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Something Great That Is Love (VII): Giving one's life for one's friends

"This is the secret of a celibate heart: leaving behind a love on this earth in order to fill the whole world with the light of God's Love."

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So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (*Gen* 1:27). This is the first creation

account in *Genesis* of the origin of man and woman, with God creating them at the same time. Both possess the same dignity, because they are his living image. The second account focuses again on this event (*Gen* 2:7-25), but with a “slow-motion camera,” as it were. God creates man first and places him in the garden of Eden. The beauty of the newly created world shines forth: the sky, the waters of the sea, the rivers that flow through the mountains and the trees of all types. It is an extraordinary scene, but Adam feels lonely.

To remedy his solitude, the Lord creates a whole host of living creatures to populate Paradise: the birds of the air, the fish swimming in the seas, the land animals. But all this still seems insufficient to the man. It is then that God decides to grant him *a helper fit for him* (*Gen* 2:18), and from the man’s own rib he

creates the woman. Finally, Adam discovers eyes that return a look like his own: *This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man* (*Gen* 2:23). This encounter fills him with joy, but above all it sheds light on his own identity: it tells him in a new way who he is. Something was missing for the man, which only another person could give him.

It is not good for man to be alone

These pages in *Genesis* provide fundamental truths about the human being that are expressed, rather than by theoretical reflections, by a narrative, with a symbolic language. The solitude of Adam therefore has a deep anthropological meaning. Saint John Paul II said that every man and woman shares in that "original solitude," and at some moment in life they have to face it.[1] When God

says *it is not good for man to be alone* (*Gen* 2:18), this actually refers to both of them[2]: both the man as well as the woman need a helper to escape from this solitude, a way to walk together towards the fullness that they lack. And this is marriage.

When, centuries later, Jesus reminds the Pharisees of how it was *from the beginning*, he was referring precisely to this passage of the Bible (cf. *Mt* 19:1-12). Christian marriage is God's call inviting a man and a woman to walk together towards Him. And not only together, but also *through one another*. The spouse is, for a married person, a totally necessary path towards God – a path where the flesh becomes the setting for a loving communion and self-giving, the matter and space for sanctification. Marital love is thus an encounter of bodies and souls that embellishes and transfigures human affection,

giving it, with the grace of the sacrament, a supernatural value.

At the same time, the love between a man and a woman points to something beyond itself. When it is true, it is always a *path towards* God, not the goal. The goal continues being the fullness that is found only in Him. Therefore, the fact that someone who is married might sense that “original solitude” at times isn’t surprising. Nevertheless, this sensation doesn’t mean, as it is sometimes interpreted, that love has come to an end and that a different story of love should begin, because neither would that story be sufficient. Rather it is a sign that the human heart has a thirst that can only be quenched completely in the infinite love of God.

The psychological feeling of never being alone

In that same dialogue on marriage, after recalling the teaching in *Genesis,* Jesus goes a step further. The mutual self-giving of a man and a woman is a beautiful path leading to God. Nevertheless, it is not the only possible path. Our Lord speaks of those who, through a special gift, renounce marriage *for the sake of the kingdom of heaven* (*Mt* 19:12). He himself traveled this path: Jesus remained celibate. In his life He had no need for any mediation between God and Himself: *I and the Father are one* (*Jn* 10:30); *I am in the Father and the Father is in me* (*Jn* 14:11). And Jesus not only traveled this path; He himself wanted to become the Way so that many other persons might love in the same way, "which can only find meaning in God."[3]

The history of the Church is filled with the stories of people who have welcomed Jesus' call to identify themselves with Him also in this

way: something central to Jesus, deeply rooted in his life, even though it is not meant for all Christians. Those who from the first centuries answered the call to celibacy did not hold marriage in contempt. Perhaps that other path in life had even attracted them as much as the one they decided to undertake. But for that very reason, because they saw married life as something beautiful, they could offer their choice to God with a radiant joy. “Only among those who understand and value in all its depth human love,” Saint Josemaria said, “can there arise that other ineffable understanding of which Jesus spoke (cf. *Mt* 19:11). It is a pure gift of God which moves a person to dedicate body and soul to him, to offer him an undivided heart, without the mediation of earthly love.”[4] In some way, those called by God to celibacy are led to discover the *source* and *goal* of all authentic love. They experience in a special

way the Love that filled the heart of Jesus and that has been poured out on his Church.

Hence celibacy is a path that reflects the gratuitous love of the One who always takes the first step (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19). Although celibate persons seem to surrender their freedom when they offer to God the possibility of establishing a family, in reality they enlarge it. Their abandonment into God's hands, their willingness to leave *houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands* (*Mt* 19:29) for his sake, makes them in a special way "free to love."[5] Like a married person, they need to keep custody over their heart, so that the love they bear within doesn't turn away from God, and so they can give it to others. But their self-giving isn't focused on the person of the spouse, but on Christ, who sends them out to the whole world to transmit "the beating of his most

loving Heart”[6] to the specific people around them.

