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Combat, Closeness, Mission (2): You Make the Path By Walking

For a Christian, Heaven is always just around the corner: life is at once a journey and a destination.

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“Life is a journey, not a destination,” one of the most popular quotes circulating online asserts.^[1] A simple search with these words yields countless images and wallpapers to

suit all tastes: idyllic landscapes with winding roads or highways, a girl on a swing, stylized compositions with a vintage air... But what does it really mean to say that life is a journey, and not a destination? Is it a mere cliché, a phrase that attracts us because it allows us to relativize our own mistakes, or because it hints that what matters most is living, not how you live or for what purpose? Are the journey and the destination in opposition to one another? Is the destination – especially our life's *destiny* – not present in every moment of the journey?

These questions certainly require a serene approach. Let's consider how this motto inspires people in their ordinary lives. In the world of running, for instance, the idea of prioritizing the journey over the destination is very popular. At times runners, especially beginners, start with ambitious goals, whether they

have to do with distances, fitness, or weight loss. And as we might imagine, most of the time they do not achieve these goals as easily as they hoped. This is how one runner described his experience:

“Day after day I failed in my goal. Day after day I accumulated evidence that I was not a runner. Every run hammered in the fact that I wasn’t there yet. But the point I’d failed to realise about running was the very one which I already knew about travelling: the key is to enjoy the journey. [...] I realised that every run is a gift. Every run is a chance to be where you want to be. With this revelation, my running changed. I stopped denying the joy I was feeling. I stopped accumulating days of failure. I began living more ‘in the moment,’ looking at each run as an opportunity to appreciate what was right in front of me.”^[2] —

This runner was starting to learn an important lesson that any of us can apply to the journey of life. By faith, we know that our destination is present in every moment of the journey, because the Christian vocation is a call to live entirely for God and with God, already in our journey through history, and then in heaven, when finally He will be “all in all” (1 *Cor* 15:28). For this reason, Saint Josemaría said that “happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth.”^[3] —

However, this peaceful union between journey and destination is not easy to achieve. It is, in fact, the work of a lifetime. And life is at once short and very long. Like the runner, when we look toward the goal and then see where we are now, we may get discouraged: the sight of the distance we have yet to travel could cause us to stop or despair of the journey. But Jesus warned us against

this temptation: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Mt 6:33-34). When the Kingdom of God – that is, the vocation to holiness – becomes the first priority, each step is an opportunity to be *where* you want to be and *with* the One you long for. From this point of view, Heaven is always just around the corner, and life is at once a journey and a destination.

We will consider, then, some aspects of our journey to Heaven. The first is the certainty that we do not travel alone: we have God as a friend and companion on the journey. The second is the need to address discouragement, learning to turn our limits and our sins around. And

finally, the conviction that living in the present is the best way to find happiness on this earth as well as in heaven.

Walk humbly with your God

In the Old Testament, the brief book of Micah is filled with prophecies of punishment. Through his prophet, God reproaches the Samaritans for their idolatry; He reproaches his people for an external, hollow worship; and He also foretells, for the first time, the fall of Jerusalem. But there is more: his message is also one of hope and salvation. Micah's mission is not only to condemn evil, but to remind the people that God is very near: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (*Mic 6:8*).

The Holy Spirit – for it is He who speaks through the prophets – does

not tell us to walk towards God, as if He were far away, waiting for us at the end of a long journey. He tells us to walk with Him. He accompanies us in everything and is interested in everything: what we think, what we look at, what we say, what we desire: “Jesus Christ, who is God and Man, understands me and looks after me, for he is my Brother and my Friend.”^[4] —

Walking with God means going through all the episodes of my life, great or small, with Him; talking about everything with Him, listening to Him at all times; exposing myself to the possibility that He will ask me things I do not expect, or to take me on paths that I did not imagine. Those who walk with a friend are ready to talk and to listen. The disciples on the road to Emmaus walked like that, even though they didn't know to what extent the stranger who listened to them with

such attention and spoke to them with such power was their Brother and Friend. They didn't know it, but they were walking with God, and God was opening unexpected horizons for them (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*). "Lord, how great you are, in everything! But you move me even more when you come down to our level, to follow us and to seek us in the hustle and bustle of each day. Lord, grant us a childlike spirit, pure eyes and a clear head so that we may recognise you when you come without any outward sign of your glory."^[5] —

