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Meditations: 19 December

Some reflections that can assist our prayer as we await the Child Jesus' arrival at Christmas.

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- Zechariah's fear and trust
- Lessons of silence
- Trusting God

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments

and statutes of the Lord (Lk 1:6). The Old Testament is coming to its fulfilment. The Messiah is about to arrive and the Church advises us to consider the faith of this married couple. Saint Josemaría in his prayer often addressed the Gospel characters close to Jesus: “This morning I began by entrusting everything to Saint Elizabeth, and then I went on to speak with her son John, and with Zechariah; and then with our Lady, with Saint Joseph, and with Jesus. For in this dialogue with our Lord, as in human friendship, we come to know someone better through their friends.”^[1]

We want to prepare ourselves well for the imminent arrival of the Saviour by learning from the Gospel to trust in God. For we often think we have many reasons to rely more on our own experience or viewpoint. That is why Zechariah’s question, made with a tone of doubt, can

sound so familiar to us: *How shall I know this?* (Lk 1:18). He went in search of certainty but found himself faced with an eloquent divine silence, until what he had so often beseeched God for was fulfilled.

Perhaps the Baptist's father was afraid of not being up to his mission. We too look for reference points, assurances, things to hold on to. He objected that he and his wife were no longer the right age for this. It is always the same: when we look only at ourselves, we think that we will cause God's plans to fail. We think our own role is indispensable, and therefore fear blocks us. "In a world in which we risk relying solely on the efficiency and power of human means, we are called to rediscover and give witness to the power of God communicated in prayer."^[2] Today's Gospel invites us to do just that: to trust in God. Despite his doubts, Zechariah was filled with joy when

he heard Gabriel's announcement:
Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard (Lk 1:13).

HOW MANY THINGS Zechariah must have learned during those months of silence. Everyone sensed that he had had a vision. He couldn't speak but somehow his face had become tremendously expressive. Surely these were days of intense prayer; his silence allowed him to draw especially close to God. When he finally spoke again, his words show that this time of silence had helped him prepare better for the coming of his son, the Precursor, and of his nephew, the long-awaited Messiah:
And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God (Lk 1:64).

Zechariah couldn't contain his joy. During those weeks of silence he surely came to appreciate the value of many common gestures, so

meaningful when words are lacking: a wink, a caress, a smile. Elizabeth perhaps would try to intuit what he wanted to tell her. They only needed to look at each other to share what God had done in their lives. They wanted to share God's gift in intimacy, to enjoy it together in silence. God had manifested himself and words were no longer needed; it was time to rejoice and to dream.

And fear came on all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?' For the hand of the Lord was with him (Lk 1:65-66).

Zechariah's experience teaches us that we too can learn more about God's plans through the people and events around us. And that we may not have understood them before because we listened too much to ourselves. "We must learn to trust

and be silent before the mystery of God and to contemplate, with humility and silence, his work which is revealed in history and often exceeds our imagination.”^[3] When we are silent and listen to God, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are filled with immense joy to see that God blesses us, often when and where we least expect it.

LOVING AND BEING LOVED often means not telling the other person how to do things. Love leaves the loved one free to express themselves as they wish. It doesn't dictate or demand ways of expressing affection. Something similar happens in our relationship with God, when we are open to being surprised by his action. Grace is not predictable, but free and creative. Zechariah saw how wonderful God's initiative is. He discovered that trust always brings its reward and that God is always near, even if it doesn't seem so: “You

mustn't trust me... But I do trust you, Jesus... I abandon myself in your arms: there I leave all I have, my wretchedness!”^[4]
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In preparing our hearts for the coming of the Child Jesus, we can ask this holy man Zechariah to obtain for us his faith, eagerness and patience. Faith to spend years asking for a miracle that finally happened when hope seemed lost; eagerness to dream of the Messiah and the salvation he will bring to Israel; and the patience he shows when learning to seek security in God. Love always involves risk, because it cannot be assured; it depends on the will of the one who loves us. So we ask Zechariah to help us in times of anxiety, when we have to rely only on God. He alone is our security. As Saint Teresa of Avila said with few words, but with great firmness: “Trust in his goodness. He never fails his friends.”^[5]
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“How often we hear this phrase in the Gospels: *Be not afraid*. It seems that God is constantly repeating it as he seeks us out. For we, right from the beginning, because of our sin, have been afraid of God; after sinning, Adam says: *I was afraid and I hid myself* (Gen 3:10). Bethlehem is the remedy for this fear. Despite man’s repeated ‘no,’ God constantly says ‘yes.’ He will always be God-with-us. And lest his presence inspire fear, he makes himself a tender Child.”^[6] We can ask Our Lady to teach us to trust in Our Lord, in his goodness and love; to not try to control God and to let ourselves be surprised by his loving Providence.

^[1] Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid, 2000, p. 259.

^[2] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 13 June 2012.

^[3] Pope Francis, Angelus, 24 June 2018.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 113.

^[5] Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Book of Life*, 11, 4.

^[6] Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2018.

Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco "Zechariah Writes Down the Name of His Son" (1490) (Wiki Commons)

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