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Closeness from Afar

Like Jesus did with Nathanael, we wish to accompany those who are far from us and perhaps alone. Our prayer, offering the pain caused by distance, and the “creativity of charity” can fill the hearts of those we love with joy and peace.

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Nathanael recognised the Messiah because he felt his quiet, personal presence beneath the fig tree. The solitude that has settled into our

societies often pains us. It may not appear in exactly the same way everywhere, but situations of physical, emotional, or spiritual isolation that cause suffering can be found almost anywhere.

Perhaps we feel the loneliness of some patients, whether in the hospital or at home, particularly acutely, though there are also many healthy people who are yet alone. Others may withdraw involuntarily, unsure how to let themselves be cared for. Something very ordinary and natural can bring deep sorrow: a change of residence that means a sister or friend will be less accessible than before; the end of a school or university period that separates a group of friends; a family wedding that marks the departure of a loved one from the family home.

In all these situations, it is important to be very honest with God and

ourselves, to ensure that no part of the distance is caused by our own comfort or selfishness. We cannot dismiss that possibility out of hand. Yet here we will mainly reflect on forms of distance *imposed* on us in some way, even if only because we cannot be in two places at once.

In Christ, we can reach the farthest corner of the planet, the furthest hospital bed, the deepest heart that feels distant. With Him, we are capable of bringing warmth, light, and affection to any soul sitting alone beneath their fig tree. Living in Christ allows us to overcome the limitations of time and space. We wish to accompany those who feel alone, but for that, it is also necessary to allow Christ to visit us in our own fig tree. “Through Christ, with Him and in Him,” we can abolish that distance and be present in a way that is divine, and yet also profoundly human.

A very personal form of suffering

Ordinary life presents us with many *distances* that we can offer to Jesus. He is not indifferent to that suffering: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (Mk 4:38). They think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: ‘Do you not care about me?’ It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because He, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on Him, He saves his disciples from their discouragement.”^[1] —

We suffer when we cannot be close to those we love because they matter to us. Jesus and his Mother experienced a separation of three days when He was twelve, lost in the

Temple. At first, Mary did not understand why Jesus allowed the anguish caused by that distance. She may even have felt guilty for not having cared sufficiently for her Son.

Conflicting feelings might arise in our hearts: the awareness that unavoidable duties objectively prevent us from caring for our loved ones as we would wish, and, on the other hand, the desire to care for them, embrace them, and make them feel loved. In time, twenty years later, Mary understood that Jesus would again be absent for three days, occupied in the work of his Father, and she realised that the distance was only apparent. She set aside her own pain and devoted herself to supporting the apostles, including those who did not immediately return, like Thomas, because she too wanted to be involved in her Father's work.

Some situations are particularly painful, such as, for example, when illness prevents those we love most from recognising us. It is hard to comprehend all that a parent feels when they must emigrate to seek a future for their family, leaving their parents, spouse, and children behind for the time being. Distance can also arise from the separation of spouses, or even more painfully in cases of divorce, which are often unwanted by both. Such situations may entail temporary separation from the children. A priest may also suffer when caring for multiple parishes prevents him from visiting sick or dying parishioners as frequently as he would wish. How can one not think of a parent who sees a child choosing bad company, potentially jeopardising their happiness and distancing them from the family? These are just a few examples among countless situations in which various forms and degrees of distance

intervene between us and those we love. They place our loved ones “beneath their fig tree.”

When it seems impossible to be present, we may feel tempted to give up, resign ourselves, and do nothing. Yet faith assures us that even then, we can become a channel of “authentic evangelical joy inspiring us to break through the barriers of indifference.”^[2] There is something within everyone’s reach in these circumstances, something that can be even more valuable than physical presence, and which also fills us with peace: “May we always praise God for his goodness, cultivate unity with our loved ones, open our hearts to those who are far away and, in particular, to all those in need.”^[3]

Keeping company from afar

In a sense, Jesus was under the fig tree, even though Nathanael was

absolutely convinced he was alone. The moments described above are a wonderful opportunity to partake in the communion of saints. The prayer of intercession is a privileged means of living this communion. Nathanael came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because, in hindsight, he realised that He had been with him at that moment in his life: “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (Jn 1:48).

Many people today need Jesus to be present beneath their fig tree. Through grace, we can reach those seemingly inaccessible places, “for in Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). If we live his life, distance cannot separate us (cf. Rom 8:35–39). Even if we cannot be physically with them, those we love will feel the Saviour’s presence, and ours, alongside them.

