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Meditations: Wednesday of the Thirty-First Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the thirty-first week of Ordinary Time. The topics are: leaving everything for Christ is a gift; consider first the gifts we have received; the fruit of carrying the Cross.

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- Leaving everything for Christ is a gift
 - Consider first the gifts we have received
 - The fruit of carrying the Cross
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IN TODAY'S Gospel, St. Luke records some surprising words of Jesus: *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple* (Lk 14:25). In several Old Testament texts, *love* and *hate* are used as an indication of definitive preference, a forceful choice. Scripture says that Jacob loved Rachel and hated Leah (cf. *Gn* 29:30), or that the Lord loved Jacob and

hated Esau (cf. *Rom* 9:13). In this sense, Jesus' words teach us that following Him takes precedence over any other path on this earth. "We must have charity towards all, both relatives and strangers, but without straying from the love of God for the love of them,"^[1] Saint Gregory the Great taught. "Christ's words could be translated as 'love more, love better,' in the sense that a selfish or partial love is not enough — we have to love others with the love of God."^[2]

Only when we realize that what Jesus asks of us is, in reality, a gift, does gratitude lead to a generous response. Jesus never stops calling anyone. He wants to share the greatest thing He has – a true and unconditional love – with everyone, and that is why He asks us to be free to receive it. Then other earthly realities find their proper weight and place in our lives. At another time in his life, we hear Jesus say, *Truly I tell*

you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life (Mk 10:29-30).

AFTER CALLING his listeners to total self-giving, Jesus uses two slightly puzzling examples. First, He talks about a man who decided to build a tower but did not sit down to calculate how much it would cost, and second, He describes a king about to go into battle, who needs to stop and consider whether victory is really possible. It seems odd for Jesus to talk about deliberation and calculation right after asking us to give everything.

Perhaps He wants us to reflect on a constant theme in his life and preaching: true self-giving always arises from considering a previous gift. In fact, although we may seem to initiate the act of giving, it is always silently moved by God. On the night before his Passion, Jesus anticipated his redemptive sacrifice by saying: *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (Jn 10:18)*. And to leave no doubt that He gave his life with joy: *I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer (Lk 22:15)*. Total self-giving is born of gratitude for a great gift received freely. Jesus gives thanks to his Father for all the goodness about to be poured out upon the world, and He feels blessed to participate in the redemption of mankind. From this place of gratitude flows a limitless, uncalculating self-giving.

The examples in the Gospel can help us reflect on what we have received and the means we possess. If we want to build a tower to reach heaven or win the battle of our lives, we must first consider our resources. Often, our intentions and desires to respond to God are sincere, but we overlook the strength and most valuable means we have: God Himself, and his call. If we see God as a competitor, it's easy to perceive his demands as a loss for us. But if we recognize that He is on our side, we are motivated to build whatever is necessary.

THERE IS an interesting parallel in the two examples Jesus gives: the decision to begin construction or enter a battle must be considered slowly. Sitting down to wonder whether we can build the tower or

win the battle symbolizes interior recollection, discerning if our trust is primarily placed in God without falling into self-sufficiency, or worse, shortcuts that solve things with worldly cunning. This inner battle is the first and most fundamental step in following Christ magnanimously. It is "a more profound war that we must all fight! It is the firm and courageous decision to renounce evil and its enticements and to choose the good, ready to pay in person: this is following Christ, this is what taking up our cross means!"^[3]

When we live for God's greatness, trusting in Him, then even the little things, "small as they are, if accepted lovingly, are most pleasing to God's goodness, which has promised a whole ocean of happiness to his children in return for one cup of cold water. And since these occasions arise at every moment, they are an excellent means of amassing great

spiritual riches."^[4] One day, when Saint Josemaría participated in Benediction with a fragment of the *Lignum Crucis* (the wood of the cross), he told those present: "After Benediction we'll come up and kiss the Cross, saying sincerely that we love it, because we no longer see in the Cross something we find or might find difficult, but the joy of being able to give ourselves, stripping ourselves of everything in order to find all the Love of God."^[5]

Our Mother Mary knew how to stand at the foot of the Cross and leave everything, even her Son, in God's hands. Perhaps, even amid the pain of temporarily being without Jesus, a prayer of thanksgiving arose in her heart because of everything God was doing for humanity and how deeply He loves us. "In the midst of the darkness of the Passion and death of her Son, Mary continues to believe

and to hope in his Resurrection, in the victory of God's love."^[6]

^[1] Saint Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, 37, 3.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 97.

^[3] Pope Francis, Angelus, 8-IX-2013.

^[4] Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, Chapter 35.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, words spoken 14-IX-1969, qtd. Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid, 2000, pg. 217 (our translation).

^[6] Pope Francis, Audience, 1-III-2017.

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