

Learning to be Faithful

Being faithful to a person, a love, a vocation is a path that requires both human loyalty and reliance on God's grace.

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Forty days have gone by since Jesus' birth, and the Holy Family sets off to fulfill what is ordained in the Law of Moses: *Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.*

[1] Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem, but the journey by donkey takes several hours. When they

reached Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph made their way to the Temple. Before entering, they fulfilled the purification rites with great devotion, and bought at a nearby stall the offering prescribed for poor people: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Then, amid the coming and going of other pilgrims, they passed through the Hulda gates and the monumental subterranean passages and came out onto the great esplanade. It is not hard to imagine their prayerful emotion as they turned towards the Court of the Women.

It was perhaps then that an elderly man came up to them, his face alight with joy. Simeon greeted Mary and Joseph warmly and told them how ardently he had been waiting for that moment. He was aware that his life was drawing to a close, but he also knew, because the Holy Spirit had revealed it to him,[2] that he would

not die without seeing the Redeemer of the world. When Simeon saw them enter, he was granted the light to recognize in their Child the Holy One of God. With great care, since Jesus was still barely six weeks old, he took him in his arms and, filled with emotion, raised his prayer to God. *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.*[3]

At the end of his prayer Simeon addressed Mary in particular, introducing a hint of shadow to that scene of light and joy. Still speaking of redemption, he added that Jesus was to be *a sign that is spoken against, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed*, and he told our Lady: *a sword will pierce through your own soul also.*[4] It was the first

time they had heard anyone speak like that.

Up until then, the Archangel Gabriel's annunciation, the revelations made to St. Joseph, the inspired words of our Lady's cousin Elizabeth, and those of the shepherds, had all proclaimed joy at the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Now Simeon prophesizes that Mary will bear the destiny of her people in her own life, and play a leading role in the work of salvation. She will accompany her Son, standing at the center of the reaction for or against Jesus in which men's hearts will be laid bare.

Contemplation: meditating in faith

Our Lady saw clearly that Simeon's prophecy did not contradict but rather completed all that God had previously shown her. Her attitude at that moment was the one we see reflected elsewhere in the Gospels:

Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.[5] Our Lady meditated on the happenings around her, “searching” for God’s will in them. She turned over the questions Yahweh raised in her soul and never fell into a passive attitude. That is the way to be loyal to God, as John Paul II reminded us: “Mary was faithful, above all, when she lovingly strove to seek out the deepest meaning of God’s plan for her and for the world...Faithfulness cannot exist unless there is, at its root, an ardent, patient and generous seeking; unless there is, in man’s heart, a question to which only God holds the answer, or rather, to which only God is the answer.”[6]

The search for God’s will leads Mary to welcome and accept what she discovers. In the course of her life, Mary was to find countless opportunities for saying “Be it done, I am ready, I accept.”[7] These were

crucial moments for fidelity, probably accompanied by the realization that she couldn't understand God's plan in all its depth, or how it would be brought to fulfillment. And yet by pondering them carefully, she showed how much she wanted God's will to be done. Mary accepted these events in all their mystery, making room for them in her soul, "not with the resigned attitude of someone who gives up in the face of an enigma, but with the readiness and availability that went with opening herself up to be dwelt in by something—by Someone!—greater than her own heart." [8]

Under our Lady's attentive eyes, *Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.* [9] When the years of our Lord's public life arrived, Mary would have seen how Simeon's prophecy was being fulfilled: *this child is set for the*

fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against.[10]

During those years Mary's faithfulness was expressed by "living in accord with what one believes: conforming one's life to the object adhered to in faith; accepting misunderstanding and even persecution rather than allowing any break between what one believes and the way one lives." They were years during which Mary showed her love for and fidelity to Jesus in a thousand different ways, years that could be summed up in one word, *consistency*, "the innermost core of faithfulness." But all fidelity "must necessarily pass through the most demanding test of all: that of duration," *constancy*. "It is easy to live up to one's beliefs for a day or a few days. What is both difficult and important is to live up to them for one's whole life. It is easy to be consistent in moments of exaltation, but difficult in moments of

tribulation. And only consistency that lasts throughout one's entire life can truly be called faithfulness.”[11]

