a king, although there was no hint of His power then and all the material evidence was to the contrary. There is no reason, but he appealed to the King, who, to the eye of the world, appeared conquered, and asked Him to remember him in His kingdom.

"And Jesus said unto him, verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in paradise."

So much faith and testimony were the only comfort Jesus had on the cross from the human side. In all the rest he saw a painful vacuum. He was abandoned by His own and scorned by others. That miserable crucified one sided with Him in the dark hour. He was not able to run because His hands and feet were nailed, but he raised his

voice. That extraordinary faith was perhaps unique in the annals of the world. That unique testimony was so much more precious inasmuch as it was in contrast to the appearance of the being to whom the testimony was rendered. "Verily I say unto thee." It is the same "I" of other times, the *I* that affirms His divinity. 'I' that you have understood who I am, I say unto thee –what thing? "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise;" today, not tomorrow. In the morning he was a malefactor, in the evening he was gathered into paradise in the company of Jesus.

Was this too rapid a conversion; can it be said that the reward was excessive? Oh, no, don't say so. There are brief periods of time that are worth entire existences. The few minutes that decided the fate of the thief weighed in the balance of God more than entire lives of trials and sacrifices. It was the conversion of a minute, yes; but it was a minute of lightning, composed of crashing noise and light; and a lightning of remorse and love that illumined that thief, lifting him up to heaven. Excessive reward? Don't say so. We are all saved by grace, but in the eyes of Jesus, if one must look to man and compare that thief to the rest of humanity, no one deserved precedence over that thief.

Let us meditate, trembling on our knees, the tragedy of Calvary and the humiliation of Jesus; and opposite all of this let us put the faith and solitary testimony of the thief, and only then can we understand the words of Jesus: "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

“And it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost.”

The thief outlived Him by a little, waiting serenely for the end. On the border of two worlds, at the edge of that darkness, a pact had been sealed between him and Christ, a pact of love destined to last for an eternity.

Jesus had gone ahead; the thief would die in a little while and join Him. When the soldier came and broke his leg, hastening his death, perhaps he barely noticed the pain. He was anticipating death and a chorus of angels was coming to take him and bring him near the Lord.

One day we will see near the Lord the one that I no longer dare to call a thief. One day we will meet this great hero of faith; and we will know his name.

Meanwhile, to he who in life was a thief, but in dying appealed to Jesus, we send our warmest regards.

Chapter 34

MARY!.....RABBONI! (Read John 20:1-18)

“There laid they (in the sepulcher of Arimathaea) Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulcher was nigh at hand.” Chapter nineteen of the Gospel of St. John ends with these words.

Forgetfulness would soon creep in like a flower that dies and the few tender memories would fade away with the end of life, but an event occurred that marked a new walk in the history of humanity –the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is remembered as a heroine of affection and profound gratitude; she was among the few people who loved Jesus. No heart was more saddened and sincerely tied to the cross in the hour of agony than that of Mary, and no feet that hurried to the sepulcher were more devoted than those of Mary.

“The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulcher.” Perhaps she had remained outside the city, waiting all night, because the gates would open at dawn.

She needed to be alone, because there are sorrows and remembrances that require solitude; alone and by night, Mary went to the monument. But she found the stone removed. It was then that she thought of looking for others. “Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith

unto them, they have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid him." She went alone; but at the sight of an empty tomb, she wanted to find the disciples again, and she didn't just go, she ran.

"Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulcher. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulcher. And he, stooping down, and looking in saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulcher, and seeth linen clothes lie, and the napkin that was about His head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in that other disciple, which came first to the sepulcher, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that He must rise again from the dead."

"Then the disciples went away again unto their own home." "The disciples went away." But Mary... There are few buts and few contrasts that are so strikingly vivid that allow one to reach into the depths of a soul. Peter and John were affectionate and devoted to the Master. They had run to the monument, they had examined and seen, but then they had gone home again. What could they do, and why linger near that tomb?

But another person did not go away. After Mary ran to Peter and to John to tell them that the tomb was open she returned, and when the two disciples left, she remained.

“But Mary stood without at the sepulcher weeping.” Hers was not a hasty visit. That tomb was associated with the most tender memory she had in the world. She found the tomb empty and immediately imagined that a new crime had been committed. The body of the Lord was not in the tomb, but that was the last place where it had been; and the places where loved persons have passed are very dear. Mary remained near the tomb and began to cry.

Love is tenacious in hope, and Mary’s constant love was rewarded by a vision. And Mary “as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulcher.” “She stooped down.” Nothing was there, she knew it, and yet she stooped down to look attentively, almost as if she was waiting for a word from the stones. “And seeth two angels dressed in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, woman, why weepest thou?”

Mary was not frightened or surprised by that apparition. Her mind was so intent on Jesus that the rest passed by without interesting her. “She saith unto them, because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.” “My Lord, I know not.” Those who have seen someone who is greatly afflicted can understand the psychology of sorrow and affection that is in the few words of Mary. They seem to be the innocent and simple expressions of a child looking for its mother. “She turned herself back;” having answered the angels, Mary turned her head and saw Jesus standing and knew not that it was Jesus. It is after a patient

expectation that Jesus appears to us. She had come for a dead person so she did not know that He could be Jesus and she was crying.

“Jesus saith unto her, woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?” Her crying was so eloquent that everyone noticed it. “Whom seekest thou?” Her eyes were fixed intensely, clearly indicating that she was waiting for someone.

“She, supposing Him to be the gardener saith unto Him, Sir, if Thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Those who are sad do not like to be distracted from the immediate object of their sorrow: Mary answered the question with another question. Where was the body of the Lord? That’s what mattered to her. “Tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away.” “I will take Him away.” A woman alone, who was tired of watching and crying, promised to take a cadaver away. In Mary’s words to the person whom she believed to be the gardener there was a profound note of prayer and an intense expression of love and devotion; in her offer to take the cadaver away by herself, there was such an extreme abandon of love that is not easy to define. The woman could only be taken out of that intense concentration by an instantaneous revelation: “Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto Him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master!”

Mary! I seem to hear the voice of Jesus calling all humanity, desolate until then. Rabboni? And I seem to

hear the voice of humanity calling Jesus. Above that empty tomb the two voices met. Jesus and humanity entered into a new communion.

Mary! Jesus called her by name: one's name is one's history and the tone in which the name is pronounced reveals the heart of the one who calls. When a name is pronounced by loving lips it stirs the intimate fibers of the heart.

Mary Magdalene! Jesus is calling you. She understood and saw. She answered to the supposed gardener and turned to look in the tomb again; but at the sound of His voice, and hearing her name "Mary," she turned. She had no doubt. She exclaimed: Rabboni.

She knew that blessed voice; and the name pronounced near that empty tomb carried the story of her redemption.

She turned and threw herself at the feet of Jesus to embrace Him. But Jesus said to her: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." "Touch me not." It seems to me that Jesus was telling Mary to content herself with having been the first to see Him. From this moment on a new meeting began that is all spiritual. It seems that Jesus was telling Mary: you who want to hold me back, fearing to lose me, don't touch me, nor remain here.

It seemed that Mary Magdalene was saying that she would not let Him go. "Touch me not." "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father,

and your Father; and to my God, and your God." You have seen me for a moment and before the others, not to remain here, but to move quickly to announce it. And "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things unto her."

Mary Magdalene is, perhaps, the most interesting woman in the scripture. She has been called the Paul of the feminine world: an apostle sent to the apostles. She is the first herald of the resurrection. "Woman, why weepest thou?" There was no reason for crying. Woman recovered her lost position. She was deceived and was an agent of deceit in the garden of Eden, but she was present at the crucifixion, where she accompanied Jesus with tears. No outcry of woman against Jesus is recorded. Women presented children to Him to be blessed; asked for His mercy; offered tears of penitence to Him and have helped Him. It was a woman who was the last to abandon the cross and the first to hurriedly look for the sepulcher. Others went to the sepulcher and left it, she remained nailed there and weeping. A woman was the first to be rehabilitated.

