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The Lamp That Never Goes Out: The Confession at Caesarea and the Transfiguration

At Caesarea, Peter did not understand that following Jesus entails self-giving and sacrifice. On Mount Tabor, however, he began to grasp that Christ's glory passes through suffering and that the cross is not the end, but the passage to the resurrection.

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Peter probably felt out of place. As he climbed Mount Tabor with Jesus, he wrestled with something within himself, suffering because he did not understand. Without a doubt, Jesus wanted to show him a special sign of appreciation by calling him, along with James and John, to accompany Him. He had probably been feeling uneasy for days, ever since that episode in Caesarea Philippi. Why had Jesus foretold that He would have to be put to death? Why had He rebuked Peter so harshly?

Praise

They had just arrived in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus, gathering his disciples, asked them, *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* They all began to share what they

had heard, perhaps with a smile on their faces: *Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.* Then the Lord surprised them with another question, this time a more personal one: *But who do you say that I am?* (Mt 16:13-15).

Silence fell. No one dared to answer. Peter, however, spoke up: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Mt 16:16). He may not have thought that he was saying anything remarkable; he had simply voiced aloud what they all believed in their hearts. Surely they had discussed it many times, but always in private, in the atmosphere of trust that arose when they talked among themselves at night, trying to explain the Master's preaching to one another.

Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, Jesus replied, *for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my*

Father who is in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Mt 16:17-18). Perhaps the apostle did not fully grasp the significance of this revelation from the Lord. But one thing must have been clear to him: he, Peter, was to be a firm support for the Messiah. Jesus wanted to count on him for something great, something that would challenge even the power of Hell.

Today, too, Christ continues to call people to collaborate with Him in the work of redemption: “We are children of God. —Bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed. The Lord uses us as torches, to make that light shine out... It depends on us that many should not remain in

darkness, but walk instead along paths that lead to eternal life.”^[1] —

Sensitive to the things of God

Peter must have felt a certain pride upon hearing that praise. However, he grew uneasy when the Lord *began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise after three days (Mk 8:31)*. That could not happen. If He was the Messiah, as He had just confirmed to them, He was supposed to liberate Israel, drive out the Romans, and restore the kingdom of David. How could that be possible if his own people were going to condemn Him? It made no sense. And Peter, emboldened by the recent commendation, felt he had to speak up.

In a way, the apostle's way of thinking still persists today. Suffering is often associated with failure. If

someone embarks on a path and encounters obstacles, they might think they have made a mistake or grow discouraged because things are not unfolding according to their plans. That is why, when Peter rebukes Jesus for what He has just said, the Lord replies, *Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking as God does, but as human beings do* (Mk 8:33).

Fear, despair, and doubt also arise as a consequence of the devil's influence in the world and in each of us. Sometimes he tempts us to give up, or robs us of our peace when something in our lives fails to meet our expectations. Thinking as God does, however, means discovering Christ's presence in every situation, both in joy and in suffering. "No man, whether he be a Christian or not, has an easy life. To be sure, at certain times it seems as though everything goes as we had planned.

But this generally lasts for only a short time. Life is a matter of facing up to difficulties and of experiencing in our hearts both joy and sorrow. It is in this forge that man can acquire fortitude, patience, magnanimity and composure.”^[2] —

Thus, in times of difficulty, we can renew our commitment to being a “rock:” these circumstances are not signs that we have failed in our mission, but opportunities to mature in our vocation, to abandon ourselves into God’s hands, and to place our hope in Him. “At times we go through moments of darkness in our personal, family or social life, and we fear there is no way out. We feel frightened before great enigmas such as illness, innocent pain or the mystery of death. In the same journey of faith, we often stumble encountering the scandal of the cross and the demands of the Gospel, which calls us to spend our life in

service and to lose it in love, rather than preserve it for ourselves and protect it. Thus, we need a different outlook, a light that illuminates the mystery of life in depth and helps us to move beyond our paradigms and beyond the criteria of this world.”^[3] —

Peter needed more time to acquire that divine perspective. To help him, Jesus would ask him, a few days later, to accompany Him up Mount Tabor.

The last word

Peter had never heard such a reproach. Not even the Pharisees had been rebuked so directly. In the days that followed, he would not stop thinking about the conversation. From being the “rock” that would withstand hell, he had become “Satan.” As much as he had delighted in Jesus’ praise, he was pained by the reproach. He tried to understand the reason for the Lord’s reaction,

without success. And like him, the other apostles would also struggle to understand that episode. “We can imagine what must have happened in the heart of his friends, of those close friends, his disciples: the image of a strong and triumphant Messiah is put into crisis, their dreams are shattered, and they are beset by anguish at the thought that the Teacher in whom they had believed would be killed like the worst of wrongdoers.”^[4] —

The apostle knew that Jesus loved him. Moreover, the fact that Jesus asked Peter to accompany Him to the mountaintop, along with James and John, showed that He fully trusted him. He had called him Satan, yes, but He had not distanced Himself from him, nor had He said that he would no longer be his rock. And later on — though Peter did not yet know it — the Lord would confirm him as the head of the Church,

despite his threefold denial during the Passion. “Experience of sin, then, should not make us doubt our mission. True, our sins can make it difficult to recognize Christ. That is why we must face up to our personal miseries and seek to purify ourselves. But in doing this, we must realize that God has not promised us a complete victory over evil in this life. Instead he asks us to fight.”^[5] —

When they reached the summit of Tabor, Peter paused to contemplate the view. Perhaps he recalled those moments when the prophets of old had encountered God on the heights of a mountain. A place like that, from which one could behold the vastness of creation, a world stretching beyond the horizon of one’s vision, inevitably leads one to reflect on the greatness of God.

