

In the Joyful Hope of Christ

"Christ freed us from a relationship with God based on negative precepts and limits, and brought us instead a life of Love." A new article on Christian life.

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What gives life its value? What gives *my* life its value? In today's world the answer to this question often hinges on two points: the success I am capable of achieving, and the opinion other people have of me. These

points are far from negligible. It is only natural to hope our efforts will be successful, as nobody starts something with the aim of failing; and other people's opinions affect our family, social and professional life. However, in life there are always failures, small or not so small; and it can happen that people form an opinion of us which we simply do not recognize as true.

The experience of failure, loss of standing, or awareness of our own inability – not just in professional life, but even in the effort to live a Christian life – can lead to discouragement, dejection, and ultimately a loss of hope. The pressure to succeed at different levels, *to be someone*, or at least to be able to claim to be someone, is stronger today than ever before. Indeed, more than what one is (a son or daughter, parent, brother or sister, grandparent), the focus

nowadays is on what one can *do*. Consequently people are more vulnerable to the different types of failure that life can bring. Setbacks that before were either resolved or accepted with fortitude, now can often be the cause of deep distress or frustration, even from a very young age. In a world with such high expectations and disillusionments, is it still possible to live as Saint Paul advises, *rejoicing in hope* (*Rom 12:12*)?

In his February 2017 letter, the Prelate of Opus Dei pointed to the only truly enlightening answer to this question, voiced with a decisive “yes!”: “Grant, O Lord, that from faith in your Love, we may live each day with a love that is always new, in joyful hope.”^[1] Even though we may sometimes be tempted to lose hope, to do so would mean closing one’s eyes to God’s Love and his constant closeness. As Pope Francis reminded

us in his catechesis about hope: “Christian hope is steadfast; that is why it does not disappoint ... It is not based on what we can do or be, nor even on what we may believe in. Its foundation, that is, the foundation of Christian hope, is what we can believe most firmly and be most certain of, that is to say, the love that God himself has for each of us. It is easy to say ‘God loves us.’ We all say it. But think a bit: is each one of us able to say, ‘I am sure that God loves *me*’? It is not so easy to say it. But it is true.”[2]

The great hope

In his preaching and conversations, Saint Josemaria often pointed to the first Christians. For them the faith was more than a doctrine to accept or a model of how to live; it was the *gift* of a new life: the gift of the Holy Spirit, who had been poured out into their hearts after Christ’s

resurrection. For the early Christians, faith in God was a reality they experienced and not simply an intellectual conviction. God was Someone really present in their heart. Saint Paul wrote to the faithful at Ephesus, referring to their life before they knew the Gospel: *remember that you were at that time separated from Christ ... strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world* (Eph 2:12). With faith, in contrast, they received hope, *and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (Rom 5:5).

Two thousand years later, God continues calling us to this “great hope,” which makes all other hopes and disappointments merely relative. “We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough

without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.”[3]

It is good to ask ourselves whether we have become “accustomed” to the reality of a God who saves, a God who comes to fill us with hope; so accustomed that we sometimes fail to see in it anything more than an idea with little real impact on our life. The Cross, which seemed a great failure to those who had hoped in Jesus, became at the Resurrection the most decisive triumph in all history. Decisive because it was not a success limited just to Jesus; we are all victors in Him. *This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith in the Risen One (1 Jn 5:4).* The disciples on the road to Emmaus looked at the past with nostalgia: *we had hoped...* (*Lk 24:21*). They did not realize that

Jesus was walking with them, that He was about to open their eyes to a wonderful future, proof against any disillusionment. “Stir up the fire of your faith! Christ is not a figure of the past. He is not a memory lost in history. He lives! As Saint Paul says, *Jesus Christus heri et hodie: ipse et in saecula!* ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today – yes, and forever!””[4]

Letting ourselves be touched by God’s Love

This is how Saint Paul summed up our Christian life: *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me* (Gal 2:19-20). For Saint Paul, Christianity primarily means that Christ has died for us, has risen, and from Heaven has sent into our hearts his Holy

Spirit, who transforms us and opens our eyes to a new life. “Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what ‘life’ really is. He begins to perceive the meaning of the word hope.”^[5] As with the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Dimas the good thief, and the disciples at Emmaus, Jesus gives us a new way of looking at the world: at ourselves, at others, and at God. And it is only with this new way of looking given to us by God that our struggle to improve and to imitate Him makes sense. Otherwise all our efforts are *vanity and a chasing after wind* (*Eccles 2:11*).

By dying on the Cross “for us men and our salvation,”^[6] Christ freed us from a relationship with God based on negative precepts and limits, and brought us instead a life of Love. *You have ... clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of*

its creator (Col 3:9-10). It means therefore *coming to know* God's Love and *letting oneself be touched* by Him, in order to set out afresh on the path to holiness. Finding God and letting ourselves be transformed by Him is the key. The Prelate of Opus Dei reminded us of this shortly after his election. "What are the priorities that our Lord is presenting to us at this historical moment of the world, the Church and the Work? The answer is clear: in the first place, to care for our union with God with the refinement of people in love, beginning with the contemplation of Jesus Christ, the face of the Father's Mercy. The program described by Saint Josemaria is always valid: 'May you seek Christ, may you find Christ, may you love Christ.'" [7] Union with God enables us to live the Life that He offers us. Seeking Christ's face and letting ourselves be looked at by Him is a marvelous way to deepen in this life of Love.

