

Meditations: Thursday of the Thirty-First Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the thirty-first week of Ordinary Time. The topics are: the mystery of God as mercy; forgiving us brings God joy; the forgiveness we find in confession.

- The mystery of God as mercy
- Forgiving us brings God joy
- The forgiveness we find in confession

WHO AMONG you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? (Lk 15:4). Hearing these words today fills us with gratitude to God, as we recall the numerous times He has come in search of us when we have been lost. *I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent (Lk 15:7).* We want to understand the *joy in heaven* that Christ describes; it is a mystery to us. Why does the repentance of a sinner bring God joy? Does He not care more for our good deeds and effort to follow his commandments?

Saint Josemaría loved to immerse himself in the Gospel, savoring each scene: "Christ our Lord often spoke about boats and nets, about the sea and fish. But didn't he also speak

about sheep and flocks? And how tenderly! How happy he was when describing the figure of the Good Shepherd!"^[1] He had seen similar scenes in the countryside, as a child: "If one of the sheep had 'taken a knock,' as they say there, if it had broken a leg for example, I have witnessed the traditional picture come to life: they carried the sheep on their shoulders. I have also seen shepherds – they're tough men, who might seem incapable of tenderness – carry a newborn lamb lovingly in their arms."^[2]

The *joy in heaven* at finding a lost sheep reveals God the Father's true face. "God forgives everything and always forgives. When Jesus describes the face of God to his disciples, he outlines it with expressions of tender mercy. He says that there is more joy in heaven for one sinner who repents than for a multitude of righteous people who

need no repentance (cf. *Lk 15:7, 10*). Nothing in the Gospels lets one suspect that God would not forgive the sins of whoever is ready and asks to be embraced again."^[3] The difficult part, for us, is recognizing how much we need God's mercy. It is our repentance – returning, time and time again, to the Good Shepherd – that provokes *joy in heaven*.

REJOICE WITH me, for I have found my lost sheep (Lk 15:6). God's joy is contagious. He gathers everyone and invites them to share his happiness. We cannot fully imagine the degree of joy that God experiences in his inner being, but we can approach the mystery, at least desiring to delve deeper into it. Why is God so happy when He forgives us? One reason is that forgiveness restores the marvel of God's love to us. In fact, the word

"forgive" means to give completely, to offer a perfect gift. "What have I done, Jesus, that you love me so?" Saint Josemaría wrote in his *Intimate Notes*. "Offending you and loving you: to love you: this is what my life will come down to."^[4]

At the same time, when we ask for forgiveness, we are expressing several unspoken messages, including regret ("I wish I had never done it") and a desire for restoration ("I want to rekindle the affection we had before"). A child who asks for forgiveness is one who loves their father, trusts him, and cares for him. It pains the child to have caused their parent grief. We ask for forgiveness because we want to put an end to the situation caused by sin, which is a rejection of God's love for us. The joy we feel in being forgiven, as great as it is, is a faint reflection of the joy God feels when He brings us back to life.

"The psalmist of Psalm 27 is surrounded by enemies [but] the witness he bears is full of faith, as he states: *My father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up* (Ps 27:10). God is a Father who never abandons his children, a loving Father who supports, helps, welcomes, pardons and saves with a faithfulness that surpasses by far that of men and women, opening onto dimensions of eternity."^[5]

IN CONFESSION, we dive into this mystery of divine joy and happiness. *Lord, You know everything. You know that I love You* (Jn 21:17). With these or similar words, we tell Jesus that, even though our actions might sometimes obscure this truth, deep down, we love Him. We go to confess our sins, undoubtedly, but above all, we confess God's goodness, love, and

mercy. We deserve nothing, yet we dare to ask for forgiveness. Although we may have grown accustomed to it, the reality is that when we confess our sins, we challenge human logic and fully immerse ourselves in God's way of thinking. We let go of the judgment we instinctively pass on our lives and allow God to have the final word.

And his sentence is clear: "I declare you innocent." In the same process, we see Christ taking on our guilt, our sins, and the responsibility that was ours. He bears our sins to free us from them: *The punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by his wounds, we are healed* (Is 53:5). "Forgiveness is not the fruit of our own efforts but rather a gift, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ."^[6] And, as if that

weren't enough, He tells us that forgiving us fills Him with joy. Where else could we find anything like this?

Sharing the existence of this gift with others, when the time is right, is a sign that we truly value and appreciate it. We can ask the Virgin Mary to help us become apostles of Confession, drawing our friends closer to the embrace of divine forgiveness.

^[1] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 13-III-1955.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, Letter 27, no. 22.

^[3] Pope Francis, Audience, 24-IV-2019.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, 5, 358-359, 29-X-1931.

[5] Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 30-I-2013.

[6] Pope Francis, Audience, 19-II-2014.

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