

The Mantle and the Shadow of Jesus: The Church, Home of Our Sanctity

When Christ reaches out to us in his Church and lets us touch his mantle, the power that comes out of Him is his own holiness. He transforms us so that we may enjoy "the breadth and length and height and depth" of his heart. Ninth instalment of the "Combat, closeness, mission" series.

It was an ordinary day in Capharnaum, and a woman was miraculously healed by touching the hem of Jesus' garment (cf. *Mk* 5:25-34). We know very little about her, and we know even less about the crowds who came to the Lord with the same hope: to reach for his mantle and be healed of their ailments (cf. *Mt* 14:36). Yet, each of them was important and unique to Jesus. Just as it is for us, all of God's love was waiting for them.^[1]

Our Lord continues to walk amongst us, allowing Himself to be reached, touched, and challenged. He does not act in our lives from a cautious "safe distance," but with a confident immediacy. The Acts of the Apostles show us how such contact is possible since, by his resurrection and ascension, Jesus has become present in a way that is less perceptible to the naked eye, but actually much closer. His mantle has become accessible in

the shadow of Peter: *They brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, so that when Peter passed by, at least his shadow might reach one of them* (Acts 5:14-15). That is the way He does it: the mantle of our Lord now subsists in the apostle's shadow, converted into the power of the Most High that covers, sanctifies and heals. The mantle of our Lord and the shadow of the apostle: this is “the divine-human reality of the Church,”^[2] the way by which God continues to reach out and touch us, the place of our experience of divine love, the home of our holiness.

Touching the mantle of the Lord

Like the immediate witnesses of those miracles, we may be surprised by the simplicity of the channels through which Christ's heart wants to connect with ours. Perhaps we might have expected something

more extraordinary, something that would have entered more strongly through our senses. Yet this is how He acts: God wants to communicate his grace to us by simply touching his mantle and allowing us to be touched by his shadow.

To truly connect with the Lord, we must be willing to navigate through times of dimness and uncertainty, in which we may encounter more shadows than light. However, much like the stained-glass windows of a cathedral, it is through these intermediaries that light is able to touch us, sometimes taking on extraordinary hues. Although Peter's shadow might appear to be just that – his shadow – in fact it is where we meet Jesus, living and acting.

The mantle of Jesus and the shadow of Peter are the Church herself, which radiates strength and light. She is “like a sacrament, that is to say,

a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”^[3] Hence, the path of our holiness passes through the desire to remain closely united to Jesus Christ in his Church, because our strength is in Him, in his “sacramentalised” person. St. Leo the Great used to say that “what was visible in our Saviour has passed into his mysteries.”^[4] Similarly, St. Josemaría viewed the sacraments as “his footprints along the way, guiding us so that we may walk in them and reach heaven.”^[5] The challenge, then, is to discover the power and fruitfulness hidden beneath the apparent simplicity of those words and gestures, those faces and elements – that shadow – through which our Lord wishes to come and meet us today.

One of the things that the life of the Lord shows us is that his way of entering into our existence is that of

a personal encounter. Jesus touches the leper, looks at those He calls, lays hands on the little ones, and invites Himself to the house of Zacchaeus. These are not simply episodes in the past, because Jesus has not changed his original desire: He wants to continue to meet each one of us personally. It is only in this way, through these beautiful encounters, that He converts us, drawing us to himself.

Sacraments of humility

What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched (...) we proclaim to you (1 Jn 1:3). These autobiographical words of the Apostle John are an impressive illustration of what was in the hearts of the first Christians. Our first brothers and sisters in the faith did not intend to pass on to us merely a reflection or moving stories about

Jesus Christ, or a guide to enter into a relationship with God on our own. They communicated to us what they could see, hear and touch; for they knew that this, and no other, was the Lord's way of transforming us into another Christ.

It is ultimately about encountering Jesus through what Saint Augustine called “the sacraments of humility.”^[6] Just as the Lord restored sight to the blind man using something as simple as mud, we too open ourselves to healing within the embrace of his Church. The reason we love Confession, the Eucharist, the common and ministerial priesthood, and every sacramental gift is because we love the holy and humble humanity of Christ. When we receive these gifts with faith and hope, we identify more and more with the sentiments and affections of Jesus (cf. *Phil 2:5*). The gestures, signs and

words we receive bring about the miracle of holiness in us.

