

Very Human, Very Divine (I): Jesus, What Should We Do?

In this first article on the human virtues we consider how all our desires can find their harmony in God. Discovering this requires time and effort, but it frees us to love.

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It might seem strange to us that Saint Augustine, at one point in his memoirs, begins to describe the

influence of “weight” on the physical objects around him. With his 4th-century knowledge of science, the one who will later become bishop of Hippo points out there is something that makes fire always go upwards, while a stone always goes downwards. Later he reflects on how oil always tends to come to the surface of water when the two are mixed together, and how everything that is disordered seeks out order and finds its rest there. Saint Augustine intuits that the objects in all these movements are guided by their “weight.” And then, employing poetic language, he confides: “My weight is my love; it leads me wherever I am led.”[1] We all have the same experience: what we want, what we seek, what we love is what moves us. We always seek the satisfaction of a desire that aspires to be lasting. This “weight” leads us to a happiness that is more or less complete, so we don’t want to be

fooled by a merely fleeting and momentary pleasure. How can we discover the lasting love that Saint Augustine felt drawn by?

Each story has its own development

“What must I do to attain eternal life?” a young man once asked Jesus (cf. *Lk 18:18*). We read this Scripture passage with expectant silence, since it raises a question that involves us all. What will the one who is both God and Man answer? But before answering, Jesus objects to a phrase the young man had used: he had addressed Jesus as “good teacher.” Jesus’ words may seem a bit blunt: *No one is good but God alone* (*Lk 18:19*). Our Lord had perceived, we don’t know exactly how, that the young man was looking for “something more” in his life, but that he thought he would find it in a created good, something he could

control, something he could hold onto here on earth. Therefore, although Jesus first makes sure the young man is striving to fulfill God's law, He wants to go further. He wants the young man to break definitively with his complacence at fulfilling the commandments and with the idols of human prosperity: *One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Lk 18:22).*

Confronted with our Lord's call, the young man, after an inner battle we can only guess at, decides to go away. Jesus may have dreamt of his being a great disciple, but the young man decides to return to the comfort of his home, his riches, and his acquaintances.

The great happiness yearned for by that young man is not immediately within our grasp. It is not something we can control or dominate it. We

can only receive it by abandoning ourselves to God. Saint John Paul II said: “If God alone is the Good, no human effort, not even the most rigorous observance of the commandments, succeeds in ‘fulfilling’ the Law, that is, acknowledging the Lord as God and rendering him the worship due to Him alone (cf. *Mt 4:10*). This ‘fulfilment’ can come only from a gift of God.”^[2] Hence what is perhaps needed above all is patience, knowing how to “wait actively.”

Christian love is not a sudden overpowering feeling – although that may also exist – but a love story, and each story has its own development. “Grace normally takes its time, and is not inclined to act with violence.”^[3] Perhaps the young man is seeking the immediate satisfaction of his desire for happiness; and he becomes impatient, not realizing that God’s love, like the grain that is sown in the

ground, needs time to grow alongside the warmth of Christ's love. We see in the Gospel how Jesus prepared his closest disciples gradually, without any haste but also without pauses. At times it may seem to us that Jesus is not going quickly enough, and we become impatient to be holy overnight.

To form a firm desire

We know that the disciples – like everyone else – needed time because, like the rich young man, they first had to purify the vain dreams their imaginations had forged: the temptation of human success and glory, of a comfortable life. They needed to understand important points such as the determination to “pray always and not lose heart” (cf. *Lk 18:1*), and to learn to forgive “seventy times seven” (cf. *Mt 18:22*). But when our Lord saw that the apostles now had the minimum

preparation needed, after having prayed all night, He sent them out one by one (cf. *Mt 10:1-5; Lk 6:12*). This doesn't mean that his disciples' formation had already ended, far from it. Saint Josemaría often stressed that an apostle's formation never ends. In many of those following Him, God's call had not taken deep root. Some refused to accept his teaching and *drew back and no longer went about with him* (*Jn 6:66*), and many abandoned Jesus during his final trial. We could say that, in these people, their desires were not yet firm, stable, disciplined.

