

Meditations: Sunday of the Fourth Week of Lent (Year C)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during these days of Lent.

- The joy of conversion .
- The merciful love of God the Father
- Always appreciating the good

ON THIS DATE, almost halfway through Lent, the Church invites us to rejoice as we approach our Redemption, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Hence this Sunday is known as *Laetare Sunday*, the Sunday of joy. In the liturgy today

we contemplate the parable of the prodigal son who, in a surprising way, expresses both the infinite mercy of the Father, as well as the sadness of sin and the joy of conversion.

The context of the parable is the murmuring of the Pharisees, astonished that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. Our Lord tells this story to spur them to a change of heart: *There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living (Lk 15:11-13).*

In the story of the youngest son we see the reality of sin: forgetting the gifts that God has given us, which

leads in the end to damaging our own humanity. “This is the authentic reality, even when it may at times seem that sin permits us to achieve success. Distancing oneself from the Father always brings with it a great destruction in the one who does so, who violates his will, and dissipates this inheritance within himself: the very dignity of the human being, the gift of grace.”^[1] In the parable we see that sin is not the result of arbitrary rules; it always does harm to the person, even if the devil tries to deceive us. But authentic joy, both human and supernatural, is restored in conversion.

BUT WHILE he was still a long way off, his father saw him and took pity on him; running up, he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him (Lk 15:20). Saint Josemaría exclaimed:

“Can you put it more humanly than that? Can you describe more graphically the fatherly love of God for us? When God runs toward us, we cannot keep silent, but with Saint Paul we exclaim: *Abba, Pater*: ‘Father, my Father!’ For though he is the Creator of the universe, he doesn't mind our not using high-sounding titles, or worry about our not acknowledging his greatness. He wants us to call him Father; he wants us to savor that word, our souls filling with joy.”^[2]

Our life is a continuous return to the Father; we need to begin and begin again many times. And with each return, we discover more deeply the beauty of God's merciful love. God is not a jealous tyrant. He doesn't want us to follow his laws out of fear, but quite the opposite: with the same refinement with which He respects our freedom, God draws us to

himself through his willingness to always forgive us.

Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son (Lk 15:21), the younger son says. But realizing that we are children of a Father who is all goodness and mercy helps us understand that He loves us unconditionally and never tires of our infidelities. “The embrace and the kiss of his father makes him understand that he was always considered a son, in spite of everything. This teaching of Jesus is very important: our condition as children of God is the fruit of the love of the Father’s heart; it does not depend on our merits or on our actions, and thus no one can take it away, not even the devil! No one can take this dignity away.”^[3]—

THE DEPTH of the mercy of the father in the parable is shown in his joy when the younger son returns: the hug, the kisses, the new cloak and the ring, the feast, the fattened calf. But his mercy is also revealed in how he treats the older son, when the latter discovers what is happening in the house. We may tend to judge this brother negatively, because he seems rigid and envious. But the father is also merciful towards him; he doesn't get angry despite the fact that his son has failed to perceive and appreciate his affection.

“The Father waits for those who recognize they are sinners and goes in search of the ones who feel ‘righteous’.”^[4] In reality, the two brothers are more alike than they seem. Both have ended up living for themselves, seeking what they want, although in different ways. One has chosen a disordered life; the other, it seems, has opted for a certain moral

rectitude, but now we see him unhappy, as though tired of doing good. “We have to be on guard against the danger of a surreptitious lukewarmness,” Saint Josemaría said, “which could lead us to be separated from God and, therefore, ineffective: the lukewarmness of those who think they have already done enough, because they have friends, and have been busy externally; but they haven’t enkindled or warmed up the environment around them.”^[5] —

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours (Lk 15:31), the father tells the older brother. Our Lord always wants to share his life with us, to give us everything He has, including Himself. We can ask Mary, mother of mercy, to help us to always see, first of all, the many good things that God has given us and that others have, so as never to stray from the Father’s house. And we can also give thanks for the desire for goodness

and conversion that is so deeply rooted in the human heart.

^[1] Saint John Paul II, Homily, 16 March 1980.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

^[3] Francis, Audience, 11 May 2016.

^[4] Francis, Angelus, 6 March, 2016.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, London, September 1971.
