

As in a Film: A Perfume with Eternal Value

At the anointing in Bethany, Mary wanted to bid Jesus farewell and show her affection for Him in a way that would last through the centuries.

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The Passion of the Lord is imminent. Jesus is in Bethany, in Simon's house (cf. *Jn 12:1-11*). Lazarus, now dead and risen, is at his side, enjoying what was perhaps the last encounter

with his good friend. Martha and Mary are also present, along with a few disciples. Martha, as on other occasions, seeks to entertain Jesus, although this time she is not the hostess. Mary, for her part, lends a hand to her sister, but in her heart and imagination, she is pondering many issues she has experienced of late. With a keen intuition, perhaps she understands in Jesus' words that this meeting is different from all the others.

An uncalculating love

That evening Mary's thoughts would turn to Jesus. Everything in her was gratitude. Friendship always gives rise to a sense of gratitude, but friendship with God does so even more! The Lord had given her many hours of conversation, consolation and companionship; and recently He had brought her brother Lazarus back from the dead. 'How can I be

grateful for so much goodness, and what more can I do for my God?’

These and other questions would pop into her head and, at last, she makes up her mind. She will do something special for Jesus to show her gratitude and love.

The other guests could not imagine what they were about to witness in a few moments. Mary thinks of what is of greatest value: she does not want to give a merely material thing. No, what she wants is to give herself, to adore Him, to thank Him, and in doing so to show Jesus all her love. A smile spreads across her face. The perfume, of pure spikenard, is contained in a fine alabaster bottle, possibly with a thin neck, so that, drop by drop, the perfume is released and perfumes the air. The fragrance was worth around three hundred denarii — almost a whole year's salary — and it will go on to acquire eternal value.

Mary makes her way through the guests and, with determination, makes a magnanimous gesture. Before Simon offers Jesus water to wash Himself, as was the custom, Mary steps forward, takes the perfume, anoints Jesus' feet with it and wipes them with her hair (cf. *Jn* 12:2). She breaks the jar: it is all for her God, and she does not reserve a single drop for herself. She offers what she has, with deep devotion. She does not calculate, she does not measure, she gives her all. With this gesture she recognises the absolute dignity of Jesus. This perfume is no longer just her perfume of nard costing three hundred denarii. Mary has anointed the Messiah with the perfume of her freedom, which "can only be given through love."^[1]

This moment resembles another in the life of the Lord, now more than thirty years ago in Bethlehem, not Bethany. Only Mary and Joseph are

there, not Martha, Mary, Lazarus, or any of the other disciples. Jesus has not performed any miracles or manifested Himself as God, but he has been born as the Saviour of the world. In these circumstances, some kings from the East also recognise his exalted dignity, lay what is of value at his feet and, with deep veneration, adore the Child God. Jesus's parents are moved by this gesture, in awe of the marvel they are experiencing. Surely, in time, they will relive with Jesus this magnanimous expression of adoration. Those mighty kings had given not only material goods, more or less valuable, but, by kneeling down — at least that is how we might imagine them as they offer their gifts — they manifested their willingness to love Him above all other earthly realities.

“Dear young people,” St. John Paul II once wrote, “you too, offer to the Lord the gold of your existence, that

is, the freedom to follow Him out of love, responding faithfully to his call; you raise to Him the incense of your ardent prayer, to the praise of his glory; and you offer him the myrrh, of your affection full of gratitude for Him who as true Man, loved us even to the point of dying as an evildoer on Golgotha."^[2] Like those kings, Mary, with her perfume, offers Jesus her freedom, her gratitude and her desire to love Him with all her heart.

As He loves

Mary continues to kneel beside Jesus. The perfume bathes her Lord's feet and, without hesitation, she begins to wipe them with her hair. Mary perceives only the presence of Christ. She does not notice the other guests, nor her sister Martha. She kneels there before the Lord, making known her affection for Him and her immense gratitude.

