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New Mediterraneans (III): "From the Wound of the Right Hand" (with audio)

A "new discovery" in Saint Josemaria's spiritual life. Contemplating our Lord's Sacred Humanity, wounded for our sins and now risen in glory, should be for us a font of hope.

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Saint John recounts that on the day of the Resurrection, in the evening, the disciples were gathered in a

house with *the doors being shut ... for fear of the Jews (Jn 20:19)*. And Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side (Jn 20:19-20).

Suddenly their discouragement was transformed into a deep joy. They were filled with the peace our Lord brought, and then received the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 20:22).

Many details in this Gospel scene draw our attention. What were the apostles waiting for? Jesus appeared unexpectedly among them, and his presence filled them with joy and peace. We know some of his words and gestures. But how would he have looked at them? They had abandoned him, and left him alone. They had fled out of cowardice. Yet our Lord didn't reproach them. He himself had foretold what would take place. He knew that their weakness could be the source of a deep conversion.

Before suffering his Passion, Jesus told Peter: *I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren* (Lk 22:31-32). Now that their hearts were contrite, they were able to receive more fully the Love that God offered them. Otherwise perhaps they, and Peter as their head, would have continued to rely too much on their own strength.

But why did Jesus show them his hands and his side? These were still marked with the torment of the crucifixion. Yet the sight of his wounds did not fill them with sorrow but peace; it did not cause dejection, but joy. Rightly viewed, these marks of the nails and the lance are the seal of God's Love. Jesus wanted the wounds of his Passion to remain in his body after he rose from the dead, to remove any trace of mistrust. He did not want us to think that he could ever repent of what he had done,

even in light of our often mediocre and even cold response. Christ's love is strong and unwavering.

Moreover, for doubting Thomas the wounds were to be the unmistakable proof of the Resurrection. Jesus is the Son of God, who truly died and rose for our sins. "The wounds of Jesus," the Pope said, "are a scandal, a stumbling block for faith, yet they are also the test of faith. That is why on the body of the risen Christ the wounds never pass away: they remain, for those wounds are the enduring sign of God's love for us. They are essential for believing in God. Not for believing that God exists, but for believing that *God is love, mercy and faithfulness*. Saint Peter, quoting Isaiah, writes to Christians: *by his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet 2:24, cf. Is 53:5).*"[1]

Spiritual writers have discovered in our Lord's wounds a font of delight. Saint Bernard, for example, wrote: "Through these open wounds, I can drink honey from the rock and oil from the flinty stone (cf. *Deut* 32:13), that is, I can taste and see how good the Lord is."[2] In these wounds we learn of God's measureless Love. From his pierced heart flows the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Jn* 7:36-39). Our Lord's wounds are a sure refuge. Discovering the depth of these open wounds can lead us to a "new Mediterranean" in our interior life.

"The holy Wound of our Lord's right hand"

"Place yourself in the wounds of Christ," Saint John of Avila advises. "There, he tells us, is where his dove dwells, which is the soul that seeks him with simplicity."[3] "Hide me in your wounds, Lord," a well-known prayer beseeches. Saint Josemaría

too had recourse to this way of drawing close to the Master, which is so deeply rooted in Christian tradition. As he wrote in 1933: “Place myself each day in a wound of my Jesus.”[4]

This is one of the devotions that he practiced throughout his entire life, and that he recommended to the young people who drew close to him. [5] But it took on special meaning thanks to an experience that opened up a new and immense panorama for him, which took place in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, while he was living in Burgos. It was a time of suffering for him. His children in Opus Dei were dispersed all over Spain: some on the battle fronts, others hidden in various places or living in the zone suffering from religious persecution, including his mother and sister and brother. Almost no news reached him about his spiritual daughters. And some of

the young men who had followed him before the war had already lost their lives.