Letting ourselves be looked at by Christ

Christ is the *face* of God's Mercy because in Him God talks to us in a language adapted to our level. It is a human language that seeks to satisfy the thirst for love beyond measure that He himself has placed in each one of us. "And you ... have you sometimes felt this gaze on you, a gaze of infinite love that, beyond all your sins, limitations and failures, continues to trust you and to look at your life with hope? Are you aware of the value you have for God, who for love has given you everything? As Saint Paul teaches us, *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8)*. Do we really understand the force of these words?"[8]

To discover our Lord's face we need to follow the path of adoration and contemplation. "How good it is to be

before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his Presence. How much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life!"[9] As the Pope said on one occasion, it means "looking at the face of God, but above all realizing that he is also looking at us." [10] It might seem easy *to let oneself be looked at*, simply *to be* in God's presence. But in this hyperactive world of ours saturated with stimuli it can be quite a challenge. So we need to ask God for the gift of being able to enter into his silence and let ourselves be looked at by Him. We need to be convinced that to be in his presence is already a wonderful prayer and tremendously effective, even though we make no immediate resolution. Contemplating Christ's face has in itself a transforming power that we cannot measure with our human criteria. *I keep the Lord always before me;*

because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure (Ps 16:8-9).

Jesus' face is also the face of the Crucified. On confronting our own weakness, we could think with over-human reasoning that we have let Him down, and that we cannot just approach Him as though nothing had happened. But these qualms come from a false idea of God's Love.

“There is a false asceticism which presents our Lord on the Cross as furious and rebellious. A contorted body apparently threatening mankind: ‘You have broken me, but I will hurl down on you my nails, my cross and my thorns!’ Such people do not know the spirit of Christ. He suffered all that He could – and being God, how much He could suffer! But He was loving even more than He was suffering... And after dying, He consented to let the lance open

another wound, so that you and I might find refuge next to his most loving Heart.”[11]

How well our Father understood the Love radiating from Jesus’ face! From the Cross He looks at us and says, “I know you perfectly. Before dying I could see all your weaknesses and failings, all your falls and betrayals. And knowing you so well, just as you are, *I judged it worthwhile to give my life for you.*” Christ looks at us with a loving, affirmative look. He sees the good in us – the good that *we are* – and that He himself has given us on calling us into existence. A good that is worthy of Love, of the greatest Love (see *Jn 3:16; 15:13*).

Walking with Christ, leaving a mark on the world

Jesus’ look will help us react with hope when we are faced with our own falls, mistakes, and mediocrity. It is not just about being good

ourselves. God is counting on us to change the world and fill it with his Love. This call is also contained in Christ's loving look. "You might say to me, 'Father, but I have my limits, I am a sinner, what can I do?' When the Lord calls us he doesn't worry about what we are, what we have been, or what we have done or not done. Quite the opposite. When he calls us, he is thinking about everything we have to give, all the love we are capable of spreading. His bets are on the future, on tomorrow. Jesus is pointing you towards the future, never to the museum."[12]

Our Lord's look is a look of Love that always *affirms* the person and says, "How good it is that you exist! How wonderful to have you here with me!"[13] At the same time, while knowing us perfectly, *He counts on us*. To discover God's affirming look is the best way to recover our hope and once again feel drawn upwards,

towards Love, and then to bring this Love to the whole world. Here is our firmest security: Christ died for me because He saw it worthwhile to do so. Christ who really knows me, has confidence in me. As the Apostle exclaimed: *If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Rom 8: 31-32).*

This certainty spurs us to set out once again, to launch out again into the whole world to leave on it Christ's mark. We know that we will often stumble, that we will not always achieve what we set out to do, but in the end that is not what really matters. What matters is that we go forward, with our eyes set on our Lord: *expectantes beatam spem,* waiting in joyful hope.[14] It is He who saves us and relies on us to fill the world with peace and joy. "God has created us to be on our feet.

There is a lovely song that mountain climbers sing as they climb. It goes like this: ‘In climbing it doesn’t matter if we stumble and fall, as long as we get up again.’”^[15] On our feet, cheerful, confident, going forward with the mission of lighting up “all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you carry in your heart.”^[16]

[1] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017.

[2] Pope Francis, General Audience, 15 February 2017.

[3] Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, no. 31.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 584.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 27.

[6] Roman Missal, Nicene Creed.

[7] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 30 (cf. *The Way*, no. 382).

[8] Pope Francis, Message, 15 August 2015.

[9] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (26 November 2013), no. 264.

[10] Pope Francis, Speech, Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements, 18 May 2013.

[11] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Twelfth Station, no. 3.

[12] Pope Francis, Prayer Vigil with Young People, 30 July 2016.

[13] See Joseph Pieper, *Faith. Hope. Love* (cited by Benedict XVI in 2011 Christmas address to the Roman Curia).

[14] Roman Missal, Communion Rite.

[15] Pope Francis, Homily, 24 April 2016.

[16] *The Way*, no. 1.

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