Mary Magdalene, who was freed from demons and redeemed, was the first to meet Jesus. She makes us think of the elect who will be the first to meet the Lord and who are selected to be the bride of the Lamb.

"Mary! Rabboni!" Reader, have you seen Jesus? Go, announce to others that He has appeared to you and is resurrected.

Chapter 35

ON THE WAY OF EMMAUS (Luke 24: 13–36)

We are indebted to the evangelist St. Luke for the narrative of the meeting of Jesus and two disciples on the way of Emmaus. In this grandiose episode the historian shows us, on one hand, the state of sadness in which the disciples found themselves, and on the other, how the fog of sorrow and discouragement dissipated, little by little, under the powerful ray of the love of the Master.

Two men were walking on the way of Emmaus: they had been disciples of Jesus. They were speaking about the last events that were of interest to them; that is, the arrest and crucifixion of the Lord.

Their dispirited and tired manner of walking revealed the pain of their soul and the subdued tone of their voices indicated that the nature of their conversation was about tender and bitter remembrances. They regretted the loss of a hero and deplored that virtue had been overcome by iniquity. It was a sad theme, and if protracted, could only produce sadness and profound discouragement. They still loved the man of whom they were speaking, and it seemed that they had been loved much. Besides that, connected with the person was the remembrance of a great ideal that vanished; that is, the deliverance of Israel. They were irradiated for a moment by the remembrance of the marvelous works of Jesus. However, a sorrowful *but* was at the conclusion of their conversation; the powerful ones were still powerful, the

aristocracy had won, and it was necessary that they the people bow their heads, overcome by secular politics and religious oppression; and they bowed their tired heads, remaining, for a time, in silent thought.

The way that was almost deserted and silent did not distract them; they were occupied by their thoughts and did not observe anything around them. They did not see a third traveler who was following them a short distance behind and had observed their manner of walking and their sad countenance. This third traveler must have been a sympathetic and sociable man, because he manifested a desire to carry on a conversation with them. And the conversation opened the door to discussing the sadness surrounding the two figures: "What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?"

Those who are sad do not always like to be questioned. And it seemed that the two were not pleased to be distracted from their theme and disturbed in their meditations. However, especially in the Orient, travelers are courteous and quickly become friendly.

They answered, but showed that they were surprised by the question, and they questioned in turn: "And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto Him, art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?"

Something so important, thought those two, that happened in these last days, could not remain unknown. But why, we add, and the third traveler could have observed, why should He, even if He knew of the recent events, know that these two were speaking of them? And couldn't it be that they were speaking of something else, and their sadness could be for another reason? And yet, the two were so sad, and so preoccupied by the subject of their conversation that they did not know how to answer other than the way they did. That questioning reply seemed to be the echo of their heart, rather than a logical and satisfying answer. It was almost as if they were saying: How can one discuss and be sad for any other reason, outside of the well known events of these days? And who can remain indifferent?

The madwoman of Tolone asked anyone who came near: "have you seen Him?" She added nothing else. She was speaking of one she loved and who she thought was lost.

The two travelers hoped that in the man who questioned them, they would have a companion in their sadness and admiration. The process of the exit and death of their hero was too well known. And if you know all this, how can you think that we are speaking of anything else? All three poor travelers must have felt united in the same sorrow and deplored, even though in silence, the cause of the misfortune. It was as if they were thinking: what more do we have to hope for, after what has happened?

The third traveler did not pay attention to their surprise, and said to them: What things?

“And they said unto Him, concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...”

It was an affectionate, reverent answer! They were remembering a prophet who was mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. It seemed that the remembrance of that power was strengthening their voices, animating them; I would say almost filling them with pride.

They continued: “And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and have crucified Him.” And here it seemed that the tone of their voices fell; “given to be judged, they have crucified Him.” It was eloquent brevity that hid an accumulation of sorrow and bitterness.

“But we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel...” There passed before their eyes a brief and blinding light, a grandiose ideal, but it now belonged to the past: we trusted, and no longer trust. They continued: “and beside all this, today is the third day since these things were done. Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulcher; and when they found not His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that He was alive, and certain of them which were with us went to the sepulcher, and found it even as the women had said; but Him they saw not.” There seems to be no connection between the parts of this rapid exposition. They spoke of the death, but

they were afraid to speak of the vision of the women, so they first affirmed that they were filled with stupor. While they referred to the empty tomb, they added that Jesus had not been seen. Perhaps they wanted to continue, but there was a storm in their hearts, awakened by various and profound emotions that had thrown them into bewilderment and confusion. They were surrounded by a cloud of sadness; they kept silence.

The third traveler said: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Fools, or rather stupefied, inconsiderate (for such seems to us to be the better translation): Perhaps they were bitter words, yet they were necessary. There are some types of bitterness that comfort the soul; if it were not so, that tender and sensitive traveler would not have spoken that way. Prolonged afflictions stupefy, and comforts are useless unless a friendly and sure hand does not first shake that torpor and appeal to the old energy of the soul. Fools, stupefied, slow of heart, wake up and listen.

And He continued: "ought not Christ to have suffered all these things, and to enter into his glory?" And He immediately affirmed that what had happened was superior to the will of the magistrates and priests. A prompt recall to the power of God is the best antidote for the poison of depression that is caused by looking at the works of men. And while the two men spoke of Jesus of Nazareth, He spoke of the Christ. "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself..." it was a long and patient exposition of the scriptures. An

explanation for what happened was to be sought in the word of God. Jesus was putting under the eyes of their mind the writings that perhaps they had only read or heard superficially. Beginning from Moses: there is an order and it must be followed to have a clear understanding of the scripture.

And He spoke with extraordinary certainty, with profound understanding, passing from one writing to another, opening the divine book unto them. The two were drawn toward the unknown one by an irresistible power and they did not interrupt. Their hearts were burning with love, and as they continued to walk they felt the importance of that pilgrim growing. Each moment, His company became more intimate and interesting.

“And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and He made as if He would have gone further.” But the two did not want to lose His company. “But they constrained Him, saying, abide with us; for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.”

They *constrained* Him; they wanted Him at any cost. We need you; continue to speak of Him. And the unknown one, noting the sincerity and the zeal of their invitation stayed. “And He went in to tarry with them.”

We can easily see how the two offered Him the place of honor at the table. And seated at the table, perhaps they began to break the bread, when the unknown one made a solemn gesture and told them there was a duty to fulfill

before eating. They did not breathe and felt subjugated by an invisible force. He (the Lord) lifted His hand and raised a noble prayer of thanksgiving for the food, broke the bread and blessed it. No one had prayed this way. One alone was in the habit of blessing the bread before eating. And that unknown one could not be any other. He was, in fact, none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the powerful prophet, who had resurrected. Their eyes were opened. They raised their heads to meet the eyes of the master, but Jesus had disappeared. Perhaps we should place a period here. There are joys so suffocating that cannot be explained in words. What the two felt can only be imagined in part and the sacred writer does not attempt to analyze it.

“And they said one to another; did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the scriptures?” “And they rose up the same hour,” notwithstanding the night, their tiredness and in spite of the distance “and returned to Jerusalem.” They had seen and spoken with Jesus resurrected; with joy in their hearts, strength returned to their muscles and they began to run, notwithstanding the distance. They took the same road where their companion met them and comforted them and they returned to their friends to testify of the resurrected One.

“...And found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, saying, the Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way, and how He was known of them in the breaking of bread.”

Two transformations happened on the way to Emmaus. In their sad walk, the two whose eyes were closed because of preoccupation and sorrow, saw Jesus only as an ordinary traveler. However, after an extended conversation, a reverent listening and seeing the scriptures opened, they felt that the traveler's company was indispensable. At the end, at the moment of the benediction, they recognized that He was Jesus. His words made their hearts burn and the benediction completed the revelation.