God also wants us to walk with him *humbly*. What does that mean? He suggests it to us in one of the shortest prayers of the Psalms: "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned

child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me” (Ps 131:1-2). Walking humbly with God means not aspiring to results or successes that do not depend on me, and that may not be right for me; being content with what I have, with what God gives me, with what life presents to me. And living all this... intensely. The paradox is that, when we walk humbly with God, we do greater things than we believed. “Didn’t you see the light in Jesus’ eyes as the poor widow left her little alms in the temple? Give him what you can.”^[6]

Turn your defects around

“Grace, precisely because it builds on nature, does not make us superhuman all at once,” the Pope writes. “That kind of thinking would show too much confidence in our own abilities.”^[7] Fragility, difficulties, mistakes, simply form part of the

journey of life. Admitting this reality does not mean giving up or resigning ourselves to sin; it simply means accepting our limits and times, and those of reality.

But our pride can't quite accept it. The devil also knows this, and does not limit himself to tempting us to move away from God: once he has seduced us, he tries to "make firewood from the fallen tree;" he uses our sins or our weakness to discourage us, because he knows that this is an effective method for making us abandon the journey. There we see the need to learn to turn our falls and miseries around, to benefit and learn from them. This may sound strange, but it is one of the most important and fundamental principles of growth in interior life. The great teachers of spirituality have understood this for centuries.

There are people, one of these teachers writes, who “are frequently amazed by their faults, who become uneasy, who get ashamed; they get angry with themselves and end in discouragement. These are all effects of self-love, much more harmful than the faults themselves.”^[8] The last sentence is surprising. The shame, unease, and discouragement we fall into when we see our limits are harmful. They push us away from God and predispose us to sin – which, ironically, is what discouraged us in the first place. It is, in short, a vicious circle that prevents us from reconciling with God, looking at his face and telling Him that we are sorry and we want his forgiveness.

Sometimes what happens to us is that we do not forgive ourselves. We fall more in love with the idea of perfection, perhaps, than we do with God, and so we lack the humility to start over. “You should never be

discouraged, no matter how many times you fall; you should say to yourself: ‘Even if I fall twenty times, a hundred times a day, I will rise again each time, and I will continue on my way.’ What does it matter, after all, if you have fallen on the way, as long as you reach the end? God will not reproach you.”^[9] — What matters most is to resume the journey, turning back to God as many times as necessary. Contrition for our sins can become a springboard that propels us back to God: “May our stumbles and defeats separate us from Him no more. Just as a feeble child throws itself contritely into the strong arms of its father, you and I will hold tightly to the yoke of Jesus. Only a contrition and humility like this can transform our human weakness into the fortitude of God.”^[10] —

Live in the present

The only way to travel our path is to take it step by step. No one climbs a mountain in one leap, and even less so if it is a high peak: sometimes it will be necessary to train and acclimatize for a good season; and we will need to make stages, camp, regain strength with the comfort of a well-chosen luggage, while enjoying the conversation and the landscape, changing at each stage. In short, we need to focus on our most immediate reality, or in other words, to live in the present.

Living in the present means recognizing the current moment as the only one in which I can receive God's grace and fulfill his will. The enemy also knows this too well, so he will try to keep us as far away as possible from our *here and now*, distressing us with a disappointing past or a worrisome future; or losing us in daydreams about what could have been or may yet be. And if he

manages any of this, he is already succeeding in cooling our love, because love only exists in the present.^[11] —

Living in the present does not mean ignoring the past and the future, but putting them in their place: being at peace with the past, reconciled with God and with others... and also with ourselves, by accepting who we are and who we have become. And being at peace with the future, because although God counts and vibrates with our plans and projects, he wants us serene. “*In manibus tuis tempora mea,*” another psalm says: my time and my things are in your hands (cf. *Ps 31:15*). With Saint Josemaría, we can pray, “Into your hands I abandon the past and the present and the future...”^[12] —

Acceptance and surrender create the climate we need to live the present with serenity and intensity.

