

Meditations: Sunday of the Twenty-Ninth Week of Ordinary Time (Year B)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time. The topics are: ends and means; a paradoxical path; offering Jesus' compassion.

- Ends and means
- A paradoxical path
- Offering Jesus' compassion

THE GOSPEL this Sunday describes James and John approaching Jesus with a bold request: *Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory (Mk 10:37).* Jesus' response is as profound as the sons of Zebedee's request is daring: *You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? (Mk 10:38).*

It is very likely that James and John made their petition with an all-too-human mentality. All the same time, despite the limited focus which drew the other apostles' indignation, whether they knew: it or not, the sons of Zebedee were asking for something objectively magnificent to sit at the Lord's right hand in his kingdom, to behold his glory, to enjoy the utmost closeness to God. This is the greatest desire to which a human being can aspire. *You will show me*

the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Ps 16:11). James and John seek a noble goal; they long for a good end, but they do not reflect on the means that lead to it. Jesus tells them they do not know what they are asking because they do not yet understand the way to achieve what they seek.

Christ's response does not question the greatness of the apostles' goal. Rather, it invites them to consider the true means of attaining it. Great desires motivate us when they push us to discover and walk the paths that lead to their fulfillment. The question of *ends* is inseparably tied to the question of *means*. An athlete who wants an Olympic gold but never considers how to achieve it, or is unwilling to plan or train in the sport, would have a merely superficial desire. Jesus not only embodies and offers holiness to

everyone through his life and preaching, but also practices the means that lead to it. His invitation is twofold: a burning desire for the end and the eagerness to find and walk the paths that lead to it, with the help of his grace. As St. Josemaría put it: “Here is a man who started to build and was unable to finish!” A sad commentary which, if you don't want, need never be made about you: for you possess everything necessary to crown the edifice of your sanctification: the grace of God and your own will.”^[1]

JAMES AND John did not understand Jesus' response, but they were not the only ones. The other apostles were indignant with the sons of Zebedee, probably because they had gotten ahead in asking Jesus for something they too desired. “The

disciples had fallen into human weakness and were discussing among themselves which one would be the leader and superior to the others... This happened and is recounted for our advantage... What happened to the holy Apostles can be understood by us as an incentive to humility.”^[2] Jesus wanted to take advantage of this situation to show them that the very ideal of glory was quite different from what they imagined.

You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:42-45).

The Lord's declaration is paradoxical:

to achieve a goal, He points to means that, at first glance, seem counterproductive. “Dominion and service, egoism and altruism, possession and gift, self-interest and gratuitousness: these profoundly contrasting approaches confront each other in every age and place. There is no doubt about the path chosen by Jesus: he does not merely indicate it with words to the disciples of then and of today, but he lives it in his own flesh.”^[3]

The apostles desire glory, but the path is one of humility; they seek self-affirmation, but Jesus asks them to affirm others; they think they are serving a dominant king, but their Lord reveals that He lives to serve all men. Indeed, “Jesus’ life is lived for others. It culminates in dying for others, embracing in those ‘others’ the entire human family with all the weight of sin it has carried through time.”^[4] The “life for others” that

Christ lived is a life that redeems us, and it is the life we too can live. When we live for God and our brothers and sisters, our existence becomes a ransom for many.

IN THE second reading of today's Mass, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Heb 4:14-16). When, with the psalmist, we implore, *We wait in hope for the Lord; He is our help and our shield* (Ps

33:20), we can consider that this *help and shield* is, in large part, the compassion of the Son of God. When we meditate on these words, we may find our hearts moved by the desire to offer the people around us the compassion of Jesus.

Christians live this compassion for others through service. Like Christ's compassion, it rises to heaven and draws God's merciful gaze: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus* (Phil 2:4-5). Our attentiveness to others through big or small acts of service is more than material or moral help: we are imitating Jesus and sharing his compassion with them. When performing an act of service, we may notice its difficulty or impact, but

behind that, imperceptible but no less real, is God's outstretched hand, the compassion of Jesus made present through our gesture. It is easy to imagine the reaction of good parents when they see one of their children sincerely, selflessly caring for another: they are moved to help the child in need and touched by the one helping.

“Our fidelity to the Lord depends on our willingness to serve. And we know this often costs, because “it tastes like a cross”. But, as our care and availability toward others grows, we become freer inside, more like Jesus. The more we serve, the more we are aware of God’s presence. Above all, when we serve those who cannot give anything in return, the poor, embracing their difficulties and needs with tender compassion: and we in turn discover God’s love and embrace there.”^[5] The Virgin Mary, like a good mother, will help us give

ourselves entirely to our brothers and sisters, knowing that this is the path that leads to glory.

^[1] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 324.

^[2] St. Cyril of Alexandria, “Commentary on Luke,” 12, 5, 24: PG 72, 912.

^[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 18-II-2012.

^[4] St. John Paul II, Audience, 14-IX-1983.

^[5] Pope Francis, Angelus, 19-IX-2021.

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