And another transformation happened. The two left Jerusalem in the morning. They left like running away, with their heads bowed and sad, taking their painful remembrance far away. In the measure they went forward, their sadness disappeared. Influenced by their encounter with Jesus they returned immediately to Jerusalem, full of courage and ready to testify.

Let this be the lesson learned from the episode of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus: that is, *how much the company of Jesus can do*. With Him we will feel the rebirth of strength and energy that for a moment had been lost and we will hasten to run to places that we avoided before, to proclaim there the power of the Cross and the resurrection.

Chapter 36

LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, EVEN UNTO THE
END OF THE WORLD
(Matthew 28:20).

“Lo, I am with you always.” Reading literally, “I am with you all the days.”

These words follow the others of verse 19: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations...” “Go.” This is the command of a powerful Sovereign, who sends His ambassadors to other nations. Practically, He says to them: come with me to this work.

The most difficult hour had arrived for the disciples. The Lord Jesus gathered them around Himself and assured them that all power had been given to Him in heaven and on earth, and He imposed on them the greatest task that could be asked: “Go, teach all nations...”

No one, before or after Jesus, demanded so much. Men of great authority like Cyrus, Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon did not dare to even think of commanding others to conquer vast territories in their absence. And yet, Jesus ordered His disciples to conquer the entire world. Humanly speaking, His disciples were much less than the generals of those great leaders.

Go everywhere. How? Where are the means? But the Lord Jesus added immediately, “Lo, I am with you all

the days..." The strength for the extraordinary command derives from the extraordinary promise. Wherever, yes, but in the company of Jesus. Such an assurance, "I am with you always," is so exaggerated that judging it humanly, only a crazy person or God could promise so much. The words have a relative meaning, according to the importance of the one who pronounces them.

If someone else had demanded and promised what Jesus did, the answer of the disciples could not have been other than a smile of forbearance. But, by now, they knew Jesus well and trusted Him. He was the same tender friend who comforted them many times and who loved them till the end; and that was not all, because even the most affectionate and sincere friend does not dare to promise to be always in the company of those he loves. The disciples saw in Jesus, besides a friend, the powerful worker of miracles; and yet even this was not enough, because others had performed miracles without promising their disciples to be with them until the end of the world. They saw in Jesus the great martyr of Calvary, and even that was not enough. They admired the Savior who triumphed over death, Jesus resurrected, the same Jesus to whom was given all power in heaven and in earth. They could believe in such a one. The command "Go" was not impossible and the promise "always with you" did not seem absurd.

It should be noted that Jesus waited until that hour to say those powerful words to His disciples: "go...I am with you." He would not have been understood before.

Who were the disciples? They were people of little importance. To use an expression of the Old Testament, they were men of no value, yet it was precisely these “nothings,” made powerful by the strength of Christ and by His Spirit, that, with a courage that never failed, went around the then known world preaching the Gospel. And we should remember that the preaching of the cross had already penetrated in all the nations of the time by the end of the apostolic era.

In the history of the people of Israel we find examples useful to cite for the present meditation. In Horeb, the Lord appeared to Moses and commanded him to go to Pharaoh to free the Hebrews. “Who am I,” Moses exclaimed, “that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” And the Lord said: “Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.” (Exodus 3:11; 4: 12)

On the eve of the taking of Jericho, the Lord appeared to Joshua to remind him that in the difficult matter of the conquest of Canaan He had been with Israel. “I am with you.” These words are the key to the success that accompanies the men of the Lord in every age in undertakings that are absolutely above human strength.

Let’s travel with our minds to two miles from Jerusalem, to Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus loved Bethany, a place of tender remembrances and perhaps the only place where He enjoyed the comfort of friendship, and where He rested many times from the

trials of life and the ingratitude of men. In Bethany there was the tomb of Lazarus and the dwelling of people very affectionate to Him. Jesus gathered his beloved disciples. They asked Him when He would restore the kingdom to Israel, and Jesus answered that it was not for them to know the times or the seasons. They were told to wait in Jerusalem for the promise, and they would be witnesses for Him in the entire world. (Acts 1:6-8) He lifted up His hands to bless them; He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

There are scenes that the sacred writer does not attempt to describe and we also leave them to the imagination of the devoted reader.

The first thought of Jesus in heaven was toward those simple men of little importance whom He had left on earth; but before entering into the glory of the universe, He hastened to send them a message, not by angels, but by men.

“And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:10, 11)

To give a pale image, let us think of a very dear person who leaves us, and as soon as possible, from the first

convenient stop, sends a very tender message of assurance and love.

“I am with you all the days.” In the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, Jesus Christ was not speaking only to the eleven gathered on the Mount of Olives. *Each one of us has a place to occupy in the army of the Lord and a work to accomplish*, and to each one of us is the promise: “*I will be with you all the days.*” And He is with us if we want Him, and if we act in such a way that He is able to come into our company. But it is still necessary that we see in Jesus the person that the disciples saw: a friend and comforter, the powerful one, the martyr, the savior and the prince of life because it is only Jesus who can say: “I am with you all the days” and He is willing to say it only to those who recognize Him as such. “And, lo.” There is great strength in the expression “and, lo.” It was as if Jesus feared that the disciples would forget, and he was trying to awaken them to a continuous attention, to the invisible presence of the Lord in the midst of the distractions of other presences.

“All the days;” the protection of friends, the sweetest affections, material means at our disposal and many other things are not always with us. There is a law that everything must obey, that says: “enough”; but Jesus Christ is superior to this law and promises to be with us always. He does not get tired of our company; and if we proclaim Him in the difficult hours, He will continue to be with us in the hours of glory. We close with the words of the apostle: “If so be that we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.” (Romans 8:17)

Chapter 37

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, repent...” (Acts 2:37, 38)

When I think of the work that was accomplished on the day of Pentecost, I feel confused; but just as in every phenomenon one must seek the cause, the reason for the success on the day of Pentecost can be found in the preparation. That is, in the three years the disciples spent with Jesus, in profound remembrance of the cross, in seeing Jesus resurrected, in the still engraved memory of His last teachings, of the forty days after His resurrection and in the continuous echo of the commission “go ye therefore, and teach all nations”... accompanied by the promise “and, lo, I am with you in all the days, even unto the end of the world.” The reason for success can also be found in the patient work in waiting for the promise of the Father in Jerusalem. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

So the Holy Spirit came upon the Church, and the old men, with a new power, began the work of Christianity. This work of the disciples is traced in the great lines of the scripture. Strangers that had assembled in Jerusalem heard them speak in their own language. “And they were all amazed and were in doubt, saying one to another, what meaneth this? Others mocking said, these men are full of new wine.” It is a rare ability to describe indirectly, to make us look at something across the stupor of the listeners. There truly are events so great that they must be described in a reflected manner. The multitude was filled with stupor and remained uncertain. They heard new words, with a new accent, from men whose attitude they marveled at. There was such a complexity of enthusiasm, courage, joy and strength in the disciples that the people paid attention, even though some added “they are full of new wine.” It is good to contemplate serenely how those men were agents of a marvelous force and to learn how only persons who depend on the Holy Spirit can attract and move multitudes.

But the audience of the Pentecost was called to go from one marvel to another. One of the disciples came forward and attracted attention more than others. It's only possible to imagine the sound and strength of his voice since the orator completely dominated his

listeners. "But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: for these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel..." and he went directly to the subject of interest, and that is: "ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by Him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and for a foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that He should be holden of it... This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are also witnesses... Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." Notice the courage and the firmness: "have slain-you have crucified—that one, Etc." And yet there was no cry of protest, since it seemed that the listeners and the speaker were bound by a gigantic force.