Confidence in our Father God leads us “to pass through life with the poise of God’s children, to reason and decide with the freedom of God’s children, to face pain and suffering with the serenity of God’s children, to appreciate beautiful things as a child of God does.”^[13] Having the poise of God’s children means living centered in the here and now, attentive to doing what He wants from me: working, resting, praying, comforting, laughing... There is “a time for everything” (*Ecc 3:1*), and the best way to get it right is to live each moment with the Lord: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (*Col 3:17*). If we cultivate this constant dialogue with God, we will more easily identify what distracts us and deviates us from the path: moments of evasion on the phone or in our imagination, dark thoughts, confusion, “mystical

wishful thinking” ...^[14] Then we will find it easier to return to the tried and true path towards holiness, which consists of doing what I ought and concentrating on what I am doing.^[15]

Living in the present allows us to be grateful for what we have and, therefore, to enjoy life. Again, “happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth.”^[16] Happiness comes from the awareness that I am loved by my Father God here and now, and that He fills me with gifts every day. Being too preoccupied with our failures in the past or the dangers of the future prevents us from perceiving the good things offered to us in the present moment. That is why it is very good to spend time every day, in our prayer, perhaps in our examination of conscience, on gratitude. How did God love me today? What specific things can I thank Him for?

Persevere to the end

“By your endurance you will gain your lives,” Jesus tells us (*Lk 21:19*). Reaching the end of the road is essential. We all dream of being able to say, like Saint Paul: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (*2 Tim 4:7*). We will achieve this goal by keeping the faith today, right now. We might easily feel overwhelmed by the prospect of being faithful for ten, twenty, forty, or eighty years. How can I be sure of my fidelity on such a long journey? In reality, it is not about being sure that I will not turn away from God over the next few decades: it is about being faithful to our Lord *today*, with the grace He gives me at this moment. Living like this is the way to travel the journey of life to its end.

Christians recognize that “life is a journey, not a destination” as an

obvious affirmation. We know that our life does not end here and that, therefore, our years on earth are not the destination. And, at the same time, we know that our true life, our destiny, is already here, in every moment: our life is “hidden with Christ in God” (*Col 3:3*). Therefore, “our heads should indeed be touching heaven, but our feet should be firmly on the ground;”^[17] we need his will to be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” Then we will “make the path by walking,”^[18] because every step we take will make both our path and our destiny.

^[1] The quote is usually attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the source is unverified.

^[2] John Bingham, “Enjoy Your Journey,” www.runnersworld.com.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, 1005.

^[4] *The Forge*, 182.

[5] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 313.

[6] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, 829.

[7] Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 50.

[8] J.-N. Grou, *Manuel des âmes intérieures*, Lieja, 1851, pg. 159. “The worst part of the situation, as observed by Saint Francis de Sales, is that sometimes one becomes discouraged and angry for having been angry, impatient for having been impatient. What a disaster! Shouldn’t we see in that pure pride?” (pg. 160).

[9] J.-N. Le Grou, *Manuel des âmes intérieures*, pgs. 160ff.

[10] St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, 7th Station.

[11] Cfr. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter 15.

[12] *Way of the Cross*, 7th Station, no. 3.

[13] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 3.

[14] Cfr. St Josemaría, *Conversations*, 88, 116.

[15] Cfr. *The Way*, 815.

[16] *The Forge*, 1005.

[17] *Friends of God*, 75.

[18] “Wayfarer, there is no path; you make the path as you walk” (A. Machado, *Campos de Castilla*, “Proverbios y cantares” XXIX. St. Josemaría quotes this verse in *Letter 6*, no. 75).

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