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"Your hearts will rejoice": The Christian Meaning of Sacrifice (II)

For Christians, the value of sacrifice is hidden in a meek and humble desire to be associated with Jesus' suffering in his Passion, and to free the heart from all that shackles it, aspiring to a lighter, brighter, freer life.

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With immense tenderness, albeit deeply troubled, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take Jesus down from the Cross and place Him in his mother's arms. Our Lady caresses her Son with the same tenderness she had on that long-ago night in Bethlehem; she closes his eyes and kisses his forehead. She weeps, believes, hopes... And through this immense trial, she sustains a Church still in its infancy: the *people yet unborn* (Ps 22:32) who are now coming into the world.

The dawn of Easter Sunday will dispel all darkness. Without the resurrection, not only Jesus' passion and death but all suffering and pain in history would have become a cruel joke. Jesus' victory over death has changed everything. Since that moment, it has been possible for us to suffer and give ourselves out of love, with the same confidence as Jesus: *I lay down my life to take it up*

again (Jn 10:18); I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice (Jn 16:22). Finding joy in accepting and choosing the cross, both in small things and great, is a special grace from the risen Jesus.^[1]

Source of life

Saint Paul explains that Jesus' death crucifies the *old self* (Rom 6:6; Eph 4:22). This death only makes sense in light of the life it will bring: the life of grace, in the Spirit, the *new self* (Eph 4:24). Similarly, Christian sacrifice and mortification are not valuable on their own, as if renouncing life were good in itself. Mortification is meaningful only to the extent that it *gives* life. It is meant to be a source of new life. Christians recognize aspects of themselves that drain life, alienate, and create division within and around them... because these areas are still under the influence of sin. Those unhealthy, twisted, or

wounded tendencies that need to be saved and resurrected by Christ. So Saint Paul warns us: *if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom 8:13).*

The apostle's message is critical, and we want to understand it well. Set against the call to live according to the Spirit (with a capital 's') is the temptation to live according to the flesh; following everything in ourselves, body and soul, that opposes God.^[2] Life "according to the flesh" may thus be not so much the life of a wild body that tramples on an innocent soul than that of a frivolous soul which exploits and disfigures the whole person, body and soul.^[3] As Jesus says, evil comes from deep within: *What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft,*

murder, adultery, greed... All these evils come from within, and they defile a person (Mk 7:20-23).

For Christians, then, the value of sacrifice does not lie in suffering for its own sake, nor in an ascetic subjugation of the body, but in the desire to free the heart from everything that binds it; in the aspiration to a lighter, brighter, fuller life, one that radiates simplicity and joy. Christians do not seek pain for pain's sake; they are not masochists. All the same, they frequently find deep roots of selfishness, sensuality, and greed in themselves and others, and – especially when those roots are deep – it is impossible to break free and help liberate others without renunciation. Certainly, opening our hearts can hurt, but it is like the pain when blood flow returns to a limb numb from the cold; it may be challenging, but it is necessary.

“Then they will fast”

Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (Mt 9:15).

These somewhat mysterious words of Jesus reveal something important about his disciples' way of life. On one hand, He has come into the world to stay and to bring joy, life in abundance (Jn 10:10): not only is He pleased for us to enjoy life, but He also delights in seeing us healthy and happy.^[4] On the other hand, as long as history endures, God's absence will be felt wherever people prefer the darkness of selfishness to the light of his love (cf. Jn 3:19-21). And that place is always, first of all, within each person's heart. In our hearts, in our relationships, in our homes, we must make room for God, for our “self” tends to occupy

everything. Where the self reigns, peace and joy are missing.

Fasting has, from the beginning, been one of the ways Christians combat their selfishness to make space for God in their lives, because the Lord Himself fasted (cf. *Mt 4:2*) and encouraged us to do so with a cheerful face (*Mt 6:16-18*). Fasting is a very tangible way of renouncing our tendency to dominate and control things. Through this practice, which touches something as basic as sustenance, we move “away from the temptation to ‘devour’ everything to satisfy our voracity and being ready to suffer for love, which can fill the emptiness of our hearts.”^[5] Saint Josemaría once called fasting “a penance most pleasing to God;” though, he added, “what with one thing and another, we have become a bit too easy-going.”^[6] Indeed, if we were to limit ourselves strictly to the minimum requirements, we would

end up fasting very little. Thus, the Church, like a good mother, leaves room for generosity and each person's spiritual growth while taking our physical health into account.