However, as happened to Naaman the Syrian, who compared the small flow of the Jordan to the great rivers of his homeland (cf. 2 *Ki* 5:10-12), we may also long for more abundant or special waters than those of the sacraments to nourish our holiness. Sometimes it may seem to us that the sacraments scarcely bring about any change in us, that it is too slow or too routine a journey. Perhaps a longing emerges for a deeper spiritual experience that transcends these moments. This may be the right time to rediscover, along with their simplicity, the persistent invitation that lingered in the memory of the beloved disciple after spending so many hours beside the Lord: to abide in Him.^[7]

Staying close to his mantle, and keeping ourselves within the

compass of the shadow of his Church and his sacraments, means rediscovering the value of frequenting them. This perseverance will work in us, not so much by an accumulation of effects that we can easily perceive, but by a progressive transformation of our heart. In this way, we will be filled with confidence that the new wine will come. It comes, as long as we remain united to the one vine and receive from the master the only words of eternal life. Abiding in the Lord through his sacraments is therefore a beautiful way of abandoning ourselves into his hands. We know that by remaining in Him we allow him to carry on his work in us, in his own way and at his own pace. Then, “our interior life contains no other spectacle than this: it is Christ who passes by ‘quasi in occulto.’”^[8] —

If in the sacraments we can once again touch the mantle of his

humanity, allowing ourselves to be touched by the shadow of the apostle also means being attentive to the voice the Church addresses to us. From her we receive the words we need to grow in holiness. By welcoming them and letting them act with trust and love, we become what we hear.

We can take a moment to reflect on the words spoken during the sacrament of reconciliation. Those who go to Confession frequently might sometimes feel like they are repeating themselves and that the guidance they receive remains largely unchanged. This can lead to discouragement and a loss of faith in the effectiveness of this sacrament. That may be the right time to remember the words offered to us with each absolution: that God grants us “forgiveness and peace.”^[9] The Lord, through his Church, reassures us of our status as forgiven people

and invites us to embrace a life of peace, for our hearts already share in his peace.

We also hear many expressions of grace during Mass, beginning with the Word of God, which must make its way in us. “We hear it with our ears and it passes into our heart; it does not remain in the ears, it must enter the heart; and from the heart it passes to the hands, to good works. This is the journey that the Word of God makes: from the ears to the heart and to the hands.”^[10] The words we receive during the consecration also grant us a special good, when Christ Himself tells us that He gives Himself for us and that He wants to dwell bodily in our lives. And what He says, He does: He allows Himself to be touched and eaten in Eucharistic communion.

A transformative force

From Jesus' mantle and Peter's shadow emerge a power capable of healing the body, but above all of converting the heart. When Christ reaches out to us in his Church and lets us touch his mantle, the power that comes out of it is his own holiness. In this way He transforms us so that he lives in us, and we enjoy *the breadth and length and height and depth* of his heart (*Eph 3:18*).

This expansion of our heart leads us to make our own what St. Paul experienced; becoming *all things to all men that he might by all means save some* (*1 Cor 9:22*). When the Church truly becomes our home, we realise that we really want all to experience God's love in their lives. “God has called us (...) to make Jesus Christ known to so many who know nothing of Him, and – in loving us in his Work – He has also given us an apostolic way of working, which moves us to understanding, to

forgiveness, to a refined charity towards all souls.”^[11]

A beautiful sign that the transforming power of the Lord's heart finds acceptance in us is that certain inner distances or barriers towards others, which previously seemed very difficult to surmount, begin to disappear. The human reasons that give rise to these attitudes cease to be the last word and the power of God's love peacefully takes hold of us. The Lord enlarges our hearts so that they can be opened in fraternal charity towards all people and in all directions. We feel that we are in communion with everyone, so that nothing of the others is a matter of unconcern to us.

Jesus wanted to form his first followers in that spirit. In choosing the group of twelve, he did not seek to create a circle of homogeneous

people, but rather the opposite. Indeed, humanly speaking, there was every reason for discord among them. It was almost a provocation to invite people from such diverse backgrounds, political sensitivities and social classes to live together day after day. And yet this is precisely how the Church is born again and again, when, out of love for the Lord and the Gospel, human causes of division cease to have the last word. God's love triumphs in our conduct when we allow the Church to make the desire for communion prevail in us over the easy tendency to division.

