

# Combat, Closeness, Mission (14): The Place of Encounter

“Talk with our Lord; tell Him: ‘I’m tired, Lord. I’m at the end of my strength. Lord, this isn’t going well. How would you do it?’” (St Josemaría).

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Being famous is no easy thing: people seek you out everywhere, and sometimes you can’t find a way to slip away for a moment of peace. This often happened to Jesus. That’s

why He would sometimes avoid the cities or withdraw with his apostles to places where He was less well-known (though this was not always successful). One such moment was when they went to Phoenicia, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, hoping to go unnoticed...

## **A current of mutual trust**

Near those cities, they encounter a Syrophenician woman who was suffering greatly because her daughter was possessed by an especially violent demon. This mother needs help, and she's heard of Jesus. So she begins crying out to Him, begging for his compassion. But the Gospel tells us that *He did not answer her a word (Mt 15:21–23)*.

The disciples are puzzled: how can Jesus ignore such persistent pleading? After a while they go to Him and say, *Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us*. But the

Lord not only doesn't grant their request; He seems to reject it outright: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* The mother, full of anguish and love for her daughter, refuses to be discouraged. She throws herself down at Jesus' feet, blocking his way. She won't let the Lord pass her by: *Lord, help me!* (Mt 15:23–25).

The intensity of the scene might make the apostles think that now, at last, Jesus will listen to her. But his reply is even more surprising. While she is still prostrate before Him, Jesus says: *It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.* The woman still doesn't give up. There is no anger or resentment in her response, only deep humility: *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table* (Mt 15:26–27).

Beneath this dialogue flows a current of mutual trust. The Lord knows the boldness of her faith, and she places all her confidence in the goodness of his heart... She doesn't know it yet, but in addition to granting her request, God will also use her to form his disciples. Through this woman, Jesus is preparing the hearts of the Twelve for the apostolic horizons that will soon open up before them. The ones who will be sent to preach the Gospel to the whole world are beginning to see how a pagan woman can have more faith in her heart than a rabbi... Or even than themselves, who spend every day with Jesus.

Moreover, in the course of her conversation with Jesus, this woman reveals some of the key attitudes of prayer: the humility of knowing we need help, and unshakable trust in the love God has for us, even when He seems silent. Perhaps Evagrius

Ponticus had someone like her in mind when he wrote: “Do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer.”<sup>[1]</sup>—

Let us return to the climax of the conversation. Jesus has sustained this “pedagogical tension” with the woman and with his disciples for as long as possible. Now, faced with the simplicity of her words about the crumbs under the table, He reveals his true feelings: ‘*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*’ *And her daughter was healed at that very moment (Mt 15:28).* The faith of this mother, her prayer filled with perseverance and humility, must have made a deep impression on the apostles.

At the same time, this woman, though a foreigner, symbolically

represents the whole People of God. In her, we see once more that mysterious struggle in which Jacob wrestled with God. As a result of that struggle, Jacob “wrestled” a blessing from God, and with it, a new name. Israel means *he who has struggled with God* (cf. Gen 32:25–30), marking a new mission in his life. Something similar happens here between Jesus and the woman: a kind of wrestling, a struggle, a test of her faith and perseverance. Her gesture of falling at the Lord’s feet to stop Him from passing by is a beautiful expression of persevering prayer; one that doesn’t give in to difficulty. And, just as with the ancient patriarch, this struggle ends in God’s blessing: He praises the mother’s faith and frees her daughter.

## **In an ongoing conversation**

“The ‘spiritual battle’ of the Christian’s new life is inseparable

from the battle of prayer,” we read in the *Catechism*.<sup>[2]</sup> This woman received abundant graces through that battle: her personal relationship with God deepened, and only good things can come from such a relationship. That’s why the path to holiness lies more in expanding our dialogue with the Lord to encompass everything we do than in striving to reach a series of challenges or levels of virtue that may not even be meant for us, or at least may not come about overnight.<sup>[3]</sup> In reality, one may lead to the other, but there is a clear primacy of grace between them, and so also a primacy of prayer.<sup>[4]</sup> *For apart from me, our Lord says, you can do nothing (Jn 15:5).*