The logic of fasting, marked by the desire for God to increase and for me — along with my selfishness and my urge to assert myself — to decrease (cf. *Jn* 3:30), helps us understand the meaning of many other voluntary renunciations. Those sacrifices might seem to diminish life, but in fact they enlarge it and make it freer. By voluntarily letting go of certain good things, we etch into our hearts the conviction that “God alone suffices.”^[7] We shield ourselves from idolatry, which “does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth.”^[8] Those who cannot renounce anything end up subject to everything: they “must

hear the din of countless idols crying out, ‘Put your trust in me!’”^[9] while those who dare to make sacrifices find themselves liberated “from many kinds of slavery and savouring instead, in the depths of [their] heart, the fullness of God's love.”^[10]

From this perspective, there are many possible ways to “fast” or offer sacrifices. As long as we choose them from the heart, and not from a cold sense of duty, all of them can make us freer, “free to love.”^[11] For instance, an intermittent *digital fast*, during which we set our phones aside for parts of the day, allows us to improve our relationships and engage in authentic conversations, not preoccupied with superficial distractions. Renouncing instant access to information, products, or experiences with a swipe of our finger frees us from a tendency to possess or consume, which ultimately leaves us empty.

Sometimes choosing a simpler or less comfortable option can help us appreciate simplicity and strengthen us against life's inevitable hardships. Avoiding scattered focus during work enables us to turn it into true service, making us rejoice in the results. Giving up free time to care for someone in need broadens our hearts and keeps them from hardening, teaching us to live with our imperfections and fragility.

This spirit of freedom — the freedom of the children of God (cf. *Rom* 8:21) — also includes various practices of corporal mortification and mortification of the senses, which have taken different forms among Christians throughout history. Like fasting, these practices express the conviction that it is necessary to pray with the body and that it becomes inevitable to wage some struggle to bring the different dimensions of our person into harmony. Thus, when

Christians demand of their bodies or senses, it is not because they see them as bad or suspicious, but because they recognize the heart's tendency to scatter in countless directions. Above all, they recognise the real cost of that scattering: the inability to love. Beyond this, they feel a gentle, humble desire to unite themselves with Jesus' physical suffering during his passion. Saint Paul speaks of carrying the death of the Lord in our bodies so that we may rise with Him (cf. *2 Cor* 4:10); and these sacrifices also follow that journey to Easter. True, sometimes these practices have led to excesses or to misunderstandings by those who cannot conceive of suffering as a way for Jesus to live in us. But between those who exaggerate and those who are scandalised, we find the serenity, simplicity, and spiritual freedom with which many Christians express their love for Jesus in this

way: “Heart: heart on the Cross!
Heart on the Cross!”^[12]

Giving one's life for one's friends

I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, God tells us through the prophet Hosea (*Hos* 6:6). Jesus repeats these words in the Gospel (cf. *Mt* 9:13), not to invalidate fasting and mortification, but to emphasise that all sacrifice must be directed toward love. Saint Josemaría explained it this way: “I prefer virtue to austerity, Yahweh said, using different words, to the chosen people, who set too much store by certain external formalities. That is why we must cultivate penance and mortification as a proof of our true love for God and for our neighbour.”^[13] In this sense, he would often say that God's favourite mortifications are those that make life more pleasant for others.^[14] In this too, he echoed the words of the Lord: *Greater love has no one than*

this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13).

