

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

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this Lenten season. The topics are: the commandments quench our thirst for happiness; idols are weak substitutes for God; the Cross overturns our scale of values.

- The commandments quench our thirst for happiness
- Idols are weak substitutes for God
- The Cross overturns our scale of values

THE FIRST reading of the third Sunday of Lent, taken from the book of Exodus, shows us God promulgating the Decalogue. The context is solemn and awe-inspiring. There are moments in Sacred Scripture when God's voice is warm and approachable, like when He comes in the whisper of the breeze (cf. 1 Kg 19:11). On this occasion, however, He manifests Himself with the roar of thunder, lightning, and fire: *The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire, the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness* (Ps 29:7-8). God speaks as the Creator of heavens and earth, the maker of man, and conveys his commandments through Moses. And He does so in the form of prohibitions.

It is logical for us to experience a certain unease before the way God

shows Himself here. We might think that his commandments are meant to deprive us of certain goods and limit our freedom. Through this lens, God is a distrustful master, an insatiable competitor to be appeased. Although this suspicion may persist in us, nothing is further from God's true face. He made us in his image and likeness and wants to share his life with us, making us participants in his plenitude. He does not take pleasure *in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live* (Ez 33:11).

We may not believe that we need any guidance to live that plenitude. But our own experience shows that we often end up doing the evil we do not want and rejecting the good we truly desire (cf. Rom 7:19). With his commandments, God offers us water that quenches our “thirst for truth, joy, happiness, and love;”^[1] ultimately, they are a path to fullness

of life outlined by the One who created us and knows our deepest aspirations. However, the devil wants to cast doubt on the commandments, presenting God as an enemy of life. He did so with our first parents, he attempted to do with Jesus in the desert, and he continues to act in this way today. We can respond to this insinuation by saying with the psalmist: *The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul [...] The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes* (Ps 19:8-9).

YOU SHALL not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them (Ex 20:4-5). Throughout their journey,

the people of Israel will face the temptation of idolatry repeatedly. They are fooled into replacing God with human creations, realities that can be controlled. And that is the greatest temptation: “More fearsome than Pharaoh are the idols; we could consider them as his voice within us. Feeling omnipotent, recognized by all, taking advantage over others: every human being feels the seduction of this lie. It is a well-trodden path. For this reason, we can become attached to money, certain projects, ideas, goals, our position, a tradition, and even some people.”^[2] Idols offer us a certain security; they are a substitute for God which, at first, we can control as we like. However, sooner or later, they end up enslaving us, hindering us from enjoying divine love and the relationships that make up our existence.

Idolatry in any form prevents understanding God's logic or how man can come to Him. God's logic is one of gratuitousness, unconditional gift. It requires trust and detachment from the desire for security that does not come from Him. In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus reproaches the merchants in the Temple for turning the house of God into a market. In addition to altering the purpose of that place dedicated to prayer, one of the characteristics of such a place is that it is transactional: we acquire goods with our own resources. We can be sure that a particular amount of money will win us a particular good. The buyer has rights and expectations, measures the risk very well, and is always bargaining with the seller. It is a tragedy for our relationship with God to become transactional when it is called to be much greater. He invites us to purify our sense of security, not to try to control the results of our struggle,

not to want to buy our salvation, but to take risks. Our salvation – the fullness of life to which He calls us – takes our capacity and efforts into account, but at the same time, it involves opening ourselves to his grace, letting God act in us. Only He, and not our feeble idols, can satisfy our deepest longings for happiness.

AT CALVARY, all idols fall like dead leaves: none can stand before the Cross. Therefore, as St. Paul exclaims to the inhabitants of Corinth: *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor 1:22-24).

We tend to exalt success, power, material abundance, pleasure, or the absence of difficulties too much... But Christ's sacrifice overturns our scale of values. The Cross shows us that sometimes what appears weak is strong, that failures may contain seeds of victory, that what appears dead and inert may contain a principle of life, and that pain can be meaningful and give birth to life. All our efforts to make space for grace in our lives will bring forth eternal life in us. "Through his passion and death on the cross, Christ gave a new meaning to suffering: from then on, it configures us with him and unites us to his redeeming passion."^[3] —

We may sometimes feel helpless when we suffer or see people we love suffering. Then it consoles us to know that the Son of God also suffered. "Suffering is part of God's plans." St. Josemaria taught. "This is the truth, however difficult it may be

for us to understand it. It was difficult for Jesus Christ the man to undergo his passion: ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done’ (Lk 22:42). This supernatural acceptance of suffering was, precisely, the greatest of all conquests. By dying on the cross Jesus overcame death. God brings life from death.”^[4] The Virgin Mary, who was not spared the pain of seeing her own Son die, can help us find meaning in the difficulties that arise in our lives.

^[1] Saint John Paul II, Message, 4-X-1989.

^[2] Pope Francis, Message, 1-II-2024.

^[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1505.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 168.

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