Saint Josemaría was vividly aware that distance was no obstacle to accompanying his spiritual children. He wrote to his daughters in Mexico: “You know that, from afar, I always accompany you.”^[4] He confided to his sons in Australia, at the other end of the world: “I keep you company so much from here!”^[5] He suffered as we do in such situations: “Paco: don’t you see that your poor grandfather” (he referred to himself thus in letters during the civil war to evade censorship) “is raw with concern for his little ones?”^[6] He firmly believed that such closeness and union “is not based on the materiality of living under the same roof. Like the first Christians, we are *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32).”^[7]

Distance from loved ones can weigh on us far more heavily than any other personal pain. Offering our suffering to God for those from whom life has distanced us is already

a beginning of closeness. Moreover, the very fact that distance prevents immediate connection can spark the “creativity of charity”^[8] “in order to bring the balm of God’s tenderness to all our brothers and sisters who are in need.”^[9] —

In these situations, it is more important than ever to discern which small acts of affection are most meaningful for each person. Perhaps it helps them if we ask for their prayers, offer up their suffering, or seek their advice for our apostolic mission. It must comfort them when we acknowledge their feelings. Remembering anniversaries and celebrations will make them feel our closeness. Some people continue to send letters or postcards, while most make use of the vast possibilities that technology offers to let the other know we thought of them, lend a listen ear, or share something entertaining. Small gifts are another

way of being present and can compensate for the lack of physical contact. Often, a simple gesture showing that we remembered that person and their preferences is enough. It is also good practice to thank them for all they have done and to ask forgiveness for the trouble we may have caused them. Let us ask the Lord never to allow distance to arise from our lack of empathy for their deepest desires.

The guardian angels are there too

Our guardian angels are our best allies in this mission of accompanying those we love. They are keen accomplices in our endeavour to breach the isolation of our loved ones. When Jesus hears Nathanael's confession, He responds by opening unforeseen horizons: "Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see

greater things. Truly, truly, I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (Jn 1:50–51). Jesus’ presence beneath the fig tree alongside Nathanael, and the action of the angels, is invisible but utterly real.

On one occasion, Saint Josemaría learned of a difficult situation his two spiritual children were facing. They were to stay in a boarding house with a rather unsuitable environment. One of them euphemistically referred to it as a “dangerous neighbourhood.” The diary of those days delves into the nature of the danger: “In this house, naturally, there is a corresponding flock of ‘vulpes levantinas.’”^[10]

Months later, in Burgos, Saint Josemaría wrote a point in *The Way* referring to this situation: “You say that in such surroundings there are many occasions of going astray?

That's true, but is there not also the presence of the guardian Angels?...”^[11] —

We too can avail ourselves of the help of such powerful intercessors to accompany our loved ones, providing them with the warmth of companionship and spiritual support they need. Love overcomes distances by soaring; becoming eternal and divine.

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“You will see heaven open” (Jn 1:51). Heaven is open because the Virgin Mary is its gate. Our faith assures us that when those we love face the solitude of the final step towards eternal life, they will have the Virgin Mary’s maternal care, just as Jesus had his Mother with Him by the Cross. We long to be with our loved ones in those final moments, beneath their fig tree. Our Mother will grant

us the gift of entering that sacred land hand-in-hand with her.

[1] Pope Francis, Extraordinary moment of prayer, 27-III-2020.

[2] Pope Leo XIV, Message for the 5th World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly (27 July 2025).

[3] Pope Leo XIV, Message for the 5th World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly (27 July 2025).

[4] Letter to his daughters in Mexico, from Rome, 20-VI-1950 (AGP, serie A. 3.4, 500620-7).

[5] Letter to his sons in Australia, from Rome, 8-IV-1964 (AGP, serie A.3.4, 640408-1).

[6] Letter to his sons in Valencia, 25-VII-1937 (AGP, serie A.3.4, 370725-3).

[7] Letter 11, no. 23.

[8] Saint John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 6-I-2001, no. 50.

[9] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14-II-2017, no. 31.

[10] *Diario del paso de los Pirineos, días 6 y 7 de octubre de 1937* (Juan Jiménez Vargas), pg. 2, in AGP, sec A, leg 2, carp 2, exp 1 y 2.

[11] *The Way*, no. 566.

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