The willingness to give one's life for others, if sincere, need not and should not wait for extraordinary circumstances, because it finds countless opportunities in everyday life. Saint Josemaría listed a few: “That joke, that witty remark held on the tip of your tongue; the cheerful smile for those who annoy you; that silence when you're unjustly accused; your friendly conversation with people whom you find boring and tactless; the daily effort to overlook one irritating detail or another in the persons who live with you...”^[15] —

In these and many other situations, the Christian's focus, like Jesus', is not on their own suffering, but on the goodness that makes the Cross a gentle reality. “Sacrifice, sacrifice! It is true that to follow Jesus Christ is to

carry the Cross — He has said so. But I don't like to hear souls who love Our Lord speak so much about crosses and renunciations, because where there is Love, it is a willing sacrifice — though it remains hard — and the cross is the Holy Cross. —A soul which knows how to love and give itself in this way, is filled with peace and joy. Therefore, why insist on 'sacrifice,' as if you were seeking consolation, if Christ's Cross — which is your life — makes you happy?"^[16]

Saint Josemaría emphasises the positive value of sacrifice made out of love, pointing to it as a source of peace and joy. For this reason, he firmly rejects “pain-centred” or “victim-centred” ways of understanding sacrifice.^[17]

Sometimes people seem to insist on the renunciation involved in following the Lord, seemingly seeking sympathy and forgetting that renunciation is only life-giving

because of its union with Jesus' Cross. In such cases, the focus is on the pain experienced or on personal spiritual effort. But Christian sacrifice is not about proving a heroic ability to endure suffering; rather, it's about forming in ourselves a heart like Christ's, a pierced heart, "completely open."^[18] —

Jesus did not present his death as a demonstration of commitment to principles or as a display of spiritual endurance, but as an offering for specific people: *This is my body, given for you* (Lk 22:19). His attention is wholly directed toward us, not toward Himself. Therefore, if we reduce the purpose of our mortification to our own suffering, we risk developing a negative, joyless spirituality unrelated to the Gospel. It might become a form of spiritual pride rendering our sacrifices fruitless. We need to look far beyond; to understand sacrifice as a great yes

to God and to others and a profound yes to Life.

There is a great difference between those who focus on suffering and those who focus on loving, even though love sometimes hurts. This is why Jesus' invitation to take up his Cross can be understood this: love even when it hurts — because sometimes it *will* hurt — and trust in the resurrection; seeking above all things the Kingdom of God and his righteousness (cf. *Mt* 6:33), and leaving everything in the Father's hands (cf. *Lk* 23:46). This is the disposition of Christ's heart and his followers'. They desire to illuminate a dark world with a joy that has its roots in the shape of the Cross,^[19] walking through life with “the Cross on [their] shoulders, with a smile on [their] lips, and a light in [their] soul.”^[20]

[1] The prophet Isaiah, with words that resonate powerfully across the centuries, had already anticipated the grace that would spring forth from the Cross and Resurrection, reaching all who embrace this path: *Because he poured out his life in atonement, he will see his offspring, prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light (...). Therefore, I will give him a portion among the many, and he will divide the spoils with the strong; because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors, he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for sinners (Is 53:10-12).*

[2] Cf. Rom 8:7-9: *The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the*

flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you.

[3] In this regard, Saint Paul speaks of the respect due to the body, noting that it is a *member of Christ* and a *temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 6:15-19); *No one ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the Church* (Eph 5:29).

[4] Cf. Sir 14:11,14: *My child, as far as you are able, treat yourself well (...). Do not deprive yourself of a happy day; let no part of a good desire pass you by.*

[5] Pope Francis, Message for Lent, 2019.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 231.

[7] Saint Teresa of Avila, Poem no. 30, “Nada te turbe.”

[8] Pope Francis, Enc. *Lumen Fidei*, no. 13.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

[11] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 6.

[12] Saint Josemaría, *Way of the Cross*, 5th Station.

[13] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 992.

[14] Cf. for example *Furrow*, no. 991; *The Forge*, no. 150.

[15] *The Way*, no. 173.

[16] *Furrow*, no. 249.

[17] Cf. *The Way*, critical-historical edition, note to no. 175.

[18] J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 2004, pg. 186.

[19] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 43; *The Forge*, no. 28.

[20] *Way of the Cross*, 2nd Station, no. 3.

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