

Meditations: Saturday of the Ninth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the ninth week of Ordinary Time.

- How Jesus looks at us
- How others look at us
- Going beyond appearances

THE LOOK in a person's eyes can provoke very different thoughts and feelings. When we are discouraged

and suddenly meet smiling eyes that show confidence in us, we feel comforted. Apathetic or stern looks, on the other hand, can sap our hope and cool our relationships. Often, we begin to perceive a lack of love through the indifference or distance in the other person's eyes. That is why it is heartening to meditate on Christ's gaze which, in turn, reveals how the Father looks at us. The kind of relationship we form with Him depends in large part on the responses and convictions his divine gaze awakens in us.

One of the scenes in the Gospel reveals something about Jesus' gaze (cf. *Mk* 12:38-44). Jesus stands before the place where the Temple alms were collecting, watching the crowds passing by. This is a familiar habit: at some point, we've all amused ourselves watching the people around us and trying to imagine their lives. While we can only see

people's outward appearance, Jesus' gaze is tender and goes to the heart. After several wealthy people give their surplus as offerings, Jesus sees a poor widow giving everything she has.

"Didn't you see the light in Jesus' eyes as the poor widow left her little alms in the temple?" St. Josemaria asked. "Give him what you can: the merit is not in whether it is big or small, but in the intention with which you give it."^[1] If we think that God wants to control us or waits for us to make mistakes, we will naturally look at Him with fear. But we will be filled with peace and joy when we discover his merciful gaze penetrating to the depths of our hearts.

JUST BEFORE considering the widow's offering, Jesus addressed

some harsh words to the scribes. They were known as men of faith, but their reputation often hid a vain desire for admiration. Thus they wore long robes, chose the main seats in the synagogues and rejoiced when many passers-by greeted them in the streets (cf. *Mk* 12:38-40). This is the danger of spiritual worldliness: serving God, the most sacred thing we can do, becomes a superficial performance.

We too can start to depend on how people see us. In a Christian culture, pride tries to contaminate our relationship with God with the vanity of wanting to be admired for our holiness. In environments hostile to the faith, it tries to undermine us with shame or fear that our acts of piety will be discovered. A certain sensitivity to others' perception is healthy, because it enables us to act prudently and adapt our behaviour to the context. But perceptions are

not all-important. We need to weigh others' opinions properly, so they do not limit our interior freedom.

Feeling Jesus' eyes on us during the day, living in God's presence, restores our freedom. Some people might have looked down on the poor widow, who only gave God a handful of coins. Others might not have noticed her at all because of her humble appearance. The woman could have decided not to donate anything at all so she wouldn't be embarrassed if anyone saw how little she gave. But she had her heart set on God and didn't worry about what others would say or think: "She has nothing left, but finds her everything in God. She is not afraid of losing the little she has because she trusts in God's abundance."^[2]

AT THE END of this passage, Jesus calls his apostles together and tells them what He has just witnessed. He did not only want to praise the widow's conduct and give her some recognition; He also wanted to teach the disciples to look at others as God does, with love. We are on a journey to become contemplatives in the middle of the world, on the street, surrounded by many other people. On this journey, "we learn to look at each other not only with our eyes, but with the eyes of God, which is the gaze of Jesus Christ. A gaze that begins in the heart and does not stop at the surface, that goes beyond appearances and manages to capture the deepest aspirations of the other: waiting to be heard, for caring attention, in a word: love."^[3]

To really understand the widow's actions, we would need a compassionate understanding of her circumstances and motivations: to

know, perhaps, that she was poor and had lost her husband, and to glimpse the faith that made God the foundation of her life. Quick judgements usually fail to take all the factors behind others' actions into account. In many cases, certain behaviours or reactions hide stories we don't know. "Underlying certain character traits are sometimes sufferings that perhaps explain a person's way of being or acting. God knows each of us in depth, also our suffering, and He looks on all of us with tenderness. Let us learn from our Lord to look at everyone in this way, to understand everyone [...], to put ourselves in the place of the other person."^[4] —

Many seemingly simple or underwhelming acts of kindness actually require great effort for the people who carry them out. Only simple and compassionate hearts, looking for the good in others, are

able to see the love in little things. "Turn, then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us," we beg our Mother in the *Salve Regina*. We can ask her to help us look at others with God's mercy and wisdom, like her.

^[1] St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 829.

^[2] Pope Francis, Angelus, 7-XI-2021.

^[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus, 4-XI-2012.

^[4] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023.

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