This was Jesus’ life. He didn’t feel lonely, because he knew he was always accompanied by his Father: *Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me* (*Jn* 11:41-42). For us, however, the risk of loneliness remains. But when Christ truly fills the heart of a person, one no longer feels alone. Hence Saint Josemaria said that God had given him “the psychological feeling of never being alone, either humanly or supernaturally.”[7] In words that reflect his own experience, he wrote: “The human heart is endowed with an enormous coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers.”[8]

John, a celibate heart

At the Last Supper, a few hours before offering up his life, Jesus opens his heart to the Apostles: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends* (*Jn* 15:13). These words that express his love for all mankind are also a call. Our Lord tells the Apostles: *I have called you friends* (*Jn* 15:15). They, like all men and women, are recipients of his love *to the end* (*Jn* 13:1). But they are also friends in a special way. "The Friend" invites them to do what He will do[9]: to also give their life for their friends. These words are undoubtedly at the origin of every Christian vocation, but they have always resounded in a special way in the heart of those who have followed Christ by leaving behind everything.

The Cross will be the place of the greatest manifestation of Love. In this sublime scene, together with Mary and the holy women, the figure

of the apostle John is shown clearly to us. “At the moment of truth, they all fled, except for John who truly loved with deeds. Only the adolescent, the youngest of the Apostles, can be found next to the Cross. The others didn’t find within themselves that love as strong as death.”[10] Right from the dawn of adolescence his heart strongly sensed Jesus’ love. We know how dear the memory was to him of the day he first met our Lord: “John’s eyes meet Christ’s. He follows Him and asks:*Teacher, where do you live?* And he went with Him, and spent the whole day with the Teacher. Years later he recounts it with an enchanting candor, like an adolescent keeping a diary who pours out his heart and records even the exact hour: *hora autem erat quasi decima*… He recalls the precise moment when Christ looked at him, when Christ attracted him, when he

couldn't resist Christ, when he fell in love with Christ."[11]

It is easy to imagine how Jesus, on the Cross, would be moved to see the young disciple who *had leaned on his breast at supper* (*Jn* 21:20). Perhaps He wasn't surprised to see his Mother. In one way or another, she had always been at his side. But next to her our Lord finds a friend: John. Amid all that anguish, their eyes meet. What an immense joy it must have been for Jesus' heart! And it is then, the Gospel tells us, on seeing him next to his Mother, that our Lord made John part of the unique relationship that existed between Mary and Himself: *When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son! Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!"* (*Jn* 19:26-27).

Years later John would write: *We love, because he first loved us* (*1 Jn* 4:19). This surprising statement stemmed from his personal experience. John knew he was deeply loved by Jesus. This reality imbued his whole life and gave it new meaning: to bring that same love to the whole world. The apostle John, said Blessed John Henry Newman, "had the unspeakable privilege of being the *friend of Christ*. Thus he was taught to love others; first his affection was concentrated, then it was expanded. Next he had the solemn and comforting charge of tending our Lord's Mother, the Blessed Virgin, after His departure. Do we not here discern the secret sources of his especial love of the brethren? Could he, who first was favoured with his Saviour's affection, then trusted with a son's office towards His Mother, could he be other than a memorial and pattern (as far as man can be), of love, deep,

contemplative, fervent, unruffled, unbounded?”[12]

Awakening hearts

Giving one’s whole heart to God is not simply the result of a personal decision: it is a *gift*, the gift of celibacy. Similarly, its defining mark is not renunciation, but rather the love that is discovered: “His Love… is well worth any love!”[13] The heart senses an unconditional Love, a Love that was awaiting it, and wants to dedicate itself to Him in an unconditional, exclusive way. And not simply in order to experience it, but to *give it* as well to many other persons. Like Saint John, who not only enjoyed the love of Jesus, but tried to ensure that this same Love might spread throughout the whole world. For the beloved disciple, this was the natural consequence: *if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another* (*1 Jn* 4:11).