That is how our Lady acted: she was loyal at all times, and still more at times of tribulation. Mary was present at the supreme trial of the Cross, accompanied by a small group of women and the Apostle St. John. Darkness covered the earth. Jesus, nailed to the wood, amidst immense physical and mental pain, sent up to heaven a prayer that united personal suffering and radical trust in his Father: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” which means, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”[12] These are the opening words of Psalm 22, which culminates in an act of trust: *All the ends of the earth shall remember, and shall turn to the Lord.*[13]

What must our Mother have thought when she heard her Son's cry? For

years she had meditated on what God wanted of her. Now, seeing her Son on the Cross abandoned by nearly everyone, our Lady must have recalled Simeon's words yet again: a sword was piercing her heart. She suffered intensely over the injustice that was being committed, and yet, in the darkness of the Cross, her faith brought the reality of the Mystery before her eyes: the ransoming of each and every soul.

Jesus' trusting words gave our Lady new light to understand how closely her own suffering associated her with the Redemption. Raised up on the Cross, at the very moment of his death, Jesus met his Mother's eyes. He found her beside him, united in intentions and sacrifice. And thus "Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation finds its fullness in the silent *fiat* that she repeats at the foot of the Cross. Being faithful means not turning away when darkness comes from what

was accepted in the public light.”[14] Our Lady had prepared for this moment by her wholehearted daily response. She knew that her unconditional self-surrender on the day of the Annunciation also included, in some way, the events she was now sharing in, with full inner freedom. “Her suffering is united with that of her Son. It is a suffering filled with faith and love. Our Lady on Calvary participates in the saving power of Christ’s suffering, joining her ‘*fiat*,’ her ‘yes,’ to that of her Son.”[15] Mary remains faithful, and “offers her Son a comforting balm of tenderness, of union, of faithfulness; a ‘yes’ to the divine will.”[16] Our Lord placed St. John under the protection of our Lady’s fidelity, and together with him the Church throughout the ages: *Behold, your mother!*[17]

Faithfulness: responding out of faith

Being faithful: seeking, welcoming, being consistent and constant. Mary's life was a faith-filled response to the most varied situations. This response was made possible because she was deeply moved when she received God's messages, and meditated on them. Our Lord himself, when an enthusiastic woman burst out in words of praise for his Mother, pointed to the real reason why she deserved it: *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!* [18] This is one of the most important lessons we can learn from Mary: faithfulness is not improvised; rather it is built up day after day. One cannot learn to be faithful spontaneously. It is true that the virtue of faithfulness is a disposition that is born of a firm resolution to respond to the call we receive, and that prepares us to welcome God's plan for us. But this decision demands a "constant consistency" from each one.

The perseverance that fidelity requires has nothing to do with inertia or monotony. Our lives unfold in a continuous succession of impressions, thoughts and actions; our minds, wills and feelings are moving constantly from one object to another, and experience shows that it is impossible for human faculties to remain concentrated upon a single object for a long time. Therefore unity of life requires realizing that over and above any given event, we have the capacity to organize our own scale of values, meditating on events and evaluating them and thus sorting out the ones that are truly important, in order to be consistent with the course of life we have chosen. Otherwise we would only be able to concentrate on the experience of the moment, and end up in superficiality and inconsistency. As St. Paul says, *“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All*

things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything.[19]

A Christian evaluates events in the light of faith; by this light we discover which are the truly important events, and receive the message they hold and make them a reference-point for our actions. A person who is faithful is guided by the genuine meaning of events in one's life, so that the truly important realities, such as God's love, our divine filiation, the certainty of our vocation, and Christ's nearness in the Sacraments, effectively guide our behavior and produce firm attitudes in us.