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do?" "Pricked in their heart." It is the heart that must first be interested: pricked, wounded, they felt the pain. What did they do? Did they applaud? No, the scripture does not say that. Were they making comments while the apostle was

speaking? Not even. They were nailed to the heart of that discourse, and they listened to him motionless. Did they hurry to congratulate themselves, calling Peter a great preacher? No, pricked, wounded, they spoke, and I seem to hear more cries than words. What had wounded them? It was their sin that was revealed and the immense love of Jesus who died for them. Under that conviction they cried as only a people looking for salvation from immediate ruin can cry out. What did they say? They wanted the remedy. It seemed that they were saying: we have understood who Christ is and who we are. "What must we do?" *We* should do, not another for us.

That discourse awakened a fire. There are some events that prick directly in the soul. By the bedside of a dear one who is dying, facing a sentence of condemnation, at the sight of an imminent danger, the normal pattern of life is violently interrupted and the heart is broken. "Pricked in the heart, crying out: what must we do?" It is a direct question, to which a direct answer follows: "Then Peter said unto them, repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost..." "And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, save yourselves from this untoward generation."

"Repent." It is the third *repent* of the New Testament. The first *repent* was pronounced by the severe voice of John the Baptist and marked the end of the old dispensation and the meeting of the new. "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2)

The second was pronounced by Jesus, and brought the announcement of the Gospel. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the Gospel." (Mark 1:15) The third was pronounced by Peter on the day of Pentecost. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...;" the message was inculcating the acceptance of the work completed by Christ. But all three "repent ye" have the same meaning: "change the mind."

In all three occasions there was an appeal to a rigorous examination of one's own conscience to then turn one's attention to something else.

Peter said "repent." Everyone had to change their mind. There were certain moral men among the listeners, yet that "Repent ye" was addressed to everyone without distinction of social conditions, culture or reputation. Repent from what? How do you know, Peter? The Holy Spirit spoke to him and told him that the human heart has need of repentance.

Every one of you; each, each one for himself; our souls are separate and the responsibilities are distinct. We die one by one and we are judged one by one. After repentance, the baptism. Baptized in what? In the name of Jesus Christ, saying that a new covenant was being established on the name of Jesus Christ. Why? In remission of sins. Of what sins? Under the work of conviction of the Holy Spirit, each one who asked, examined himself and felt like a sinner. Nothing else, nothing. It was a simple answer, direct and powerful.

“And ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Our hearts must be delivered from something and occupied by something else. Repent, be baptized, and you will receive the Holy Spirit: three stages. And the final aim? The apostle does not say it, but it is understood in the words “you will receive the Holy Spirit.” He will take care of you if you surrender to Him and accept His guidance. And those words of Peter had to be put into practice quickly. All evangelization should be like this, direct to the hearts of the listeners. “Hear, repent,” and Peter continues: “for the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

And it is not enough; to the message Peter united the exhortation. It seemed that the listeners who had been touched in their conscience were going to bend to follow that counsel, but a force was still holding them back. Therefore, “with many other words did he testify and exhort.”

Men do not repent and yield to the work of the Lord easily; it is not enough that they understand the Gospel, and they desire to follow it; it is necessary that they decide immediately. If they put it off, they will quickly forget even the message. That’s why there was that exhortation; it seemed that the orator was encouraging them a little with persuasion, a little with protests; and when he had nothing more to say he concluded: “Save yourselves from this untoward generation.”

“Save yourselves.” As if he wanted to say, I am speaking in your interest; your souls are in danger. In order to have an idea of the force of this exhortation, think of a storm or a fire. Here it was a question of the fire or storm of sin. “Save yourselves.” It’s not a question of accepting Christ as a favor in order to please the orator. No, it was for their salvation. The advice is to all; let whoever wishes save himself while they have time. In this perverse generation there are many things that seem good, and yet they are told to save themselves, run to the refuge that is Christ, the only way of escape. May everything be lost, may your life be saved.

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” Who? Those who received the word. Perhaps there was someone that had cried “crucify him.” The people were of diverse conditions: some, perhaps, had families far away. Did they say, let’s go home to ask our relatives and then we will get baptized? They did not think they had time; they were touched in their heart and moved by the Holy Spirit, in answer to the cry “save yourselves.” It was necessary to act. And they moved, almost three thousand persons; in groups, ten here, twenty there, came forward, without asking their neighbor, each one deciding for himself, each one voluntarily. They ran to the apostles, were baptized and added that day to the Church. They left their house without a care in the world to enjoy a great feast. When the apostles began to speak, some were amazed and some believed they were drunk, but the people were touched by the direct message and they

were converted and baptized. In the morning they were the "Ye" of the hearers, in the evening with the Apostles they were the "We" of the Church which was beginning the glorious work of propagating the Christian faith.

A few words in conclusion. The Bible is the book of penitence. However, it is not easy: it requires the renunciation of things that are very dear, and above all, it requires abandoning our will to divine direction.

Another reflection: In Exodus 32:28 we read that after the proclamation of the law, about three thousand people were killed because of disobedience; after the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ, at the inauguration of the new dispensation, in one day, three thousand persons were saved. Also, in the siege of Jerusalem, one million or more Jews perished, but no Christians. The Christians were in a safe place, and among them there were certainly some who were converted on the day of Pentecost.

"Save yourselves from this perverse generation," warns us that everything is destined to perish, and only those shall be saved who put themselves in the safety of the arms of love of the Son of God.

Chapter 38

ST. PAUL IN ROME

“We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee...” “...but as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against.” (Acts 28:21, 22)

The primary scope of this meditation is to bring encouragement to tired Christians, not so much for trials and persecutions they face, as for the indifference that surrounds them.

Of all the conspiracies, perhaps the most humiliating is silence.

Focusing our attention on the two verses cited above, it seems to me that we should pay homage to one of the many virtues of Apostle Paul, because great characters should not be studied so much in their solemn and difficult moments, as in certain dark hours when others would lose courage and their ideal would fade. Truly strong souls overcome those gray moments by patience and perseverance; at other times, they have shown heroic firmness against the fierce contrast of life.

In verses 21 and 22 of Chapter 28 of Acts of the Apostles we see Paul in one of these moments, full of discouragement. We will attempt to write a few reflections. The dream of the Apostle was finally realized; for many years his thoughts had been fixed on the capitol of the world and finally he was a few miles

from Rome, after having escaped many dangers, from his arrest in Jerusalem till the shipwreck. He was coming from a long, very uncomfortable trip, but felt he was ready and was anxiously waiting to see the proud city of the Caesars spread out under his eyes.

Paul was older in years and in poor health, but he had grown in faith and experience. More than ever, Paul was disposed to undertake the missionary work in Rome with his old energy. Others before him had desired to see the eternal city and some would have liked to return amid shouts of triumph. But this time it was a new conqueror that arrived, and his entrance was quite different from that of military heroes.

Having heard of his arrival, some of the brethren went out as far as The Appian Way to meet Paul. The brethren looked among the group of prisoners and distinguished an older, more tired one, and they saw that his arm was chained to the arm of a soldier. It was Paul of Tarsus who arrived in Rome, tied like a criminal.

When Paul saw them he thanked God and took courage. These two words, "took courage" describe the tiredness that had almost exhausted him. In that group of believers, on Italian soil, Paul saw the connecting thread of the preaching of the cross that was spreading everywhere.

Paul arrived in Rome and was allowed to live apart from other prisoners with a soldier guarding him. Ironically, Paul had to pay rent for his prison.

“And it came to pass that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together...” (v. 17) “After three days,” the usual brief language is rich in meaning. Paul must have been very tired, because he remained inactive three days; he had never granted himself so long a rest. Those who have experienced an intense work of body and soul will understand Paul’s prostration. Great men have never conceded many hours for rest and Paul’s reaction finally came and he was lying down exhausted, while in his indomitable soul he was working out a new plan of action.

He called the chief Jews to explain why he was in Rome. Paul said he desired to speak with them, and stated he was in chains for the hope of Israel. We can imagine the expression on the face of the great Apostle and the emotion that accompanied his words and we can only guess how he must have felt at the frozen answer of the Jews.

“And they said unto him: We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came showed or spoke any harm of thee.”