Confronting these circumstances, Saint Josemaría saw the need to redouble his efforts, his prayer, and especially his practices of penance. But in early June 1938, while walking to the monastery of Las Huelgas, where he was doing research for a thesis, he received a special light from God. He spoke about it in a letter to Juan Jiménez Vargas, written that same day:

“Dear Juanito: This morning on the way to Las Huelgas monastery to do my prayer, I discovered a new Mediterranean: the holy Wound of our Lord’s right hand. There I was all day long kissing and adoring. How truly lovable is our God’s sacred Humanity! Pray that he grant me his true Love to completely purify all my other affections. It’s not enough to

say, 'heart on the Cross!' If one of Christ's Wounds cleans, heals, soothes, strengthens, kindles and enraptures, what wouldn't the Five do as they lie open on the Cross? Heart on the Cross! O, my Jesus, what more could I ask for? I realize that if I continue contemplating in this way (Saint Joseph, my father and lord, is the one who led me there, after I asked him to enkindle me), I'll end up crazier than ever. Try it out yourself!"[6]

He already had deep devotion to our Lord's Sacred Humanity and to Christ's wounds. But now, unexpectedly, he saw it all as a "new Mediterranean." He grasped more deeply the redemptive Love shown by those wounds, and realized that the best way to respond to such great Love was not a matter of what he could "do," but rather of placing himself in Christ's wounded hand, contemplating it and allowing

himself to be completely overcome by this Love.

His letter continues: “I’m quite jealous of everyone on the battlefronts, despite everything. The thought goes through my head that, if my own path were not so clearly marked, it would be wonderful to ‘outdo’ Fr. Doyle.^[7] But...that would suit me quite well, since penance has never been very hard for me. That’s probably why I’m being led by another path: Love.” His path is to love and let himself be loved. And he concludes: “Take care, my son. *Dominus sit in corde tuo!* Here goes a big hug. From the Wound of the right hand, your Father blesses you.”^[8]

That event, that unexpected light, was a sign of hope and a spur for his priestly work. Thanks to this divine illumination, a well-known and often-meditated-on reality—a path he himself had traveled and

recommended to others—suddenly became “new,” a font of inexhaustible riches, which he never wanted to separate himself from.

Defended by Love

The wounds of Jesus are a perennial reminder of his Love, which went to the extreme of his sacrifice on the Cross. God never repents of his love for us. Therefore the contemplation of his Love is a font of hope for us. On seeing the Resurrected Lord with the marks of his Passion, we come to realize that “precisely there, at the lowest point of his abasement—which is also the loftiest point of love—*hope burgeoned*. Should one of you ask: ‘How is hope born?’—‘From the Cross. Look to the Cross; look to Christ Crucified and from there you will receive the hope that never disappears, which lasts to eternal life.’”[9] On the Cross our hope was born and is always reborn. “This is

why with Jesus, all our darkness can be transformed into light, every defeat into victory, every disappointment into hope. Every one: yes, every one.”[10] *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom 8:35,37).*

On seeing our weakness and sins, the temptation can come in various guises to lose hope. Something we had consented to in the past, out of frivolity or carelessness, suddenly seems to us an absurd “no,” a blow we struck against the God who loves us. Our lukewarm and feeble response can also be a cause for losing hope. However all this is nothing but a series of temptations from the one who made us fall in the first place. Contemplating our Lord’s

wounds can be the best way to react, since thus we are reminded that his love is *as strong as death* (Song 8:16). What is more, his Love has conquered death. As a contemporary poet has eloquently written:
“Washed by the water from his Side /
and inside the Wound defended /
from so many ‘nos’ that lead to
nothing / from so many feeble ‘yesses,’
from so much surrender.”[11]

Contemplating our Lord’s Sacred Humanity, wounded for our sins and now risen back to life, should be for us a font of hope. Jesus looks at us as he did at the apostles, without resentment. He doesn’t upbraid us for our sins, our weaknesses, our betrayals. Rather he “reaffirms” us, because his love is truly unconditional. He doesn’t tell us: “I’ll love you, if you behave well,” but rather “I love you, you’re a treasure for me; and you will continue being so no matter what happens.”

This realization, which stems from contemplating the open wounds in our Lord's Body, will fill us with joy and peace. *No matter what happens*, we can find refuge there, welcoming once again God's forgiveness. "In my own life, I have so often seen God's merciful countenance, his patience; I have also seen so many people find the courage to enter the wounds of Jesus by saying to him: Lord, I am here, accept my poverty, hide my sin in your wounds, wash it away with your blood. And I have always seen that God did just this—he accepted them, consoled them, cleansed them, loved them."[12]

Acknowledging our own littleness isn't a defeat or a humiliation. It could be, if God were someone seeking to dominate us. But that's not how God is. Love is his driving force: the unconditional Love that he gives us, and that he hopes we will welcome.