St. Josemaria said: “Only people who are inconstant and superficial change the object of their love from one day to the next.”[20] And referring to the star that guided the Wise Men he said: “If vocation comes first, if the star shines ahead to start

us along the path of God's love, it is illogical that we should begin to doubt if it chances to disappear from view. It might happen at certain moments in our interior life—and we are nearly always to blame—that the star disappears, just as it did to the wise kings on their journey. We have already realized the divine splendour of our vocation, and we are convinced about its definitive character, but perhaps the dust we stir up as we walk—our miseries—forms an opaque cloud that cuts off the light from above.”[21]

Were something like this to happen to us, we need to remember the decisive moments in our life when we saw what God was asking of us and we made generous decisions to be faithful to him.

Thus our memory has a key role to play in our fidelity, because it can evoke the *magnalia Dei*, the great

things that God has done in our own lives. Our personal experience becomes a fount of dialogue with our Lord: it is one more spur to be consistent and faithful. St. Josemaria saw in the virtue of fidelity the effective result of the full commitment of human freedom that aspires to the highest gifts; it is a continual self-giving: a love, a generosity, a self-renunciation that lasts, and not merely the result of inertia. This can be seen in Mary's life, and in the history of the Chosen People: *Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.*[22]

Remembering God's goodness, in the world and in each person, moves us to be loyal.

The light and grace that God grants us when we receive the sacraments, in the prayer, in the means of formation, and also in get-togethers and in our work, show us specific ways to be faithful in our daily life. These lights enable us to be more refined in our piety and to grow in our fraternity; they spur us on in our apostolate and help us to do our ordinary work joyfully and with a spirit of service. If we are docile to the thoughts, decisions and affections that the Holy Spirit inspires in us, we will grow steadily in faithfulness, and cooperate in carrying out God's plans, even without realizing it.

How fruitful is our faith when it incorporates the events of our own experience in life! We are not alone. We all depend on God's grace and on one another, and our Christian vocation sets us face to face with our responsibility to bring many people to God's love. Faced with situations

that may seem harder to accept or understand—complications in our family relationships, ill-health, times of inner dryness, setbacks at work—we seek and accept God’s will. *Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*, says divine Wisdom through the mouth of Job.

Thus we won’t view temptations as something separate from or incompatible with past inspirations or decisions, since temptations also enter into the divine plan of salvation. “After the tragedy of the Cross all the disciples have fled, all of them! There only remain a few women and an adolescent, John, whose fidelity was rewarded with the Redeemer’s words: *Behold, your mother!* (Jn 19:27). In response to the fidelity of a few short years, our Lord entrusted him with what he loved most on earth, and also gave him himself. With our eyes on this little

band of women, strong in the hour of sorrow, loyal in spite of everything, let us renew our resolution to never again forsake God. And if on some occasion we have in fact fled, we promise him it won't happen again, while asking him to grant all of us the strength to persevere.”[23]

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[1] *Lk 2:23*

[2] Cf. *Lk 2:26*

[3] *Lk 2:29-32*

[4] Cf. *Lk 2:34-35*

[5] *Lk 2:19*; cf. *Lk 2:51*

[6] John Paul II, Homily in the Cathedral of Mexico City, 26 January 1979

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Lk* 2:52

[10] *Lk* 2:34

[11] John Paul II, Homily in the Cathedral of Mexico City, 26 January 1979

[12] *Mk* 15:34

[13] *Ps* 22(21):27

[14] John Paul II, Homily in the Cathedral of Mexico City, 26 January 1979

[15] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 17 September 2006

[16] St. Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Fourth Station

[17] *Jn* 19:27

[18] *Lk* 11:28

[19] 1 Cor 6:12

[20] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.

[21] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 34.

[22] Is 44:21-22

[23] St. Josemaria, notes from a meditation given on July 22, 1964.