Jesus contemplates her without saying a word. He lets her do it. It is Mary's moment, and He wants to prolong this loving attention. She knows that his passion and death are approaching, and she thinks of all that He will suffer for each and every one of us, because He came into the world to draw us into his love, to teach us to love. And He sees in this affectionate movement of hers consolation for the suffering that is already approaching. Mary projects in this gesture the many thousands of acts of love for God that Christians of all times will offer him. Jesus' heart is particularly sensitive to the manifestations of affection he receives. That is why He thanks Mary and, in her, all those who will continue to anoint God with the perfume of their ordinary life:

Wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in remembrance of her (Mt 26:13).

How would Jesus have lived that moment? What would he have been pondering inside Himself? Perhaps He was thinking about what He would do with his apostles at the Last Supper. He would wash the feet of his disciples, and Mary had foreshadowed that gesture. Jesus was probably thinking of the greatest act of self-giving that would take place a few days later with the institution of the Eucharist, the total self-giving that would culminate on the Cross. Perhaps He also considers his presence in every Tabernacle, and in so many souls who would approach Him and receive Him with the same disposition as Mary did at that very moment. *If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (Jn 14:23).*

In this whole scene, one might think that it is Jesus who receives most from this gesture of Mary's: she

anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair, but, in truth, it is Mary who wins in this story. She pours herself out to Jesus, but He "does not allow himself to be outdone in generosity"^[3] and opens to her even wider horizons of love: by showing her affection and seeing that it was well received, Mary's heart learns to expand in order to love like Jesus.

The atmosphere is filled with fragrance

St. John tells us that the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume (cf. *Jn* 12:3). Those of the people present who had not seen Mary's generous act would nonetheless know that something had happened because of the scent.

A manifestation of piety does not only magnify the soul of the one who performs it. Love is diffusive, it spreads, it imbues those around with its aroma. Even what is left undone,

the omissions, leave their mark and diminish this economy of salvation. Piety, born of the desire to please our Father God, "is a profound attitude of the soul, which eventually permeates one's entire existence: it is there in every thought, every desire, every affection."^[4]

In the naturalness of every Christian's daily life, there are many occasions when one can impregnate the atmosphere with love for God: at work, in family life, with friends and colleagues... It is the *bonus odor Christi*, the fragrance of Christ, which is manifested "every day and made up of a thousand little details of understanding, hidden sacrificed and unnoticed self-giving."^[5] Anointing the Lord, permeating the environment in which we find ourselves with the perfume of charity, opens up an immense panorama to our own existence: it allows us to look at God, and to feel

that He is looking at us in everything we do.

Unsurprisingly, the guests turn their attention to the scene of Mary's action. The focus of conversation would shift and an exchange of glances would take place. Each, in the intimacy of his or her heart, weighs this gesture. John, like Peter and Martha, probably appreciates Mary's act. Simon, the master of the house, on the other hand, is surprised, wondering how it had not occurred to him to be more courteous and affectionate in welcoming Jesus. St. John notes Judas's reaction: *Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii to give to the poor? (Jn 12:5)*. Mary turns a deaf ear to these words. Calculation was not part of the lexicon of love that she had learnt from her Master.

Jesus looks at Judas and Mary; in his eyes we can see the affection with which He tries to redirect their thoughts. With a clear voice, He says: *Let her alone (Jn 12:7).*

"Jesus knew that his death was near and he saw in this gesture of Mary's an anticipation of the anointing of his lifeless body before being laid in the tomb. This vision goes beyond any expectation of the diners. Jesus reminds them that the first poor man is he himself, the poorest of the poor, because he represents them all. And it is also in the name of the poor, of the lonely, the marginalised and those discriminated against, that the Son of God accepted the gesture of that woman. She, with her feminine sensitivity, proved to be the only one who understood the state of mind of the Lord."^[6]

This was Mary's farewell to Jesus. She wanted to show her affection for

Him in a unique way that would last through time. And she succeeded. Her love not only touched the Lord's heart: it also touched the hearts of all those — present in Simon's house or reading this passage — who recognise her magnanimity and her desire never to be separated from Him.

^[1] *Friends of God*, no.31

^[2] Saint John Paul II, Message, 6-VIII-2004

^[3] *The Forge*, no. 623

^[4] *Friends of God*, no.146

^[5] *Christ is Passing By*, no.35

^[6] Pope Francis, Message, 14-XI-2021

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