Suddenly, Peter realized something was happening with Jesus. *As He was*

praying, the appearance of his face changed (Lk 9:29); his face shone like the sun (Mt 17:2). Also, his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them (Mk 9:3). The three apostles saw two men appear beside Jesus and begin speaking with Him. They realized it was Moses and Elijah, appearing in glory, and they were speaking of His departure, which He was about to fulfill in Jerusalem (Lk 9:30-31).

As he listened to them speak, Peter might have remembered that the Scriptures had already foretold that the Messiah would suffer: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter (Is 53:7). They have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing (Ps 22:18-19). Now*

everything made sense. At last, he began to grasp the meaning of those mysterious words that had led him to rebuke Jesus. The Messiah would indeed be a king, but not in a human sense: He would be a crucified king. “His face radiant and his garments glistening, which provide a preview of the image as the Risen One, offer to those frightened men the light, the light of hope, the light to pass through the shadows: death will not be the end of everything, because it will open to the glory of the Resurrection. Thus, Jesus announces his death; he takes them up the mountain and shows them what will happen afterwards, the Resurrection.”^[6] The frightening cross, then, would not have the last word. This is what the Lord meant when He rebuked Peter for thinking as men do, rather than as God does. For Peter, crucifixion was a sign of death and failure, but for Jesus, it would be a sign of life and salvation.

In the darkest night

When Moses and Elijah finished speaking, Peter could not contain himself: *Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You wish, I will put up three shelters: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah* (Mt 17:4). Any of us would have made the same offer.

When we clearly perceive God's closeness, we experience a joy we wish would last indefinitely.

Something similar happens when we enjoy a particularly pleasant moment: days of rest, family gatherings, outings with friends...

But all these things, like the episode on Tabor, have a beginning and an end. Trying to make them last forever is not only impossible but would also detach us from reality and prevent us from accepting those times when God's kingship seems hidden with serenity and peace.

Jesus allowed Peter, James, and John to witness his glory as a foretaste of the Passion so that they could endure it with faith and hope in the resurrection. “Jesus wants this light to illuminate their hearts when they pass through the thick darkness of his Passion and death, when the folly of the Cross becomes unbearable to them. God is light, and Jesus wishes to give his closest friends the experience of this light which dwells within him. After this event, therefore, he will be an inner light within them that can protect them from any assault of darkness. Even on the darkest of nights, Jesus is the lamp that never goes out.”^[7] —

When the cross appears in our lives, we can recall all the times we’ve been with Christ on Tabor, feeling the joy of walking with Him. And even then, though we may feel that these memories belong to a past that will not return, we know that God

never lets go of our hand.

“Sometimes, when things turn out the very opposite of what we intended, we cry out spontaneously: ‘Lord, it's all going wrong, every single thing I'm doing!’ The time has come for us to rectify our approach and say: ‘With you, Lord, I will make steady headway, because you are strength itself, *quia tu es Deus fortitudo mea.*’

“I have asked you to keep on lifting your eyes up to Heaven as you go about your work, because hope encourages us to grasp hold of the strong hand which God never ceases to reach out to us, to keep us from losing our supernatural point of view. Let us persevere even when our passions rear up and attack us, attempting to imprison us within the narrow confines of our selfishness; or when puerile vanity makes us think we are the centre of the universe. I am convinced that unless

I look upward, unless I have Jesus, I will never accomplish anything. And I know that the strength to conquer myself and to win comes from repeating that cry, ‘I can do all things in him who strengthens me,’ words which reflect God's firm promise not to abandon his children if they do not abandon him.”^[8] —

Peter was still speaking when a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said: ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!’ (Mt 17:5). The three disciples, frightened by what they had just heard, fell face down. Jesus approached them and, touching them, said: *Get up, and do not be afraid (Mt 17:7).*

As they descended the mountain, Peter meditated on all he had witnessed over the last few days. He began to understand that *the*

sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8:18): however much the Messiah must suffer, his victory will be far greater. But he still had a long way to go before fully grasping the meaning of these events.

Many years later, in a time of constant threat to the nascent Church, Peter would write a letter to the first Christians, encouraging them not to lose hope amid difficulties...

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice borne

from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Pt 1:16-19).

[1] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 1.

[2] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 77.

[3] Francis, Angelus, 28-II-2021.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 114.

[6] Francis, Angelus, 28-II-2021.

[7] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 4-III-2012.

^[8] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 213.

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