

Under the Fig Tree: Accompanying Our Loved Ones

Just as Jesus accompanied Nathaniel from afar, under the fig tree, we too can accompany our loved ones if we are united to Christ.

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Nathaniel discovered the Messiah because Jesus was accompanying him from afar, under the fig tree. During these days, the solitude of many sick people in the hospitals or

at home deeply pains us. Many healthy people also find themselves alone now. At times the fact that we cannot accompany them becomes almost unbearable.

Nevertheless, in Christ we can reach the furthest corner of the world, the last bed in a field hospital, the deepest place in a lonely person's heart. With Him we can provide warmth, light and affection for any soul that finds itself alone.

A very intimate suffering

The confinement now affecting a large part of the world provides many opportunities to offer Jesus restrictions that make us suffer: not being able to receive Holy Communion, nor to go to confession, nor even at times to go outside.... Jesus is not indifferent to these "sacrifices" of ours. As Pope Francis said recently: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (*Mk 4:38*). *Do you*

not care: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: 'Don't you care about me?' It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because He, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on Him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement."[1]

We too are surely suffering in a special way because we are unable to accompany our loved ones, perhaps in need of the affection and warmth of a home: a grandmother, a brother, a daughter, a sick person, someone who is poor, a faithful who needs to get to confession or receive the Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum. Sentiments that are so common now can stir up unease in our heart: the realization that our duty is to remain at home; the desire to care for these

people, to embrace them, to help them feel loved; the doubt about how they are holding up, especially if they are alone.

We find all this especially painful in the case of those now suffering from COVID-19. The need for them to be isolated means they can only be accompanied by health care teams. Due to the great demand on their time and the nature of the illness, these professionals often can't look after their patients with all the care and calm required. In some of the gravest cases, only a brief final visit of farewell by the closest relatives is possible. A wife who has always been very close to her husband sometimes finds it impossible to accompany him on his deathbed. Priests are only allowed to assist the faithful at the last moment and encounter many difficulties in trying to accompany their flock, also those who are healthy. A granddaughter may find it

impossible to say goodbye to her grandmother, or a mother to offer her dying son a caress.

If we find ourselves in situations such as these, we will surely have a great desire to accompany our friends or family members.

Moreover, our anguish may be intensified by the abundance of free time that confinement now offers us. All this can result in our imagination dwelling frequently on the suffering this situation is causing us. And it would not be strange if doubts were to arise about whether we are doing the right thing. We may become uneasy, thinking we are acting out of comfort or fear. And as a result, we may find it hard to decide whether we should remain at home or risk going out to accompany people in these exceptional circumstances. Each one's conscience, helped by grace, has to decide whether the risk of falling ill and spreading the illness

is proportionate to the urgency of the care we could provide. Often the decision has already been made for us, since the health or civil authorities allow us no choice here. But there is something definite we can do in this situation and that can be of great value, besides filling us with peace.

Accompanying from afar

Although Nathaniel wasn't aware of it, Jesus was present with him under the fig tree, accompanying him.

“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (*Jn 1:48*). Many people today need Jesus’ presence alongside them. The current situation is a marvelous opportunity to accompany one another through the Communion of Saints. Through his grace, we can help Christ reach these hidden places, for “in him we live and move and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*). If

our life is a participation in His, confinement will not isolate us. Although we cannot be physically present, our loved ones will sense the Savior's presence alongside them.

Saint Josemaria was very aware that distance and physical separation were not obstacles to accompanying his spiritual children in special situations. He wrote to his daughters in Mexico: "You know that I'm always accompanying you, from afar."^[2] And to his daughters in Australia, on the other side of the world, he wrote: "How much I am accompanying you, from here."^[3] During the Spanish civil war, employing the figurative language he used to circumvent the censors, he expressed in a letter his concern for his children scattered around the country: "Paco, your poor grandfather [Saint Josemaria] is so worried about his little ones that he's always on edge; it's like touching a raw nerve."^[4] The isolation our

loved ones are enduring can be much harder for us to bear than our own confinement. Offering God our suffering for them is already the first step in trying to resolve the problem.

But what about the Angels?

The Guardian Angels are our very effective allies in trying to overcome the isolation our loved ones may be faced with. It is their solitude, and not our own confinement, that truly pains us. When Jesus hears Nathaniel's confession of faith, He responds by opening up wide horizons to him: "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these ... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (*Jn 1:50-51*).

Divine mediation has many channels and instruments. We ourselves are

one of these, but God can act through more effective means such as his angels.

During the Spanish civil war Saint Josemaria became aware of a complicated situation two of his sons were confronting. They were living in a guesthouse in Valencia that had a bad atmosphere, as well as many people who were fiercely hostile to the Catholic faith. Juan Jimenez Vargas referred to this situation in a diary entry he wrote, and said he wasn't worried about it since the Guardian Angels would provide protection. This became the basis for point 566 in *The Way*: “You say that in such surroundings there are many occasions of going astray? All right. But, are there not also Guardian Angels there?”[5]

The founder's strong devotion to the Guardian Angels is also seen in a letter he wrote to the faithful of Opus

Dei before the war. He describes a trip on one of the dilapidated trains that were common in Spain back then: “This morning I said the Breviary with greater solemnity than in a Cathedral choir. I invited all the Guardian Angels in my compartment to join me in singing praises to the Lord. My sons, may you never lose sight of the Angels.”[6]

We too can make use of these “special units” in the divine army to accompany our loved ones and provide the spiritual help they need.

The Queen of the Angels, to whom they can never refuse any request, is also the Gate of Heaven. Jesus wanted his Mother to be present on Calvary. Our faith assures us that Mary’s caress will never be lacking to a dying person who requests it. We will never be in such great need of her motherly presence as at the moment when we take the final step

towards eternal Life, towards the Heart of her Son.

Diego Zalbidea

[1] Francis, *Homily*, 27 March 2020.

[2] *Letter to his daughters in Mexico, from Rome*, 20 June 1950.

[3] *Letter to his daughters in Australia, from Rome*, 8 April 1964.

[4] *Letter to his sons in Valencia*, 25 July 1937.

[5] *The Way*, no. 566.

[6] *Letter*, 17 September 1934.

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