

Meditations: Novena to the Immaculate Conception, Day 2 (1 December)

In preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, here are some ideas to reflect on during the novena.

- The poverty of Bethlehem
- Our Lady's richness
- The value of each person

During this Novena to the Immaculate Conception, in the light of the Beatitudes, we can consider today why our Lady was so happy amid poverty. *Blessed are the poor in*

spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3). Jesus was poor from birth. God could have become man within a family surrounded by comforts in an important city. But He did so in the womb of a simple woman, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, in a small, obscure village in Israel. His birth was in no way showy. Saint Luke tells us that a woman *gave birth to her firstborn son; she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn* (Lk 2:6-7). Only a few tired and astonished shepherds witnessed what had just happened. Christ “did not want anything special, any privilege. Everything happens with exquisite naturalness: from his conception to his birth . . . Our Lord knew how demanding his mission would be. But He hungered to come down to earth to save all souls.”^[1]

The poverty that surrounds the manger scene contrasts with the joy of its protagonists. It might seem that, given their surroundings, it would be difficult to be happy. But the happiness of Mary and Joseph does not depend on external circumstances or on the goods they possessed. They discovered a deep joy based not on ephemeral things but on the awareness of living in God's presence. They saw his divine love behind everything that happened during those days: the impromptu trip to Bethlehem, the lack of space in the inn, the discomfort of the manger... Mary and Joseph can make their own the words Saint Paul would later write to the Philippians: *I have learned to be content with what I have: I have learned to live in poverty, I have learned to live in abundance, I am accustomed to everything everywhere, to plenty and scarcity, to wealth and*

poverty. I can do everything in him who comforts me (Phil 4:11-13).

IN BETHLEHEM, Mary knew that her life, from the most practical things to her deepest happiness, depended on Joseph and Jesus. All generations would call her blessed not so much for what she did, but, above all, for what God was doing in her heart. She was not the mother of our Savior through her own merits. God is the one who chose her, and she answered yes. She was able to give birth to Jesus in that stable thanks to the care of Joseph. Providing trust and security for her to lean on, his care and concern allowed her to regain strength. This was the richness Mary possessed: the recognition that she needed others.

God counts on the people around us to send us his help, to support us when we may feel weak. The Prelate of Opus Dei encouraged us to “see life as a path of collaborating with others where we support each other.

Moments of difficulty can end up being good opportunities for inner growth, for personal and social improvement; they force us to get out of ourselves, to open up to others.”^[2]

Mary always felt supported by Jesus and Joseph. At the same time, they also felt supported by her. This is true in the life of any person. No matter how much human uncertainty we may face, we can always spread affection and serenity to others, and vice versa. We can find comfort in the people who love us.

Our dependence on human relationships is not a limitation, but quite the contrary. This dependence is a major source of happiness here on earth because “joy is not a

transitory emotion: it is something quite different! True joy does not come from things or from possessing, no! It is born from the encounter, from the relationship with others; it is born from feeling accepted, understood, and loved, and from accepting, from understanding and from loving; and this is not because of a passing emotion but because the other is a person.”^[3] In Jesus and in his Immaculate Mother we can always find love that accepts and understands us.

NOT MANY THINGS are required to be happy in Bethlehem. Jesus, Mary and Joseph supported each other. While the external circumstances were certainly not pleasant, the Holy Family embraced the situation they found themselves in. Like them, God invites us to welcome with serenity

and joy whatever happens to us, because He always accompanies us. And, above all, He invites us to welcome those He has put at our side.

Poverty of spirit leads us to discover the richness of each person, even when they may differ from our own way of being and living in many aspects. The value of each person does not depend on their qualities or the affinities we may have; rather it depends on the reality that this person is loved by God and has somehow been entrusted to our company. “The secret of life has been revealed to us by how the Son of God, who became man, dealt with it, even to the point of taking upon himself, on the cross, rejection, weakness, poverty and pain. In every sick child, in every frail elderly person, in every desperate migrant, in every fragile and threatened life, Christ is seeking

us, he is seeking our hearts to reveal to us the joy of love.”^[4]

When we welcome a person as he or she is, with his or her virtues and defects, we are welcoming Christ. This is what Mary Immaculate does with each one of us. She recognizes in us the face of Jesus, since by his death He has redeemed us from sin. As a good Mother, she is the first to welcome us. Mary knows very well that “each soul is a marvelous treasure; each person is unique, irreplaceable. Each one is worth all the blood of Christ.”^[5]

^[1] Saint Josemaría, Meditation, 31 December 1959.

^[2] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Meditation, 11 May 2020.

^[3] Francis, Speech, 6 July 2013.

^[4] Francis, Audience, October 10, 2018.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 80.

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