The path of compassion

There are many ways to draw close to our Lord's wounds. "Go as the spirit moves you: unburden in his Wounds all your love, both human and... divine," Saint Josemaría advised.^[13] We know how much he liked to put himself into the Gospel scenes with his imagination. In *Holy Rosary*, for example, when contemplating the first glorious mystery, he wrote: "And before this decade is over, you have kissed the wounds on His feet..., and I, more daring—because I am more a child—have placed my lips upon His open side."^[14]

Bishop Javier Echevarría, in a book he wrote about his years spent alongside Saint Josemaría, recalled how he did the thanksgiving after Mass, renewing each day his personal encounter with the Love of his Life. "He would kneel for some

minutes, on the floor or the kneeler. And looking at the pocket crucifix that he held in his hands, he would recite the prayer *En ego, O bone et dulcissime Iesu*, Look down upon me, good and gentle Jesus. And while saying the words about our Lord's wounds, he would devoutly kiss each one."[15]

Our Lord's wounds, which Saint Josemaría discovered so deeply on that June morning, not only reveal Christ's Love for us. They are also an invitation to co-redeem with him, as our Lady does; to be his Simon of Cyrene and console him for the many offenses that wound his Heart, above all because they also wound ours. It is a call, in the end, to care for him in *the least of these my brethren* with whom he identifies himself so closely, and in whom he has wanted to remain with us (cf. *Mt 25:40*).

Therefore, Saint Josemaría's discovery of this "new Mediterranean"—certainly a special light from God—should be seen in the context of the many hours he spent caring for the sick and poor in Madrid's impoverished districts. Here we are shown a marvelous way to discover God's Love: getting out of ourselves and drawing close to Jesus in those who are suffering. For Saint Josemaría, this was a sure path.

Touching Christ in those who are suffering offers us a path to draw close to his wounds and respond to his Love with love. Thus we learn to extend to others the same tenderness that God shows us when he sees our personal weakness. By following this path, our own life takes on a renewed sense of mission that spurs us to get out of ourselves, relying not on our own strength but on a call coming from God, who transforms us and counts on us to sow his peace

and joy in the world. The Pope insists untiringly on this point: “Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others ... Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people.”[16]

“Placing ourselves” in Christ’s wounds, by the path of compassion and contemplation, can open for us an authentic new Mediterranean. We learn to love those around us with our whole heart, beginning with those most in need, who often are right by our side, in our own home.

[1] Pope Francis, canonization homily for John XXIII and John Paul II, 27 April 2014.

[2] Saint Bernard, *Sermon 61* (Commentary on the *Song of Songs*), 4.

[3] Saint John of Avila, *Letters*, no. 47. Cf. *Song* 2:16.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, no. 1799b, dated 1933, in *Santo Rosario. Edición crítico-histórica*, Rialp, Madrid 2010, commentary on the first Glorious Mystery, p. 226, note 5.

[5] “Each day, in fulfilment of an old resolution, I will remain within the Wound of my Lord’s Side.” Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, no. 1763, dated 1934; in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter Press, commentary on point no. 288.

[6] Cf. Saint Josemaría, Letter to Juan Jimenez Vargas, 6 June 1938, in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, Scepter, New York.

[7] Probably Fr. William Doyle, S.J., Irish priest killed in World War I after many acts of heroic service as chaplain on the battle front. He stressed the need for a cheerful but demanding asceticism in daily life (cf. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 1031).

[8] Cf. Saint Josemaría, Letter to Juan Jimenez Vargas, 6 June 1938, in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, Scepter New York, pp. 213-214.

[9] Pope Francis, General Audience, 12 April 2017.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Julio Martínez Mesanza,
“Defendido,” *Gloria*, Rialp, Madrid
2016.

[12] Pope Francis, Homily, 7 April
2013.

[13] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*,
no. 303.

[14] Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*,
first Glorious Mystery.

[15] Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del
Beato Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2000,
p. 235.

[16] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort.
Evangelii Gaudium (24 November
2013), no. 270.

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