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Meditations: September 21, Saint Matthew

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of Saint Mathew, Apostle.

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- Matthew's encounter with Jesus
- A love that guides us amid difficulties
- Acknowledging oneself a sinner

“JESUS SAW the publican and, because He loved him, chose him.”^[1]

These words of Saint Bede sum up the essential features of any vocation. In every call, the initiative always comes from God, who has thought of us from all eternity and accompanies us in each of our steps. Jesus passes by the place where Matthew is collecting taxes. And on seeing him, He decides to call him right then and there. It is the mystery of the vocation. Matthew could have asked himself: Why me? Why now? Do I have the necessary qualities? Where will this choice lead me? He was a tax collector, seen by society as a public sinner. But his story shows that none of these concerns are decisive. The only important thing, in the case of Matthew and in anyone's vocation, is the personal encounter with Christ. He is the one who invites us to assist Him in his plan of salvation.

Jesus tells Matthew: “Follow me.” It is not just an invitation to accompany Him. “He is also saying: ‘Imitate me.’ Jesus told him, ‘Follow me,’ but not simply with his footsteps, but also with his way of life. For whoever says that he abides in Christ must live as He lived.”^[2] — And thus Matthew’s life found its full meaning. He came to see his entire existence with new eyes, with a light that also gives the warmth and impulse needed to respond generously: “If you were to ask me how the divine call is sensed, how one becomes aware of it,” Saint Josemaría wrote, “I would say that it is a new outlook on life. It is as though a new light is lit within us; it is a mysterious impulse that urges one to dedicate one’s noblest energies to an activity which, over time, becomes a way of life. That vital force, which is something like a sweeping avalanche, is what others call a vocation.”^[3] —

MATTHEW responded to Christ's call without a moment's hesitation. The Gospel simply tells us that *he rose and followed him* (Mt 9:9), and doesn't provide any details. We don't know whether he had already heard the Master speaking before or had spoken with him in Capernaum. What the passage highlights, in its conciseness, is the readiness with which he follows our Lord as soon as he receives the call to share his life. We see something similar happen in the case of other apostles, such as Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathanael, and James and John (cf. *Jn* 1:40-50; *Mt* 4:18-22).

What moved those simple fishermen and Matthew the tax collector to follow Christ without delay? It is not easy to give a definite answer. We know little about who they were, how they thought, what their dreams

and hopes were. But what we do see in the Gospels is that Jesus had touched their hearts. He had let them vividly sense the love He brought into the world. And this discovery brought them an irresistible joy.

“Every true vocation begins with an encounter with Jesus who gives us a new joy and hope. And he leads us, even amid trials and difficulties, to an ever fuller encounter . . . to the fullness of joy.”^[4]—

Matthew let his heart be won over by Jesus. He experienced that being close to Him gives a happiness the world can never give. Possibly, after a few weeks spent following Jesus, he realized that there would be difficulties, since not everyone received the Master with the same open heart. Perhaps he would also have begun to recognize his own limitations and mistakes, in contrast to the mission Jesus was undertaking. But Matthew chose

hope over any pessimism, and trusted that he could safeguard his love for Jesus, purifying and renewing it many times over if need be. “Certainly there are trials in life; there are moments in which it is necessary to go forward despite the cold and the crosswinds, despite much bitterness. But Christians know the way that leads to that sacred fire which enkindled them once and for all . . . God wants us to be able to dream like him and with him, as we journey through this life, well aware of reality.”^[5]—

AFTER HIS ENCOUNTER with Jesus at the custom house, Matthew decided to organize a party in his own house. He wanted to celebrate the new life he was going to undertake by inviting his friends to meet Jesus. Many of them, like Matthew himself,

were considered public sinners because of their collaboration with the Roman Empire. *When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* But on hearing these words, Jesus makes clear why he has come into this world: *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt 9:11-13).*

A person who considers himself righteous closes the doors to God. But the one who acknowledges himself a sinner allows Christ to draw close and heal him. God does not ask us for a spotless life without mistakes, but for a contrite and humble heart. This is the best sacrifice we can offer Him (cf. Ps 51:19). "We are poor clay vessels: fragile and brittle. But God has created us in order to fill us with

his happiness forever. And already now on earth, He gives us his joy so that we can spread it to everyone.”^[6]

We can ask our heavenly Mother to help us experience in our lives the healing power of God’s mercy.

Especially in Confession and the Eucharist, we receive the grace that spurs us to be witnesses to God’s immense love for us.

^[1] Saint Bede the Venerable, Homily 21.

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *Letter* 3, no. 9.

^[4] Francis, Audience, 30 August 2017.

^[5] Ibid.

^[6] Fernando Ocáriz, *In the Light of the Gospel*.

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