Little by little, with divine patience, God draws close to our hearts, calls us and sends us out to communicate the Gospel to all men and women. He does so through moments of personal meditation, Eucharistic adoration, vocal prayers in which we use the words the Church offers us, and also through continuous

contemplation throughout the day. We discover intimacy with Christ; we savor his friendship, his look, his strength, his understanding... God also prepares us through setbacks, helping us to gradually break with our idols, big and small, internal and external, to make more space for Jesus in our soul. Finally, Jesus draws close to our heart through the continuous work that fills our day: *My Father is working still, and I am working* (Jn 5:17). The same One who has placed the desire for the good in our hearts – the “weight” that guided Saint Augustine – will be the one who will bring that desire to completion.

The harmony of goods

Throughout our lives, we often make mistakes by seeking ephemeral goods that fail to fill our heart, apparent goods that are not from God, the source of all good. Recalling the rich young man’s concern about what he

has to “do” to reach heaven, Saint John Paul II points out that “only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself. To ask about the good, in fact, ultimately means to turn towards God, the fullness of goodness. Jesus shows that the young man’s question is really a religious question, and that the goodness that attracts and at the same time obliges man has its source in God, and indeed is God himself.”[4]

Jesus, after many had abandoned Him, asked the Twelve if they too were going to leave. Peter responded: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God (Jn 6:68-69)*. In that call to love, they have discovered the ultimate meaning of their life: the Kingdom of God, eternal life, heaven. Peter has discovered the truth that Saint

Teresa of Avila would later express so well: “God is all we need.”[5] He has found the hidden treasure. It is then that the other desires in the human heart find a harmonious, measured, reasonable place; it is then that the goods to which those desires look form an ordered whole. We don’t have to flee from them, but they no longer dominate us.

Whoever finds God above all other goods feels agile, detached, freed to bring the power of the Gospel to all creatures. We are able then to “unite ourselves to the Creator by using our freedom. We are in a position to give Him, or deny Him, the glory that is his due as the Author of everything that exists. This possibility makes up the light and shade of human freedom. Our Lord invites us, urges us to choose the good, so tenderly does He love us!”[6]

Saint Josemaría encouraged us to love the world passionately, not

because the created world is an absolute good, but because it is the first gift of God, the first source of all the desires that arise in the human heart. However, these desires need to be deepened by the Love that gives meaning to all our tasks and unity to our entire existence. Love for God doesn't eliminate our human desires – for companionship, for the future, for noble human goals – but rather purifies them and unites them in a call to intimacy with God.

Saint Augustine said that the moral virtues, in leading us to happiness, are in reality identified with love for God. All our efforts to acquire the facility and liking for doing what is good are always efforts to love. Hence the bishop of Hippo defined each of the virtues in function of this love: "As to virtue leading us to a happy life, I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God ... temperance is love giving itself

entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it.”[7]

The path to bring harmony to our desires is strengthened throughout our life, since it is an ongoing story of love. Often we are in a hurry; we make hasty decisions and look for immediate gratification... But that path leads to frustration in the end. In English we say that a person “falls in love,” as though love is something that happens suddenly. Even if this sudden love sometimes exists, it will not always be like that in our life. It can surprise us that Mary responded so quickly to the angel’s announcement that she would be the

mother of the Messiah – as though she had suddenly discovered the fulness of divine love. But in reality God worked in the soul of our Mother right from the moment of her immaculate conception and throughout her entire life, which was always a love story.

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[1] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 13, ch. 9.

[2] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 11.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 668.

[4] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9.

[5] Saint Teresa of Avila, fragment of an autograph found in her prayer book.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 24.

[7] Saint Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, I, 15, no. 25.

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