

Meditations: Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer during the 5th Week in Ordinary Time. The topics are: we have good and evil within us; for Christians, every “no” is at the service of a greater “yes;” examining our hearts in depth.

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HEAR ME, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him (Mk 7:14-15).

Later, in private, Jesus' disciples asked Him for a more detailed explanation of these words, which must have surprised them. Jesus insisted particularly on this teaching, engraving it on his followers' souls: it is the heart that sees God. Jesus took special care to teach his followers to live focused on what is most important. He came to redeem us, to transform our hearts, not to engage in petty disputes.

The Gospel is always vibrant and relevant to us. We can therefore ask ourselves whether we are like those Pharisees who cleaned the cup on the outside without noticing the uncleanness within (cf. *Mt 23:26*).

Jesus “emphasizes the primacy of interiority, that is, the primacy of the ‘heart’: it is not the external things that make us holy or unholy, but the heart which expresses our intentions, our choices and the will to do all for the love of God. External behavior is the result of what we decide in the heart, and not the contrary: with a change in external behavior, but not a change of heart, we are not true Christians. The boundary between good and evil does not pass outside of us, but rather within us. We could ask ourselves: where is my heart? [...] Without a purified heart, one cannot have truly clean hands and lips which speak sincere words of love — it is all duplicitous, a double life — lips which speak words of mercy, of forgiveness: only a sincere and purified heart can do this.”^[1] —

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SACRED SCRIPTURE gives us many examples of the teaching Jesus wanted to share with the Pharisees put into practice. He wanted them to realize that, when God asks us to deny ourselves and say “no” to something, it is always at the service of a greater “yes.” The important thing was not which foods could or could not be eaten, but what happened within each person. That is why, in another passage, Jesus issues this invitation: *Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life (Jn 6:27)*. In the same vein, St. Paul reminds us that *athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable (1 Cor 9:25)*. Jesus wants us to avoid falling into the asceticism of those Pharisees who lived by the precept but forgot about the purpose of their actions.

Christianity is much more than what we see on the surface: Jesus invites us to seek what is lasting, what endures. Our faith is not about saying “no,” as some caricatures would have us believe. Living as a Christian sometimes involves saying “no,” certainly, but only insofar as it helps us say “yes” to bigger things. We fast, but we do so to seek worthwhile food, food that remains. In his first homily as Peter's successor, Pope Benedict XVI echoes his predecessor, saying: “Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? And once again the Pope said: No! If we let Christ into

our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great.”^[2] —

WHEN WE read or listen to the list of evils Jesus says can come out of our hearts, it may be worthwhile to pause and consider which ones concern us personally. He starts with dramatic words – like *theft* and *murder* – which we might not associate with ourselves, but He goes on to speak of *pride* and *foolishness*. It is easy to stir up disputes like those Pharisees did, robbing our families of peace by failing “to overlook one irritating detail or another in the persons who live with you.”^[3] — We may have more Pharisaical tendencies than we think. Pride may silently poison our personal relationships, or we may lack the sensitivity to perceive God’s calls to

set our minds on what is above, not earthly things (cf. Col 3:2).

This Gospel passage invites us to examine how our hearts are becoming identified with Jesus' heart. St. Paul warns us that pride can lead us to practice the faith superficially, not to please Christ but to satisfy our own ego: *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch' (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:20-23).*

We can pray, along with St. Josemaría, “*Cor Mariae Dulcissimum,*

iter para tutum: Most Sweet Heart of Mary, prepare a safe way. Guide our steps on earth with strength and security.”^[4] May our Mother help us purify our hearts so that we can lift our gaze and our actions toward God.

^[1] Pope Francis, Angelus, 30-VIII-2015.

^[2] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 24-IV-2005.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 173.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 178.

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