The missionary work of over twenty years was received so coldly! Elsewhere, Paul had encountered the hatred of his fellow countrymen and his discourses had often aroused violent scenes, but nothing like that happened in Rome. They knew absolutely nothing of him; they were immersed in their own affairs, and perhaps they did not even care to know if Paul existed. It was a cold

response, apt to quench the most ardent enthusiasm; not one word of interest, comfort, or sympathy toward the man who was came from a distance and had suffered so much. We know nothing, that's all.

Were they sincere? Did they really know nothing of Paul? It does not seem likely to us. At any rate, it is the impression of Paul that we are trying to analyze here. Their attitude must have broken the heart of that great one, and made him realize how in the skeptic capitol he was facing a fiercer and more powerful enemy: *indifference*.

As if their answer to St. Paul was not enough, the Jews added: "But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

"Spoken against everywhere." If we are able to reconstruct the scene from the brief account, we understand that this expression had to prove bitter for the apostle Paul. The Jews did not offer any personal opinion about the rising Christianity; they heard something, here and there, and, considering themselves to be strangers to the Christianity movement, they limited judgment of others. And while they said they knew nothing of Paul and his work, instead, they showed that they knew as much of Christianity as was needed to humiliate and discourage.

"Spoken against everywhere." It's almost as if they wanted to say to him: Is it worth it for you to be here,

chained, in such a sad position, representing an idea that is contradicted everywhere? Poor Paul, yours is a vain work!

We have read of great missionaries who were received with great interest and who spoke to large audiences. Behind Paul, however, there was no help of any missionary society. His work in Rome was not announced by any advertising, and he enjoyed only a limited liberty for proclaiming the triumph of his ideal.

The attitude of the Jews must have passed over Paul like a frozen wind; but it was only an instant. He recovered his old courage and heroism immediately and his courageous and persevering faith drove him to immediately assign a day to the Jews to witness to them about the kingdom of God, and to persuade them about Jesus. On the assigned day, Paul spoke to them; and in Rome, as elsewhere, he saw the dualism, the effect of his powerful preaching; some believed, and others no. At the end the Jews left in discord, and Paul dismissed them with the words of the prophet: "Seeing ye shall see, and not perceive."

Without wasting time, Paul began his missionary work to the Gentiles. The beginning of Paul's work in Rome was humble, but it had immense results. He was always superior to his circumstances with his gaze fixed on the kingdom of God. Paul found something positive even in the presence of the soldier guard; we read in his letters how many disciples he later gained for the cross.

That prison, which for others would have been a source of desperation and cursing, became a sanctuary for Paul. The letter to the Philippians, precisely about his imprisonment, is the most encouraging writing that came from the hands of the apostle. In chains, forgetful of himself, Paul knew how to infuse joy and courage in the distant churches, and to thank God that his imprisonment had resulted in the greater advancement of the Gospel.

Chapter 39

THE SECOND MILE

“And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.” (Matthew 5:41)

At the end of a year, with a new year before us, the exhortation: “and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain,” seems to us to be proper since it helps us tolerate, with patience and love, many things that we had decided to no longer tolerate.

These words belong to the grandiose Sermon on the Mount, judged by Christians and unbelievers to be a masterpiece of eloquence and of the highest morality. Especially the last ten verses of chapter 5 of St. Matthew reach such a height that its image cannot be found elsewhere, not even in the literature of the Old Testament. In those ten verses, Jesus teaches a love that almost goes beyond human conception. We are taught to suffer with joy and patience and to overcome the pretensions of others by increasing our abnegations. We read: “Whosoever shall smite thee on the right check, turn to him the other also; and if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.”

These words, like all of the Sermon, were directed to a multitude, but especially to the disciples. To the disciples, the words must have sounded very strange,

accustomed as they were to hearing complaints about the local and foreign oppression. These words must have fallen like frozen drops on the ears of the hearers whose souls were hoping for someone who would vindicate their rights. Instead, the Master was commanding not only love, but ultimate abnegation. And the words still seem strange and weak to many so called sociologists, who pretend to renew society by methods entirely different from those suggested by the divine Master.

“And whosoever shall compel thee to go with him a mile, go with him twain.” These words were based on the custom that existed among the Persians and the Romans. When carrying their messages, the Roman and Persian messengers could stop passengers and carts and make use of them for part of their trip. The words of the Lord Jesus must have awakened a painful memory of foreign domination. To compel means to constrain, and the words translated “go with him,” have a very harsh sense. “Submit yourself, subjugate yourself.” So, if someone compels you for one mile, subjugate yourself and submit for two miles.

It is noteworthy that the Lord Jesus Christ was not speaking only of the Persian and Roman messengers that could compel. Jesus said: “whosoever,” whoever he may be, not only foreign oppressors or men of authority, but whoever it may be, and so a man of lesser authority would be able to impose on you to go one mile with him. Do not rebel, as you could in some cases, but go with him voluntarily for two miles instead of one. We want to consider this message of Jesus in relation to Christianity.

The work of a slave is strictly duty, while a free man has liberty. St. Paul does not say "I must," but he thanks the Lord for giving him the opportunity to serve Him. And the apostles before Paul thanked the Lord for being considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

If something is done unwillingly or within strict limits of duty it is oppressive. Beyond duty there is love, and one who works beyond duty shows that he is a free man. The words of the Lord Jesus Christ have a great application in all branches of life.

There are so many cases when someone can feel compelled for "one mile," and the best cure is to walk the second mile willingly. Perhaps it is a friend who was rude to you. Try the philosophy of "the second mile" with him and you will notice that it is better than it seemed at first; and, if it is not better than you believed, it can become such by your attitude; in any case, a great blessing will come upon you.

Since tyrannical oppression is present in many areas of life, it may be one of your superiors who compels you to "go one mile." Go the second mile, shout the words of the Master and on the second mile the attitude of your oppressor can change or become milder. Perhaps it is a fellow worker who does not like you and with whom you are obligated to work for one year. Well, try "the second mile" with him; perhaps you will learn to know his virtues, since in the first mile his defects appeared.

In many things the counsel of the Master resounds to our ear: go another mile. Courage! Many times we make resolutions like these: in the new year, I do not want to do this or that, but the end of the year comes, and, worse than losing patience, we resent the counsel; go forward another mile. Courage! Always have courage. The philosophy of the second mile is applicable in all our relations, domestic as well as social.

Many times the strength that compels us to walk one mile is an ideal. It can be a sense of virtue and honor or it can be the higher and more comprehensive ideal of Christianity. At times it seems that our strength fails and a rebellion is about to flare up suddenly and ruin the plan of our existence. And it will be a poor and oppressed one who will get tired of living honestly and seeing his little children grow weak from privation; or others who must submit themselves to multiple privations and have a constant ideal that they pursue. It seems that one can no longer endure and patience has reached its terminal point, but just when everything seems lost, a voice can be heard: Go ahead *still one more mile*. So day to day, year to year, supported by the invisible guide, always forward, mile by mile along the Christian pilgrimage; in this way, now running now walking, one goes to the end.

Looking back, when contemplating what the early Christians suffered, many marvel at how they had the strength. The secret is that they renewed their determination to continue *from mile to mile*. And truly, what man could remain steadfast in his honesty, if, for example, he knew that he and his wife and children must

live in a hovel for fifty years, always hungry and poorly dressed. What man would not rebel and feel drawn to crime? But the Lord knows our strength, and does not ask for more than another single determination: *the second mile*.

Many become tired in the first mile of Christianity: the fruits are bitter. I remember reading about a gardener who invited a boy to enter into the orchard to eat some apples. "I don't want any," answered the boy, "they are bitter." The gardener said to him: "those of the hedge are bitter, but inside the garden you will find the sweet ones." Those of the hedge are often bitter, but in the profound Christian life sweet fruits are gathered. Listen to what the Apostle has to say about some of these fruits: "the peace of Christ; the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge." (Ephesians 3:19 and Philippians 4:7)

Christian, forward! Still another mile. Don't fail in this new year; after all, it is not an eternity. Perhaps, before this New Year expires, many things will change; maybe this very year will be the end of your pilgrimage here, or the return of your Lord will happen. Courage, therefore, even in this other mile.

