

Meditations: Saturday of the Thirteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the thirteenth week of Ordinary Time.

- The joyful banquet of God with his people
- A fast that goes unnoticed
- The new wine of Jesus

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JESUS WAS NOT a conventional teacher. He drew the attention of his contemporaries by the freedom with which he acted and the authority with which he taught. The teachers of Israel, in contrast, were meticulous about the precepts the people had to live by, and at times fell into a casuistry that failed to distinguish the essential from the accidental. The danger existed of their teachings becoming a complex external guide that had to be learned and followed unthinkingly. Jesus' teachings have an entirely different tone. While continuing the tradition received by the people of Israel, he was not concerned about merely fulfilling external precepts, nor did he teach his disciples to do this. Rather he sought to bring about a conversion in each person's heart.

As a result, some people were surprised to see that neither he nor his disciples fasted on certain

occasions. When challenged about this, Christ replied with an image the people could easily understand: “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?” (*Mt* 9:15). At weddings in Israel, the bridegroom’s close friends were expected to keep up the joyful atmosphere of the celebration. With this comparison, Jesus is clearly referring to himself as the bridegroom, and to his disciples as the bridegroom’s friends. He has brought to the world the joy of salvation.

God wants our happiness, and He never commands us to do anything that would hinder us from attaining that goal. But precisely because it is an ambitious goal, it will often cost us effort; and at times we may fail to fully understand his paths, which may also include suffering. However, God’s precepts always guide us towards a free and happy life. “A

philosopher once said something more or less like this: ‘I do not understand how one can believe today, because those who say they believe have a face from a funeral wake. They do not bear witness to the joy of Christ’s Resurrection.’

Many Christians have that face, yes, a face from a funeral wake, a face of sadness. But Christ is risen! Christ loves you! And you have no joy? Let us think a bit about this and let us ask: Do I have joy because the Lord is close to me, because the Lord loves me, because the Lord has redeemed me?”^[1]

THE IMAGE of the wedding feast is also used by Jesus for a prophetic announcement of his own death: “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (*Mt*

9:15). The bridegroom will be taken away from them on the Cross, which will overwhelm his disciples with mourning, Fasting, like the Cross, involves mourning and deprivation, but both are permeated with the joy of fulfilling God's will and the hope of a new life. Hence fasting is not merely depriving ourselves of something we like; it is not an end in itself but rather seeks to give us the nourishment that comes from obedience to the Father's will. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (*Jn* 4:34), The deprivation involved in fasting, the initial movement of self-denial, helps detach our heart from personal comforts and keeps our spiritual sensitivity awake. Thus we will be able to discover and enjoy divine goods.

At another point, Jesus invites people to give alms, to pray and to fast without others knowing about it, but

only their Father in heaven. This also surprised some of his listeners, because in many cases they performed these good works precisely to gain the esteem of others. But Jesus reminds us that the value of our actions does not depend on how others see them. Often God will be the only one who appreciates our prayer and sacrifice, or our generous gesture. And this will be enough. St. Josemaría said: “At times your smile may be your best mortification and even your best penance. *Alter alterius onera portate* (Gal 6:2): bear one another’s burdens, trying to do so in such a way that your help goes unnoticed, so that you aren’t praised for it, and no one sees it. That way you won’t lose any merit before God.”^[2] Thus, passing unnoticed, like salt, a Christian seasons every environment, making “everything supernaturally lovable and attractive.”^[3]

“NEITHER is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved” (*Mt 9:17*). The wineskin was a leather pouch into which new wine was poured and left to ferment. As the wine fermented, the leather pouch expanded due to the release of gases. But if the wineskin was old, it became hard and lost its elasticity. So if new wine was poured into an old wineskin, the wineskin could burst as the wine fermented, and both the wineskin and the wine would be lost.

Jesus always brings new wine. This new wine is the Holy Spirit, the good news of redemption. And the clearest sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in a person is joy. It is no coincidence that Jesus wanted to begin his public life by turning water into exquisite wine,

in the context of a wedding banquet. Christ has come to fill us with a life that gladdens our heart, as wine gladdens a banquet. But this new wine needs to be poured into the new wineskin of our heart. That is why Jesus prepares the hearts of his disciples so that the strength and newness of his divine life can be contained there.

The teachings of certain scribes and Pharisees in Israel, with their casuistry and merely external vigilance, transformed people's hearts into old wineskins. To be filled with the new wine, with the new life Christ offers us, our heart must learn to listen and be docile to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of continual renewal. We can ask our Lady to give us a heart like hers, capable of opening itself to the new wine of the divine life her Son gives us.

^[1] Francis, Angelus, 13 December 2020.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Alone with God*, no. 122.

^[3] *Ibid.*

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