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Meditations: Sunday of the Fourth Week of Lent (Year B)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this Lenten season. The topics are: an inexhaustible plan of salvation; a cross that leads to joy; love and sacrifice.

03/10/2024

- An inexhaustible plan of salvation
- A cross that leads to joy
- Love and sacrifice

THE FOURTH Sunday of Lent is traditionally known as Laetare Sunday, alluding to the opening words of the Mass: “*Laetare, Jerusalem...* Rejoice, Jerusalem [...], rejoice, you who were sad.” Easter is approaching, the time of our salvation, and contemplating it brings a note of joy to the penitential austerity of Lent, which “is a time for both bravery and joy; we have to fill ourselves with courage, for the grace of God will not fail us. God will be at our side.”^[1] —

The fundamental reason for our joy comes from contemplating God’s love for us, his mercy, and his patience with us. This is discussed in the first reading, which recalls how the repeated infidelities of the people of Israel culminated in a violent invasion by Nebuchadnezzar II, who devastated the city and set the

Temple on fire, taking those who had survived the sword to Babylon as slaves. Even though they had repeatedly ignored many calls from the prophets to repent, in their darkest hour, God did not abandon his people. After a time of repentance and penance, reminiscing about the promised land, the Lord moved a pagan king, Emperor Cyrus, to issue a decree freeing the Israelites.

Despite our occasional failures to respond faithfully to God's plans for us, He does not reject us but continues to love us as a good and patient father. His desire to free us from sin becomes even more evident with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of his Son, as St. Paul says in the second reading: *God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ*

(*Eph 2:4-5*). Savoring the sweetness of forgiveness and divine grace will help us overcome any weariness or discouragement that may arise in this Lent or at different times in our lives. As Easter approaches, we can renew our desire to be drawn to the Lord and prepare ourselves to turn a little more towards Him and welcome the salvation He offers.

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JUST AS Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (Jn 3:14). In this Sunday's Gospel, the Lord speaks these words to Nicodemus, discussing the new life He has come to bring to the earth, and He addresses them to each one of us as well. Christ invites us to focus our prayer on the Cross, where “the redeeming tenderness of God was fully revealed.”^[2] From there, we can learn to face with peace and joy

the pains that inevitably arise in life, “our suffering, our sadness, our anguish, our hunger and thirst for justice...”^[3] —

St. Josemaría drew from his personal experience to explain how the cross can have a positive meaning: “To find the Cross is to find Christ. And with Him there is always joy, even when faced with injustice, misunderstanding and physical suffering. That’s why I’m unhappy when I hear people call the setbacks that often spring from pride ‘crosses.’ These aren’t the Cross, the true Cross, since they aren’t Christ’s Cross. I’ve never seen myself as unfortunate, even though God has sent me sufferings in abundance. [...] You have made me understand, Lord, that to have the Cross is to find joy and happiness. And I see now more clearly than ever why this is true: to have the Cross is to be identified with

Christ, to be Christ, and therefore a son of God.”^[4] —

Difficulties and sorrow will not be lacking in our personal lives or in our world: violence, tragedies, illnesses... Even in those moments, we have the opportunity to renew our faith and hope in the Lord, in the saving power of His redeeming sacrifice, which we can join in our daily existence: “Jesus on the Cross feels the whole weight of the evil, and with the force of God’s love he conquers it, he defeats it with his resurrection. This is the good that Jesus does for us on the throne of the Cross. Christ’s Cross embraced with love never leads to sadness, but to joy, to the joy of having been saved and of doing a little of what he did on the day of his death.”^[5] —

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FOR GOD so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

We continue to contemplate this giving of the Son by the Father, which ended with the death of Jesus on the Cross. “It is the glory of the Crucified One that every Christian is called to understand, live and bear witness to with his life. The Cross — the giving of himself on the part of the Son of God — is the definitive ‘sign’ *par excellence* given to us so that we might understand the truth about man and the truth about God: we have all been created and redeemed by a God who sacrificed his only Son out of love. [...] This is love in its most radical form.”^[6]

God's love for us calls us for a response. One way to respond is by embracing the suffering the Lord allows in our lives with childlike trust. “We are not soft, comfort-

seeking Christians,” St. Josemaría preached. “On this earth there must be suffering and the Cross.”^[7] He explained this idea more thoroughly in one of his homilies: “Sometimes we speak of love as if it were an impulse to self-satisfaction or a mere means to selfish fulfilment of one's own personality. But that's not love. True love means going out of oneself, giving oneself. Love brings joy, but a joy whose roots are in the shape of a cross. As long as we are on earth and have not yet arrived at the fullness of the future life, we can never have true love without sacrifice and pain. This pain becomes sweet and lovable; it is the source of interior joy. But it is an authentic pain, for it involves overcoming one's own selfishness and taking Love as the rule of each and every thing we do.”^[8] —

Just as Christ died on the Cross out of love, there is no true love for God,

ourselves, or others on our earthly journey without the Cross: the ability to suffer joyfully, with interior freedom, in order to give of ourselves to others and reject the ties that bind us to sin. Even when objective difficulties arise — including when they are harsh or unexpected — with God's grace we can embrace the Cross: "Always be serene and strong in the face of setbacks, if they come, in the face of what people call failure. Success or failure is a question of interior life. Success means to receive Christ's Cross calmly, with our arms outstretched, for the Cross is a throne for Jesus and it should be so for us. It is the height of love, the height of redemptive effectiveness, in order to lead souls to God."^[9] We can ask the Virgin Mary, who remained standing at the foot of the Cross, to help us welcome difficulties with the desire to console her Son.

[1] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 63.

[2] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 26-III-2006.

[3] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 168.

[4] St. Josemaria, Notes from a meditation, 28-IV-1963.

[5] Pope Francis, Homily, 24-III-2013.

[6] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 26-III-2006.

[7] St. Josemaria, Notes from a meditation, 25-II-1963.

[8] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 43.

[9] St. Josemaria, Letter, 31-V-1954, no. 30.

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