The holiness that the Church awakens in our souls is therefore also expressed in a strong desire for reconciliation, forgiveness, and profound unity among all God's children. The communion of saints is no longer reduced to an ideal, to something we know to be true but which appears unattainable. We

experience what our Father wrote: “each one will feel, whether in the heat of interior struggle or in the bustle of professional work, the joy and the strength of not being alone.”^[12] This union with everyone in the Church thus becomes an enthusiastic call to which we want to respond with a renewed attitude, born of the heart of Christ: “May you find mutual understanding, may you forgive each other, may you love one another, and may you always remember that you are in God’s hands, surrounded by His goodness. Never feel alone; always remember you are accompanied, and you will remain steadfast: with your feet on the ground and your heart uplifted, ready to pursue what is right.”^[13]

Giving hope

Alongside this new capacity to love, the strength that comes from the Lord and his Church moves us to

look at reality through a new lens: hope. Pope Francis wanted us to celebrate the upcoming Jubilee of the Redemption in this key.^[14] Jesus continues to walk through history and in the midst of humanity. His mantle is wider than our eyes can see. We are seized by the certainty that the Lord continues to act, to touch, and to allow Himself to be reached by men in the midst of the feverish rush of a world that in so many ways seems disoriented.

Without losing sight of the drama of history, with all its pain and tragedy, the holiness that the Church sows in us helps us not to give way to discouragement or nostalgia in the face of an apparently post-Christian world, as if the widening or narrowing of certain fields of influence were all that can be hoped for as triumphs, or lamented as defeats.

“Once we have found Jesus, we can no longer view history with anything but confidence and hope. Thus, we do not retreat into ourselves or mourn a seemingly glorious past; instead, we constantly look forward to a future that is shaped not only by our own efforts but, most importantly, by God’s ongoing care.”^[15] The holiness that is born from the bosom of the Church reminds us that the Lord is continually *making all things new* (Rev 21:5). Where some might see only decadence, we see, in spite of everything, the seeds of a transformation. At the wedding where the wine runs out, we discern the necessary conditions for the new wine to come, which only Christ can bring.

“The most important challenge facing the Church – and society as a whole – is to give hope to every person, especially to the young, to

families, and to those who are most in need, materially or spiritually.”^[16] And the hope that the Church wishes to inspire in our hearts is the certainty that the Lord never ceases to come to the aid of men and women; and that what is truly definitive in history is the reality of our redemption, which continues to be present and to grow, in spite of the tares (cf. *Mt 13:24-52*).

St. Josemaría wrote to the faithful of Opus Dei that they should get used to looking “first and always to the holy Church.”^[17] These are words which, in reality, apply to all Christians. In the Church, the believer sees Christ Himself living among us. The same Christ who walked among the crowds and who now draws near us, touches us and sanctifies us. The gaze of faith sees in the Church the unmistakable mantle of Christ, who is very close to us, giving us life and communicating his infinite love to

us. With this gaze also comes a feeling of deep trust and affection, so that all that is his will always finds within us “an attitude of hopeful filial abandonment.”^[18] We will receive, as St. Josemaría told us, “whatever message comes to us from the Bride of Jesus Christ”^[19] with this attitude, for we have no doubt that only good things can come from her, and that all of them aim towards the most important good of all: our holiness.

^[1] “I ask myself many times a day: what will it be when all the beauty, all the goodness, all the infinite wonder of God is poured into this poor earthen vessel that is me, that is all of us?” (St. Josemaria, Notes from a family gathering, 22-X-1960)

^[2] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Message, 21-X-2023.

^[3] Second Vatican Council, Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.

^[4] St. Leo the Great, *Sermon 74*, 2; quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1115.

^[5] Cf. St. Josemaría, Gathering in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15-VI-1974.

^[6] St. Augustine, *Confessions* 8, 2, 4.

^[7] In the Gospel of John, this verb appears repeatedly on Jesus' lips; cf. *Jn* 6:56; 8:31; 15:4-10. In his first letter, the apostle echoes this insistence: cf. 1 *Jn* 2:6,24,27; 3:6,24.

^[8] *Friends of God*, no. 152.

^[9] Cf. Ritual of Penance.

^[10] Pope Francis, Audience, 31-I-2018.

^[11] St. Josemaría, Letter 4, no. 1.

^[12] *The Way*, no. 545.

^[13] *In Dialogue with the Lord*, no. 79.

^[14] Cf. Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Convocation of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025.

^[15] Pope Francis, Audience, 11-X-2017.

^[16] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, “The Church’s vitality depends on complete openness to the Gospel,” Interview 3-VII-2017, published in English on opusdei.org.

^[17] St. Josemaría, Letter 18, no. 27.

^[18] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Message, 13-IX-2023.

^[19] St. Josemaría, Letter 8, no. 54.

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