Don't get tired of doing good and praying. I read about a poor little boy who was praying for his father who was a drunkard and an atheist. The father did not want to pray and he threatened to put the boy out of the house. The little boy did not give up and one morning the enraged father, ill-treating the boy, put him out of the house; the boy was going away, praying. It was then

that the heart of the father was broken; he ran after his son, embraced him, and changed his life from that hour.

The philosophy of the second mile is that of Christianity. Jesus uses the instruments of humiliation as weapons of spiritual conquest. One cannot expect the abnegation of the second mile from a weak person. The passive strength of suffering and going forward is not a prerogative of the weak, but of the best character. To suffer with a smile, with forgiveness and love, is heroism superior to that generally appreciated by men. Does Christian religion authorize oppression? We hear this being repeated by some. It seems so, but only at a superficial glance. It is not so.

Jesus was speaking to people who were longing for political liberation. They dreamed of a warrior Messiah who would put in motion a political plan of immediate redemption. But He said nothing of politics, nor did the apostles after Him; rather, they commanded servants to obey their masters.

Reader, wait, do not judge. It is true that centuries have passed and Christianity has not broken the obvious chains; it has not loosed the bonds of slaves, but Jesus planted the idea in the bosom of humanity, more than anything, to end barbarity and slavery. And this thought of the Master of the power of passive force has required time to grow and to branch out. It has not grown or branched out entirely; the process is slow but sure.

One more word before we finish. Like many others, I am enraptured by the Sermon on the Mount from which the words of our text are taken; but, and I am happy I am not alone; I do not stop at the Sermon on the Mount.

Allow me two observations before finishing. The glory and the power of the Sermon on the Mount, allow me to say it, are loaned to it. Its pretenses would seem like vain paradoxes; that is, there must be absolute purity up to the most hidden thoughts, with abnegation and suffering. "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." These would seem like absurd pretenses if they were not seen in the light of Calvary. The light of the Sermon on the Mount comes from the Cross.

Also, the pretext that we have examined needs an example. I look around in vain to find one who has put the Sermon on the Mount entirely into practice. I say in vain, but I have found one exception. With His life, Jesus gave authority and vigor to those precepts. One mile after another, always voluntary for the new walk, He went forward in the great work of redemption. Ingratitude did not tire Him, and perhaps among the cruelest spectacles was having one who betrayed Him in His presence for three years. No one would have tolerated Judas for three years. Judas was with Jesus on His trips, in dining and under the same roof, but Jesus always moved forward.

And in all His life, the philosophy of the second mile appears evident to us, always present from His descent from heaven up to the humiliation of the cross.

I thank you therefore, oh Son of Man, because by your life and by your sacrifice I can have light and strength in your words: "Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain."

Chapter 40

TOWARD JERUSALEM
THE NEW NAME

“And the name of the city from that day shall be: The Lord is there.” (Ezekiel 48: 35)

Ezekiel is the prophet of hope. The words of the scripture cited above present a prophecy whose fulfillment is still in the future. The misery of the Jewish people painted a sad picture, but Ezekiel had the distant vision of the New Jerusalem and the revelation that it would have a new name: “The Lord is there.”

In every age, humanity has caressed the high ideal of carrying the divine in its bosom. God in the midst of men has always formed the supreme object of art and poetry. This ideal is expressed clearly by all people, even by the most ignorant. Some people do not understand that God is spirit and truth, and adorn their dwellings with pictures and images to which they attribute superhuman power. They surround themselves with these pictures and images as if providing a protection.

Undoubtedly, the clearest revelation of God in humanity was given to the Hebrew people; Jehovah living in the tabernacle and in the temple. The Lord promised Moses: “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” (Exodus 33:14) Ezekiel had the special task of announcing to the people that the presence of Jehovah

had gone away. The Hebrews had taken too much advantage of the Lord's presence, and the Lord passed through the temple, went out of the city, made a brief stop on the Mount of Olives, and then disappeared. This language is certainly quite imperfect in speaking of the divinity, and the meaning is symbolic.

Jerusalem did not want the Lord, and they suffered many calamities culminating in the destruction of their temple and imprisonment in Babylon.

Several years passed and the prophet Ezekiel, who had remained faithful to Jehovah, presented himself with a message of hope, rich in blessings and promises. Ezekiel had a vision. He was brought to the top of a very high mountain and saw a magnificent city spread at its feet, an immense city that had a colossal temple at its center. Although the temple seemed imposing and glorious to him, Ezekiel's attention was attracted by the fact that Jehovah lived there. The prophet wanted to know the name of this city, and came to know that it is: "The Lord is there."

Jerusalem means "vision of peace." The names of cities, like those of individuals, are given with a special purpose. They are suggestive, like the names Rome, Athens and Babylon. But, as a vision is different from reality, in that it precedes it and is an image of it, the earthly Jerusalem has always been quite far from representing a "vision of peace."

The aspirations of Judeo-Christians are turned toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of David and the prophets; even in its ruin, and perhaps more than ever, Jerusalem has attracted the attention of the world to itself.

In medieval days, during the Crusades, the cavalry went toward Jerusalem. Notwithstanding their errors and excesses, the Crusades represent a profound idea: Fierce, bold men left their leisure and love and were moving toward Palestine. They were happy to be able to die under the walls of the Holy City.

Jerusalem has always been the favorite dream of the Jewish people. Jews scattered throughout the world and united in a common ideal in Zionist assemblies, tearfully repeat the cry of hope: "next year at Jerusalem, next year at Jerusalem." Even today the heart of many Christians tends toward Jerusalem to visit those places where Jesus passed, and where (to quote the discordant words of writer E. Rean), humanity would like to come to kiss the imprint of his feet.

However, all that has been said describes an effort to seize the divine. Names and symbols, as much as they are suggestive, are not the reality. The new city seen by Ezekiel will no longer be a vision: the new name will not be part of the divine idea, but all of the ideal will be reached. Its name will demonstrate supreme happiness, "The Lord is there."

Believers assume many names and they accomplish many religious objectives. The ultimate ideal of the life of St. Paul, and many other men of God, was always to reflect the image of Christ in him to others. We also have the example of the Lord Jesus, whose aim was to reveal God to men: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

In the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, the departure of the Lord from Jerusalem left that city a prey to a sequence of ruins; likewise, in man, the departure and absence of the Lord brings a succession of sins. The apostle paints a dark picture of our soul deprived of the fear of God. (Romans 3:12-18)

One of the most significant expressions in the chapter that deals with the resurrection of Lazarus is the lament of Martha: "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." She knew that death would flee at the presence of Jesus. If Christ were always in us, we would never sin.

As the body loses its natural vigor it also loses its power of resistance and becomes a prey of the sicknesses that surround it; likewise, the soul that is deprived of the Lord is at the absolute mercy of evil.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, the name that He revealed to him had no resemblance to human things, but was an affirmation of being: "I am that I am." Likewise, in the vision of the prophet

Ezekiel, the new Jerusalem does not have a name that represents an ideal, but is called "The Lord is there."

Men closest to God have always represented the ideal of the divine. The presence of the Lord is the secret of the strength of a Christian and a Christian is a source of blessings for those near him.

The name of the city seen by Ezekiel does not originate from any secondary wonders, but from the presence of the Lord. Thus the believer manifests the presence of the Lord living in him, to those who are near him; this is the most eloquent demonstration and the best testimony.

Let's not try to impress people with our person, with some remarkable quality we possess; rather, let's act in a way that in meeting us, others will forget us and see the Lord in us. A measure of greater tendency toward Christian perfection is to abandon the desire to attract attention to ourselves. Great service is rendered to the cause of Christianity for whom it can be said: "The Lord is there."

