

Meditations: Saturday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 17th week of Ordinary Time.

Herod's heart

Guarding what really matters to us

An inner world

HEROD married Herodias, his brother's wife, and imprisoned John

the Baptist when the prophet refused to accept this union. Although Herodias wanted to kill the Baptist, Herod recognized that he was a just and holy man and tried to protect him. He was also afraid that a death sentence would stir up the people. Nevertheless, on his birthday “the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask” (*Mt 14:6-7*). At the instigation of her mother, she asked that the Baptist be put to death. Not wanting to break his oath or lose face in front of the guests, Herod gave the order that John should be beheaded.

Everything seems to indicate that Herod lacked sound and firm convictions needed to guide his immediate inclinations. According to what we know about him, we could say that he was guided by his superficial feelings at each moment.

Perhaps that's why he decided to marry his brother's wife, why he kept John alive, and why he offered Herodias' daughter whatever she wanted, even half his kingdom. To establish one's life on something as unstable and dangerous as one's most immediate and superficial inclinations leads one, in the end, to not know where to look for true happiness. In that case, the goal, the aim of one's actions, the reason why one does things, changes so frequently that one doesn't even know where one is going. Besides giving rise to dissatisfaction, this can lead to terrible injustices such as those committed by Herod towards those around him and towards himself.

“Many people suffer because they do not know what they want from their lives; they have probably never gotten in touch with their deepest desire. Hence the risk of passing

one's existence between attempts and expedients of various kinds, never getting anywhere, and wasting precious opportunities.”^[1] We can ask God to help us identify the deepest desires that He himself has placed in our hearts so that, by striving to purify them, they will guide our life towards happiness with Him, both on earth and in heaven.

ON HEARING the request of Herodias' daughter, Herod was saddened (cf. *Mt 14:9*). He knew that he was going to do something that he didn't really want to do. Because of the passion that this woman had stirred up in him, because he had not educated his own heart to enjoy goodness and beauty in an orderly way, he was going to order the killing of a person he respected. And this

decision filled him with sadness, because he was going to sacrifice someone he esteemed.

In contrast to what we see in Herod, learning to direct our heart to what is truly valuable fills us with joy, because it enables us to be who we truly want to be. We learn to enjoy what is truly good, as our heart becomes more sensitive to God's presence in men and women and in all creation. Educating our desires strengthens our identity, protecting us from many dangers along our path. But a heart like Herod's sacrifices what is truly worthwhile – his first marriage and John's life – for a moment of pleasure. A pure heart, in contrast, is filled with what is truly valuable and is able to enjoy it in a noble way, not letting itself be dominated by what is ephemeral and superficial.

St. Josemaría said that chastity “is a battle, but not a renunciation. We respond with a joyful affirmation, and give ourselves to him freely and cheerfully. Your conduct should not be limited to simply evading falls and occasions of sin. In no way should you let it come down to a cold and calculating negation. Are you really convinced that chastity is a virtue and that, as such, it ought to grow and become perfect?”^[2] Chastity does not mean ignoring our affectivity or opposing what we feel. Although at times it requires acting against an immediate inclination, this is not the goal of this virtue. Rather it aims at guiding our heart to enjoy the greater goods that can truly fill it with joy.

WE ALL probably have the experience of following a film, a

series or a book with special interest. Our senses are focused on what has attracted our attention. We are so caught up in what will happen next that we don't give importance to what is happening around us or to the concerns that previously filled our heads. Perhaps this image can help to illustrate St. Josemaría's suggestion about guarding our heart: "Why look around if you carry 'your world' within you?"^[3] If we carry our world within – made up of great goals, human and divine, towards which we direct our hopes and our efforts – temptations against chastity may have a certain force of attraction, but they will be much easier to combat. We will quickly perceive them as a threat to the harmony of our own inner world, since they make it difficult for us to follow with attention what really interests us.

Chastity enables us to connect emotionally with other people and to enjoy all that is beautiful, noble and genuinely amusing. In contrast, a person who lacks this virtue is often unable to enjoy the small and humanly rich incidents of daily life and personal relationships, because these are seen as irrelevant or insipid. As Saint Josemaría also said: “I never did like talking about impurity. I would rather consider the rich rewards that temperance brings . . . Living this way, with a spirit of sacrifice, means freeing oneself from many kinds of slavery and savoring instead, in the depths of one's heart, the fullness of God's love. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes.”^[4] We can ask our Lady to help us strengthen the virtue of chastity in our soul, so that we can experience the genuine joy of living close to her Son.

^[1] Francis, Audience, 12 October 2022.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 182.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 184.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

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