Let’s picture, for example, someone deciding to bring a bit more order to their life. They resolve to go to bed earlier, at a time that allows them to rest enough, so they can be more productive at work, be in better

spirits, and make time to pray each morning. That's a great step, and they may manage to do it one day, or even two, but on the third, they slip up, or get swept away by the chaos... As with any project, we will meet with victories and defeats in our struggle. But results are not the most important factor. What matters is not so much the score of wins versus losses, but how we fight – or more precisely, *with whom* we fight. The battle can be fought alone, relying mainly or almost entirely on one's own strength; or, it can become part of a relationship with God, turning that goal into a topic of conversation with the Lord: "Lord, I think You want me to get to bed earlier too, but You'll need to help me..."; "Jesus, put love and hope in my heart... Help me get excited about this: if I'm a bit more orderly, I can do a lot of good"; "Lord, forgive me because today the chaos got the better of me; help me more"; "Jesus, I'm going to offer this

up for other people who are also struggling”

Here we are seeing a struggle centered on God. Our dialogue with God is nourished by whatever we have at hand, and vice versa: the ordinary things around us open up in our relationship with God, to let his grace in. The Gospel shows us that, for any of our resolutions to be truly effective, they must become the subject of many conversations with God. Thus we will open all the areas of our life to that vast horizon of meaning that is our relationship with the Lord. “If we are working with Christ, all our efforts are meaningful, even when we do not achieve the results we were hoping for, because the echo of the deeds we do for love always reaches Heaven.”<sup>[5]</sup>

What really brings joy to a father or mother’s heart is not so much that their little child gets everything right,

but that the child looks at them from time to time and smiles; that they share their little battles. Children, though they try hard, often make mistakes... but they are always seeking to dialogue with their parents through glances or gestures, and always with their heart. That current of love and communication is what their parents want most. Our Father God longs for the same thing from us: a current of trust, of love, of communication. And our whole life is the setting in which this trusting relationship with our Father God should unfold. Saint Josemaría encouraged everyone to walk this path: “Talk with our Lord; tell Him: ‘I’m tired, Lord. I’m at the end of my strength. Lord, this isn’t going well. How would you do it?’”<sup>[6]</sup> —

## **Living from that relationship**

The apostles, perhaps without fully realising it, lived in continuous

dialogue with the Lord, nourished by the most ordinary circumstances of daily life. The Gospels record countless situations in which Jesus and his disciples spoke with confidence. They asked Him questions and expressed their puzzlement or enthusiasm. The Twelve were not only disciples and witnesses, but also friends with whom Jesus shared his intimacy (cf. *Jn 15:15*). Jesus' personality captivated them and, at the same time, filled them with awe. He was a great friend to them, as well as a great mystery.

One of the things that struck them most was Jesus' relationship with the Father. They frequently watched Him withdraw to pray. Little by little, they came to understand that Jesus was always in intimate conversation with God the Father. Jesus Himself makes them see that what He says and does flows from his relationship

with the Father: *I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself commanded me what to say and speak (Jn 12:49); When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority (Jn 8:28).*

Sometimes our Lord made this intimate conversation with the Father visible. For example, when the seventy-two disciples whom He had sent ahead to various towns and villages returned, amazed by the experience of acting in Jesus' name, healing and casting out demons (*Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name*, they exclaimed (*Lk 10:17*)), Jesus raised his voice to the Father and, full of joy, exclaimed: *I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were*

*pleased to do (Lk 10:21).* Another occasion on which they hear Jesus speak aloud to the Father is the solemn moment of the raising of Lazarus. In the midst of grief over the death of his friend, Jesus speaks out: *Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me* (Jn 11:41–42). We can imagine the amazement of those who heard Him speak to his Father in this way. How could such words not remain engraved in their memories?

By speaking in this way, Jesus unveils to his friends the mystery of his divine intimacy: his inner life. Jesus' deepest reality is his relationship with the Father. He lives from that relationship, a relationship that is an unceasing dialogue of knowledge and love, expressed concretely in the constant desire to do the Father's

will. He makes this clear to his disciples: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work* (Jn 4:34). In many ways, Jesus is telling them that He lives from his relationship with the Father, and that his personal intimacy is that relationship.