Chapter 41

IN HIS NAME

“In the name of Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk.”
(Acts 3:6)

“Now Peter and John went up together into the temple, being the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms. And Peter fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. Then Peter said, silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk... and all the people saw him walking and praising God... and they were filled with amazement and wonder... and when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? Or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?... And killed the Prince of Life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And His name through faith in His name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.”

“In the name of Jesus.” It is good, first of all, to focus our attention briefly on the word “Name”.... There are

names that have more power than others: In the name of the king, say the officials of the Sovereign, in the name of the law, etc. The name assumes a special strength. But this gives only a pale idea of the power in the name of Jesus. "In the name of Jesus," has greater meaning than it is possible to write and perhaps imagine. It means, in the mind, by the command, for the love of Jesus, and above all by His redemption, and for Jesus himself. *In the name of Jesus* is a great expression, perhaps the most powerful in the scripture: so much so that by no other name can men be saved.

Many times, finding myself before a congregation to whom I have the honor to preach, I think: this group is united in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They sit quietly and reverently every week; they hear the voice of the minister, they go, they return. They are people of different social conditions and character and perhaps they would never meet together. They converge from different places, attracted by a single power, and drawn together by a single name: Jesus.

A lame beggar was carried to the gate of the temple of Jerusalem called Beautiful. Even those who are indifferent and adversaries of religion recognize that, as a rule, it is to the gate of the temples that unhappy people go for help. One does not see the poor extend their hand in front of banks. This inscription is posted on the door of many buildings: "Beggars are not admitted." And whatever one may say or think, beneficence is always close to religious sentiment. Many humanitarians do not want to acknowledge this; yet they have breathed, so to

speak, the religious atmosphere, so that, even in many unbelievers, humanitarianism is the effect of that religious sense that, willing or unwilling, surrounds them and has surrounded them.

The lame man at the gate of the temple of Jerusalem was accustomed, as are all beggars, to look attentively at all those who were entering, and to guess how generous their hearts would be from the expressions on their faces. The unhappy beggar noticed that two men were arriving and expected to receive something from them. When Peter and John commanded him to look on them, he gazed intently at them hoping to receive money. Nothing happened as expected; instead, the unexpected happened. The older one of the two spoke to him: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk."

These were new words to the beggar's ear. He, being lame, would be able to rise to his feet and walk, and only in the strength of a name! But before he could ask any questions, a generous hand took his right hand; he rose to his feet and began to walk. One moment earlier, the beggar was lame and now he was healthy and on his feet. Between these two conditions there was the command in the name of Jesus.

He had gone to the gate of the temple to receive alms, and had obtained the use of all his members. It often happens this way, we go to the Lord for one object and we receive another infinitely better.

It was natural for people to remain astonished; they were looking at the apostles. Peter hurried to say: "Why marvel ye at this? The name of Jesus hath made this man strong." Certainly, it is always thus; men look for human causes, and look astonished into the faces of this one or that one. They don't know that behind the event and the visible hand, there is One in whose name the event was made possible. And that is: *in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

"In the name of Jesus." These words have a stronger significance in the measure that we know the love of Christ. We are attracted mostly toward natural things and many times we judge by appearances. We see the hand and not the spirit. We remain marveled looking at a work of art; rarely do we think of the creator. Some have acquired some virtue and forget *from whom* and *for whom* they have it. In humility, the apostle turned the attention from him and said: "In the name of Jesus." Perhaps he never would have met the lame man some other way and meeting him, he may not have cared about him.

So it is for many things. Let's look around us. We see public charity in motion. Ambulances, hospitals, welfare offices: whatever the government may be, these things abound in Christian countries. We look back in history for the origins and source and we find that it is "In His name." In India, an immense number of orphans and widows are abandoned to poverty; but, little by little, in the measure that Christianity advances, there arise shelters and asylums for orphans, widows and sick ones.

Wherever there is goodness and virtue, behind it there is that extraordinary force "In His name." Hurried and tired pilgrim, in quenching your thirst at a fountain built by the generosity of another, stop; perhaps you will read these words: "In His name."

Look around you. We see much ingratitude, and yet how much tolerance! We see many private hands, many generous hands that work in the shadows for the redemption of their fellow men. In different places in various languages; everywhere, this gigantic force unites men "In His name." If it were not for it, many good things would not be, and hatred would be rampant among men.

Reader, you who are tired and overcome by the problems of life, to you this phrase is repeated: "In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." Forward, forward! Continuously draw strength in Him. And you, sinner, despised by others who are perhaps more guilty than you, rise from your condition and give ear to the voice of the spirit that says to you "In His name, rise up and walk."

Glorious name! Jesus gives us His name, and we become His personal representatives. In His name, we announce salvation to men. But in order to pronounce the name of Jesus, we need to feel His presence. Before His name comes to our lips, we must have Jesus in our heart. We have to identify ourselves with Him. We must forgive, love, suffer and fight in His name. In His

name many remain firm and faithful all their lives in a place of sacrifice and duty.

There is no other power of evangelization. The efforts of many are in vain, because it is "they" that seek to interest and persuade others. It is a work that doesn't bear fruit, or even if it does, it doesn't last.

I remember reading of an orphan child who was alone on a cold winter night in London. The child was sent to one of the places that Christian charity operates. It was called "House of Refuge." The child was told to use the words: "In His name." At the sound of those words, he was received and provided with food and clothing. A few days later, the child was struck by an ambulance and was taken to a Christian hospital. They told him there was no hope for him and he should prepare himself for his heavenly home. The child remembered the words that served him in the house of refuge; he learned from a Christian infirmary that the same passport was valid, and that it alone could serve him for entrance into the house of the Heavenly Father. "In His name." The child died with those words on his lips: "In His name."

Troubled reader, why do you seek to gain salvation trusting in your own strength? Is there perhaps any virtue where Jesus is not part of that virtue? Rather, can there be any virtue in us or any faith unless Jesus comes to live in us? Summarize the vast program of your life in a few words. You will be sustained in your work, saved from multiple temptations and guided until the end by a single force: "In His name."

Chapter 42

FORGETTING AND CONTINUING

“.....But this one thing I do, forgetting those which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14)

At the beginning of the New Year it is more than opportune to remember the words of the apostle as a program for our future. In mentally reviewing past things, there is much that needs correction, things that we cannot correct, and much to get rid of as useless impediments. St. Paul was writing to faithful Christians and it is precisely to them that he believed it necessary to say: “But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

It is a man who has reached the height of his career, rich in experience, who speaks. These are not the words of an enthusiast, although there is also a great enthusiasm. Paul's words mirror, rather, a conclusion of a program to which that great one had come, and like a traveler to a far country who lightens his load, he wanted to rid himself of many things that, although they were not bad, were not necessary for the goal that he had set for himself.

St. Paul confessed that he had not yet attained the prize, that he was not perfect, because there can never be perfection in these human bodies. Nor are his words those of a man who desires salvation. Paul never doubted his salvation. Instead, his words mark an important point in his career, in which, summarizing the past, he gathered his strength for the rest of the walk toward Christ, the last aim of his aspirations.

“This one thing I do.” Men begin to do many things and do not accomplish them; Paul, too, had begun many things after his conversion, although the center of his activity was Christ. Now, however, Paul says that he does only one thing. All the other things, although he does not condemn them, are nothing in comparison.

Paul had a persevering discipline; from year to year, with a slow but sure process, he had arrived to the point where he was able to exclaim: “One thing I do.” One, but he was doing it. An old proverb says: fear the man who thinks he knows everything and admire one who has a high objective and pursues it. Such was Paul, the specialist of Christianity.

“Forgetting those things which are behind.” The past is often a tremendous obstacle from which many never extricate themselves; they live annihilated by the failure of another time or rest serenely on old laurels. It’s similar to the story of a fallen nobleman who, although living in squalor, feeds on wind by repeating every day the list of his ancestors.