At times celibacy is viewed above all as the dedication of one's time, as though this total dedication was justified by a question of effectiveness in advancing certain apostolic works, unhampered by other commitments. Nevertheless, that is a simplistic view. Celibacy is not the result of practical considerations about availability for evangelization, but rather a calling from Christ. It is an invitation to share in a special way in the life of his own Heart: to love like Christ, to forgive like Christ, to work like Christ; even more, to be Christ himself – *ipse Christus* – for all souls. Therefore "the solely pragmatic reasons, the reference to greater availability, is not enough: such a greater availability of time could easily become also a form of egoism that saves a person from the sacrifices and efforts demanded by the reciprocal acceptance and forbearance in matrimony. Thus, it

could lead to a spiritual impoverishment or to hardening of the heart.”[14]

Celibacy, then, is not solitude within an ivory tower, but rather a calling to accompany and awaken many hearts. How many people there are in the world who do not feel important, who think their lives have no value, and who at times fall into strange practices, because deep down they are seeking a bit of love! Those who receive the gift of celibacy know they are also in the world to draw close to all these people and reveal God’s love to them, to remind them of their infinite value. Thus the celibate heart is fruitful in the same way the fruitful and redeeming Heart of Jesus is. It strives to discover in each person the same good that our Lord discovered in those who drew close to Him. It doesn’t see a sinner, a leper, a contemptible publican, but rather a beloved

creature of God, chosen by Him, of immense value.

Thus even though those who live celibacy don't have natural children, they become capable of a deep and real fatherhood or motherhood. They are a father, or mother, of many children, because "paternity means giving life to others."[15] They know they are in the world to truly care for others, to show them, with their life and helpful words, that only God can quench their heart's thirst. "Our world in which God appears at best as a hypothesis but not as a concrete reality, needs to rest on God in the most concrete and radical way possible. It needs a witness to God that lies in the decision to welcome God as a 'land' where one finds one's own existence. For this reason, celibacy is so important today, in our contemporary world, even if its fulfilment in our age is constantly threatened and questioned."[16]

A gift called to grow day by day

The divine gift of celibacy is not like a magic charm that brings about an immediate and permanent change. Rather God grants it as a seed that needs to grow gradually in “good soil.” Like every vocation, celibacy is a gift and a task. It is a path. Therefore, it is not enough to make the decision to dedicate oneself to be celibate for the Kingdom of Heaven for the heart to be automatically transformed. A continuous effort is needed to root out the weeds, to watch out for insects and parasites. Divine grace always acts upon nature without negating it or taking its place. In other words, God counts on our freedom and our personal history. And it is precisely there, in that mixture of human soil and divine grace, that the beautiful gift of a virginal heart silently grows. Where it grows… or where it is lost.

Like the younger son in the parable, even those called to a greater intimacy with God can one day feel jaded and empty. That young man decided to go off to a distant land (cf. *Lk* 15:13), because in his father's house he felt an inner emptiness. He needed to reach rock bottom, so that finally he would open his eyes and realize the state of slavery into which he had fallen. It is noteworthy that, according to the Gospel text, the reason for his return was not very spiritual. He was hungry, with a physical hunger. He missed the savory bread of his father's house. When he finally returned, his father was waiting for him and *ran and embraced him and kissed him* (*Lk* 15:20). The son had imagined facing almost a formal judgement (cf. *Lk* 15:18-19); instead he finds a loving embrace. He discovers – perhaps more clearly than ever – his deepest identity: he is the *son* of such a good Father.

At other times, feeling jaded can take on a more insidious form. While remaining in the father's house, one might feel more like a servant than a son, like the elder brother in the parable, who "was living at home, but he was not free, because his heart was elsewhere."[17] In both cases, the path to escape from sadness is to turn one's eyes to the Father and his love for us. God satisfies the hunger of the soul with the Bread of the Eucharist, in which we find the One who has become one of us, so that we may love him as a Friend. There we can keep our heart enkindled with a love *as strong as death* (*Song* 8:6).

John stayed next to the Cross of Jesus, and was also present at his Ascension into Heaven, "that day on which an apparent departure was in truth the beginning of a new nearness."[18] Jesus had to separate himself physically from his disciples,

whom He had loved to the end, in order to be able to love them even more closely, and each of the persons who would come to believe in Him. This is the secret of a celibate heart: leaving behind a love on this earth in order to fill the whole world with the light of his Love.

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[1] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 10 October 1979; 24 October 1979; 31 October 1979.

[2] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 10 October 1979, no. 2.

[3] Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2006.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 122.

[5] Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 884.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, Scepter 2018, p. 66.

[8] *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth Station, no. 8.

[9] Saint Josemaria at times referred to Jesus as “the Friend.” Cf. *The Way*, no. 422; *Christ is Passing By*, no.93.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 2 (cf. *Song* 8:6).

[11] Saint Josemaria, Notes from a get-together with young people, 6 July 1974.

[12] Blessed John Henry Newman, “Love of Relations and Friends,” *Parochial and Plain Sermons* 2, sermon 5.

[13] *The Way*, no. 171.

[14] Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2006.

[15] Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 26 June 2013.

[16] Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2006.

[17] Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 9.

[18] Joseph Ratzinger, “El comienzo de una nueva cercanía,” in *El resplandor de Dios en nuestro tiempo*, Barcelona: Herder, 2008, p. 185.

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