Theology will later express this by saying that the Son is a subsistent relation: everything in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is sonship, relation to the Father.<sup>[7]</sup>

Little by little, and especially with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples will come to realise that this intimate relationship with the Father is Jesus' most personal identity. And they will long to share in it. That is why, on one occasion, Philip says to the Lord, *Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us* (Jn 14:8). And that is also why they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, to help them discover that source of life

from which He Himself lives. That is when Jesus teaches them the “Our Father” (cf. *Lk 11:1–4*).

Through Jesus, the Word through whom all things were made (cf. *Col 1:16*), we too are, at the deepest level of our being, in profound relationship with the Father.<sup>[8]</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch felt this deeply in his heart when he wrote: “a living water speaks within me, saying: Come to the Father.”<sup>[9]</sup> The fact that God loves me, that He created me so that I might be happy with him, is the truest core of my personal identity, the deepest meaning of who I am. And conversely, “anyone who does not realise that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself.”<sup>[10]</sup> That is why prayer is not something added to our life. Conversation with God allows us to dwell within ourselves. To be in dialogue with God is to be *at home* interiorly, to *be* who we truly are.

Jesus' inner life consists of unceasing dialogue with his Father, and our own interior life must also be nourished by that same dialogue with God: a dialogue of love.

“God loves to communicate himself, not in the roar of thunder and earthquakes, but in the *whisper of a gentle breeze* (1 Kings 19:12) or, as some translate it, in a *sound of sheer silence*,” and this is an “essential and important encounter,” Pope Leo XIV said two days after his election.<sup>[11]</sup> And the heart is where that encounter takes place: “The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; (...) the heart is our hidden center, (...) it is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation.”<sup>[12]</sup> And yet, some hearts live in a constant inner monologue. And when a heart lives like that, the fruits cannot be those of love; they will more likely be fruits of selfishness. If our inner conversation

is centred on the self, our actions will also revolve around the self.

Frequent complaining, bad temper, irritability... these may be symptoms of the frustration that stems from this internal monologue, for *the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Lk 6:45)*.

The true treasure of a heart, the only real treasure, is its relationship of love with God. From that root good fruits will spring forth, in both word and deed. That is why Jesus says that *only God is good (Mk 10:18)*. Outside of Him, there is only darkness, sadness, meaninglessness. There is emptiness and the isolation of someone who, though made for relationship, finds himself, in the end, terribly alone: alone before the future, alone before death, alone in the face of difficulties. *It is not good*

*that man should be alone* (Gen 2:18), God says in the story of creation. And when the angel announces the sublime moment of the Incarnation to Mary, he tells her that the child shall be called Emmanuel, which means “God-with-us.” The Saviour has a name that expresses presence, personal relationship. *Apart from me you can do nothing* (Jn 15:5): it is the relationship with Jesus that saves us, and that makes us instruments of salvation for others.

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“Christ remains with us. At times, before beginning a task, St. Josemaría would tell our Lord: “Jesus, let’s do this together.” Jesus is with us, and we are his instruments. This calls for us to act well, to work well; otherwise, in a certain sense, we make Him “look bad” because of the poor quality of his instrument. Jesus and I. Ours is a personal,

unique, irreplaceable relationship. But at the same time, union with Christ – if it is authentic – becomes union with the Body of Christ, which is the Church: communion with God, communion of saints. The relationship between Jesus and I becomes union for others, with others.”<sup>[13]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Evagrius, *De oratione*, no. 34.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2725.

<sup>[3]</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, nos. 11, 50.

<sup>[4]</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 38.

<sup>[5]</sup> F. Ocáriz, Meditation for Easter Sunday, 11-IV-2020, opusdei.org.

<sup>[6]</sup> St. Josemaría, notes from a gathering in Valladolid, 22-X-1972, collected in the documentary “The Heart of Work,” opusdei.org.

<sup>[7]</sup> Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29 a. 4 co.

<sup>[8]</sup> Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13 a. 7 co; *De Veritate*, q. 4 a. 4 co.

<sup>[9]</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom.* 7, 2.

<sup>[10]</sup> St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 26.

<sup>[11]</sup> Pope Leo XIV, Gathering with cardinals, 10-V-2025.

<sup>[12]</sup> *Catechism*, no. 2563.

<sup>[13]</sup> F. Ocáriz, *In the Light of the Gospel*.

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