The apostle had to leave much behind that was an impediment to him after his conversion. Perhaps he had to leave behind the pride of being a Pharisee and a Roman citizen and of being an intellectual. Paul had to forget much, including the bitter discords and sharp controversies, and he had had to forget human ingratitude. Once Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, exclaiming that the more he loved them, the less he was loved by them. He had had to learn to forget himself, his great accomplishments, the sacrifices he sustained and his many successes. It is not easy to forget bad things, as it is not easy to forget the good that we have done; these are things that attach themselves to our memory.

“Give me a good pay,” a rhetorician said to the Athenian Themistocles; “pay me, and I will teach you the art of remembering.” The great exiled one replied: “Teach me, I beg you, the art of forgetting.” Themistocles had been banished from the city that he had defended and saved.

Paul had not yet learned the art of forgetting, but he was learning it, because he says “forgetting” almost as if saying he was forgetting more every day, putting some importune memory out of my mind. This “forgetting” was being accomplished in the school of Christ.

“And reaching forth unto those things which are before.” The angel told the family of Lot not to look back. “Unto those things which are before;” these words reveal a feverish anxiety of the great apostle to travel the distance that separated him from Christ.

Between the past and the future there must be a tomb, like that which was between Egypt and Canaan for Israel. The Hebrews left behind several tombs, from that of the unbelievers, to the other on the mountain where Moses died, the last symbolizing the death of human efforts and our self-justification.

The history of Israel can be synthesized in three words: Out, In and Forward. Out from Egypt; in Canaan; forward in the conquest of Canaan. These actions represent continued risk. There is much territory to conquer after our conversion and the horizon becomes always more vast. The key to those three commands, out, in and forward are two things: *faith* and *obedience*.

“Press toward the mark.” Forgetting and press seem to be a contradiction. In fact, if the apostle had many things he had to forget (those things which are behind) others he could not and should not forget...press denotes continuation. There are things we must never forget, and they are precisely those that we are more disposed to forget; that is, the great number of blessings we have received. For St. Paul, the blessings he received from his conversion on the way to Damascus to the end formed a luminous stripe that never left him.

“Toward the mark.” The image is taken from the Greek amphitheaters, where young men raced in order to win the prize. At a certain point toward the end of the course, written in big characters, were words that can be translated: “Hurry up.” It was a practical spirit that counseled that admonishment, because it is right at the

end that many fall and do not have the strength to continue. But Paul says courageously, "press toward the mark."

"For the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Each man needs an ideal. If there is no ideal at the base of our existence, we are dead. Our actions and the strength of our character are measured by what we aspire to. Humanity has never known a higher ideal than Christ.

It is useful to note that the word "anthropos" (man) means "look forward." A pagan writer, wanting to make the nobility of man stand out, emphasized that humans look forward and upward, whereas beasts look at the ground. The conclusion is that man is created for heaven. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a message rich in joy and hope. The apostle, in chains, forgets his imprisonment and instills courage in the brethren far away.

In the history of Alexander it is said that after dividing his empire to his generals, someone asked him what he had left for himself; smiling, the hero answered: "hope." And that was hope based on earthly things. A short time later, still young, Alexander died from a burning fever without having satisfied his immeasurable ambition.

Paul had his eye on a mark above this world and ran toward it indefatigably, always drawing vigor and courage from the intimate communion he had with God. His final goal was no less than Christ, the high calling of God.

Chapter 43

READY

“And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and ye shall eat it in haste; it is the Lord’s Passover.” (Exodus 12:11) A careful reader of the Bible will find some expressions repeated with insistence, such as: “Watch...;” “...of that day and that hour knoweth no man...,” and others which tend to make us live as though from one moment to another we must appear before eternity.

It is well known that important things often happen in a moment. Men of genius have the ability to quickly grasp the secrets of great events. “To decide in a moment the soil of human life and of human destiny.” (Goethe)

We will attempt to offer a few reflections on the text cited: “With your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand.” Such a command was given to the Hebrews on the occasion of the institution of the Passover, in the solemn hour in which Israel was being prepared by the Lord to leave Egypt. It is worth noting the attitude in which the Hebrews had to keep themselves while eating the lamb, like hurried pilgrims who wait for the order, from one moment to another, to leave for a long voyage. “With your loins girded.” We find an analogous expression in 1st Peter 1:13: “...gird up the loins of your mind,” to indicate how all the strength and energy of the mind must be kept in its place

in order to use it in the right way at the opportune moment. The girdle for the loins was necessary to hold up the long robes used by the Orientals. The orders were issued on time and were faithfully passed, with marvelous promptness and in secret, from family to family. The time had finally come; it was midnight. The homes of the Egyptians were wrapped in sleep; in the Hebrew homes there was fervent preparation. At a given hour they all ate lamb and were at attention for the signal to depart. Suddenly, a cry of pain was heard from the Egyptian homes: their firstborn were killed. The Egyptians, anxious to hasten the departure of the Hebrews, ran to Pharaoh, who until that moment would not let the Hebrews leave. Finally, even Pharaoh was shaken by terror; even his firstborn was dead. It was a general terror, and it seemed that death threatened everyone. Moses and Aaron were called to order the departure. The order passed in a flash from house to house, and all the Hebrews hastened to leave. They had everything with them, including the ashes of their patriarch Joseph; the moment was solemn.

They had never been all together; now the oppressed people rose like a single man. And everywhere there was an exchange of happy and subdued voices; the name of the Lord was in the heart and on the lips of all. They were ready, and at the last signal, they moved. It was an immense marching of people. They passed, leaving behind them the pain of four centuries. They passed at night, looking one more time at the giant pyramids and recalling the construction of which they and their ancestors had been employed. The history of what they

suffered ran like a flash through their mind. Besides the families, there were 600,000 men on foot, workers whose backs were bent from heavy work were now around their respective families. They were strong and resolute and they seemed to shake off the secular oppression by their free way of walking. No provisions had been made for laggards: everyone had to keep to themselves and be ready at the moment of departure. It was the Exodus. Israel moved toward Canaan; the oppressed have become a great nation. "Ready" was the password of the apostle St. Paul. He was ready to go to Macedonia and Rome to be offered. Many times, looking at enormous waves of people, I think if a powerful voice should command the people to stop and cry out "in an hour you will all die," the aspect of the crowd would be quite different. The fervor of mundane interests would disappear in a flash. Desperation and terror would invade many and most people would think painfully about their trip to eternity. On the face of some, the glory of the certainty of the love of God would irradiate, as in the epoch of the martyrs, when the Christians were giving blessings while dying, ready to meet the Lord face to face.

Many put off the definitive hour of their conversion and consecration. "Later" is one of the most insidious suggestions that Satan whispers in one's ear; whereas the invitation of the Lord is: "*Now*," "*come now*." In Luke 12:36 we read: "be like men that wait for their Lord." Now it is certain that no one can be found perfect, but it is likewise true that we can all be found diligent in working toward perfection, intent on undressing the old

man and dressing the new man, in a continuous growth toward a complete sanctification.

It is said that at the first act of breaking off relations between France and Prussia, the sovereign of Prussia hurriedly called his top general to call together that same night the highest governing body to study the best plans for an imminent military campaign. The sovereign and his generals were surprised when they saw the aged top general, tranquil and serene, pull out some packages of documents, consigning them to the various commanders, each containing detailed plans for the movements that were to be made. They were the precise orders for the movement of the Prussian army. The old general had guessed three years before that a war with their powerful neighbor was possible and he had taken the time to study the fortresses at the borders and to outline, with precise calculations, every move to be accomplished. The war found him ready. In a few months the German army was under the walls of Paris. And the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war was due in large part to this readiness. This is a grand lesson that makes us reflect again on the instability of human things and the transient nature of our existence.

Before this day ends let us fall on our knees and be reconciled to God by the cross of Christ, as though our life were to end today, or as if this should be the night of the coming of the Son of Man.

THE END

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