

Meditations: Monday of the First Week of Lent

Some reflections that can assist our prayer as we begin the season of Lent.

- Giving up sin is gain
- Seeing Christ in others
- Heaven is for those who receive everything from God

THE PRECEPTS of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are pure, enlightening the eye (Ps 19:8). Joy for our heart and light for our eyes: these are the gifts God has prepared for us if we open our heart during

this Lent and strive for the conversion He wants from us. God wants us to be happy, as the first point of the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”^[1]

We want to ask for light so as not to remain simply on the surface of things, and to grasp more deeply the value of the people around us and of our work. Converting means looking in a new way at what we have already seen many times. The Holy Spirit is the one who can cleanse our eyes and purify our heart to love God and those around us better. The lie of the enemy consists in making us suspect that God’s only concern is to ask us to give up things. But giving up sin is always a gain, a benefit beyond imagining. This sacrifice “is more apparent than real, for living

this way means freeing oneself from many kinds of slavery and savoring instead, in the depths of one's heart, the fullness of God's love.”^[2]

“Lent is a new beginning, a path leading to the certain goal of Easter, Christ's victory over death. This season urgently calls us to conversion. Christians are asked to return to God ‘with all their hearts’ (*Joel 2:12*), to refuse to settle for mediocrity and to grow in friendship with the Lord ... Lent is a propitious time to intensify the life of the spirit.”^[3]

I WAS HUNGRY and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35). Jesus tells the disciples that this is the behavior of those who, in the end, will be

counted among the blessed. Saint Paul, in turn, writes to the Ephesians: *I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers (Eph 1:16)*. God has said clearly that He awaits us in every person we meet; knowing this is good reason to be thankful. If we open ourselves to his grace, we will learn to discover the divine image in each soul, especially in those in need. Knowing that our Lord not only loves that colleague, that friend or that family member, but that He is even present in them, is a spur to seek there Christ's face. Those around us are a gift for us from God.

As if that were not enough, Jesus has promised us that each of our acts of love for others is like one addressed to Him: *As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40)*. God urges us to bring love, understanding and peace wherever we are. In this endeavor, a

smile can already be a good start and can brighten the day of those around us. “Don’t forget that sometimes one needs to have smiling faces by one’s side,”^[4] Saint Josemaría wrote. To spread peace and joy to those around us, we must first have it in our own heart. Hence the importance of being very sincere with God, with ourselves, and with those who assist us. ”Let us not be afraid to be truthful, to speak the truth, to hear the truth, to conform ourselves to the truth. In this way, we will be able to love . . . Hypocrites are afraid of the truth. They prefer to pretend rather than be themselves.”^[5] To feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty and welcome the stranger, we first need to have peace in our own heart, with the serenity that enables us to see Christ in others.

COME, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34). In a certain sense, “the final judgment is already in progress; it begins now over the course of our lives. Thus judgment is pronounced at every moment of life, as it sums up our faith in the salvation which is present and active in Christ, or of our unbelief, whereby we close in upon ourselves.”^[6] But the risk exists of viewing this path as a struggle to make God love us; without realizing that, in reality, his love is eternal and precedes us. As Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, “hell consists in man being unwilling to receive anything, in his desire to be self-sufficient. It is the expression of enclosure in one’s own being alone . . . In contrast, it is the nature of heaven that it can only be received . . . it is essentially what one has not done nor can do for oneself.”^[7]

Completely opposed to this attitude are the claims of the two sons in the parable of the merciful father. The younger son demands: *“Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me”* (Lk 15:12). The elder son, in turn, reproaches his father: *“You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends”* (Lk 15:29). Both calculate what they think they deserve, but they are wrong. The younger son, when he returns repentant, does not even finish his sentence when his father says: *“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry”* (Lk 15:21-22). The elder son is promised even more: *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours”* (Lk 15:31). Thus, both learn to receive, and they can go to heaven to receive for all eternity the infinite love of God.

With the desire to let God work in our soul, we can unite ourselves to the prayer of Saint Josemaria: “Yes Lord, with the help of our Mother in Heaven we will be faithful, we will be humble. And we will never forget that we have feet made of clay, and that everything that shines forth in us and attracts others is yours; it is your grace, it is the divinization you give us because you want to, because you are good.”^[8]

^[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1.

^[2] Saint Josemaria, Friends of God, no. 84.

^[3] Francis, Message, 18 October 2016.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, Furrow, no. 57.

^[5] Francis, Audience, 25 August 2021.

^[6] Francis, Audience, 11 December 2013.

^[7] Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *An Introduction to Christianity*, p. 239.

^[8] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 2, no. 62.

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