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Combat, Closeness, Mission (1): "Choose Life"

The first chapter of a new series on the path to holiness, an adventure in which it is not only about "giving" but, above all, "receiving."

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Like a prince. That's how the boy felt, despite his youth and plain, worn-out clothes, when he entered the church and was enveloped by the vibrant music of the organ. "It seemed as if it

greeted us, me and my little companions, like we were princes," he said many years later, recalling his childhood in Canale d'Agordo, a tiny village in northeast Italy. Albino Luciani pinpointed the start of "a vague intuition, which would later become a convinced certainty," that the Catholic Church "is not only something great, but it also makes the little ones great"^[1] in that childhood experience.

Choose life

These lines of Blessed John Paul I naturally evoke those of Mary in the *Magnificat*. The word with which our Mother begins her song means "to glorify," to sing someone's greatness. Mary exalts God because He makes the little ones great. "He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The

hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty" (*Lk 1:51-53*).

Along with the song of our Lady, Saint Luke shares a moment in which our Lord's heart overflowed in what we might call his *Magnificat*. Like his Mother in Ain Karim, when she carried Him in her womb, Jesus is filled with "joy in the Holy Spirit," seeing how God pours Himself out for the little ones: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him" (*Lk 10:21-22*).

What is it that has been revealed to the little ones? It was first revealed to Mary and Joseph, then the apostles and the holy women who accompanied Jesus, and finally to many humble Christians throughout the twenty centuries of the Church's history. But what is it that makes them great? A passage from Deuteronomy guides us toward an initial answer. The Lord speaks to his people's hearts, his voice at once solemn and tender: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them" (*Dt 30:15, 19-20*).

In the original language, the "you" pronouns alternate between plural

and singular, making it clear that God is not only speaking to his people in general: He speaks to each person, one at a time, because choosing Life happens in each person's heart. *Life*... Saint Josemaría used to write it thus, capitalized, when referring to grace and glory; to Life with God here on earth and later in heaven. Some of his words from June 1975, a few days before going to heaven, cannot fail to move us: "We are all the same Life of Christ: and there is so much to do in the world! Let us always ask the Lord to help us all to be faithful, to continue the work, to live that Life, with a capital letter, which is the only one that is worthwhile: the other one is not worthwhile, the other one goes away, like water slipping through your fingers. On the other hand, this other Life...!"^[2] —

"Choose life." With these powerful words from Deuteronomy, and their

thousand echoes in the Gospel,^[3] the Lord is telling each one of us that He created us to live, to be happy. And He asks: *Are you going to choose me? Are you going to choose Life?* That is what the "little ones" have discovered and chosen. They know that the infinite desire to live that they carry within comes from and leads to God. And they want nothing else. They understand that triumphing in life, succeeding in life, means letting God's love fill them and then distributing it generously. Speaking of Mary, Martha's sister, Jesus will say that "she has chosen the better part," and that "it will not be taken from her" (*Lk 10:42*). And He will comfort his disciples with a similar assurance: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom" (*Lk 12:32*). The "little ones" live from God; that is what makes them great. Holiness is living from God and, from God, for others.

Holiness is in giving, and even more in "receiving"

When we consider the lives of the saints, the "little ones" who chose Life, it is not surprising that the renunciation, struggle, and "lessening" involved in their holiness comes to mind right away. Indeed, the saints necessarily oppose many adverse forces. Jesus prepared the way for us and He told us that this would happen: "In the world you will have trouble" (*Jn 16:33*); "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (*Jn 15:20*); "Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat" (*Lk 22:31*). No, Christian life is not easy, but other forms of life on earth are not easy either: sacrifice, renunciation, and struggle for any number of more or less lofty ends are always necessary.

"As we fight this battle, which will last until the day we die, we cannot

exclude the possibility that enemies both within and without may attack with violent force."^[4] Within ourselves we find different forms of resistance to God's love, but it involves "losing things." We give up control over everything in our lives, we give up satisfying every whim, we expose ourselves to others' disapproval, we take up our crosses... "When we abandon ourselves into God's hands, he frequently permits us to taste sorrow, loneliness, opposition, slander, defamation, ridicule."^[5] We certainly lose many elements of what the world calls "life." However, whoever loses their life in this way does not abandon it into nothingness, but to God. "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (*Mt 16:25*). Saints "lose" themselves in God, and thus, precisely, begin to "find" themselves.

What does it mean to "find" ourselves in God? In his first letter, Saint John writes: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (1 *Jn* 4:10). The Greek phrase is written in a particular tense, the aorist, which is a kind of "open past." It is the same tense used in both Mary's *Magnificat* and Jesus's. They speak of "actions which the Lord carries out repeatedly in history,"^[6] in our personal history. Saint John is not saying that God loved me once and for all in the past, but that God *is always loving me*. And every time I truly love, it is God who is loving me, and who is loving *in me*. Here and now.

Thus, it is true that the saint surrenders and "loses his life," but it is even more true—in the sense that it is a truth that embraces and underpins the former—that the saint "finds" God, and "receives" his whole being from God, analogously to how

Jesus receives Himself entirely from the Father.^[7] That is the secret source of the saints' love: it is the reason they can live in a way that a merely human gaze perceives as impossible and unbearable. Even when they feel their limitations and weaknesses every day, they go forward with their souls "immersed in God, divinised"; each of them "becomes a thirsty traveller who opens his mouth to the waters of the fountain."^[8]

Jesus tells his disciples, who stare at Him perplexed: "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (*Jn* 4:32). He lives to do the will of his Father: that is his life, that is his glory; He needs nothing more (cf. *Jn* 4:33-34). Just moments earlier, he told the Samaritan woman by the well: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (*Jn* 4:10). The Lord

whispers the same thing to each of us. If you knew the gift of God, if you realized what I want to give you, I would not be the one asking for a sip of water, or for your time, strength, patience, and struggle: you would ask me, *Lord, what do you need?* You would no longer measure or calculate what you give to God because you would realize that He gives Himself to you every time you give something, however small. Even if it is a single coin or a glass of water, "God, whole and entire"^[9] gives Himself to you.

Perhaps we now understand why we talk about surrender and renunciation when we speak of holiness. It is because of the resistance within us. The world is wounded, and our relationships are wounded because our hearts are wounded. But though this resistance is real, it loses strength when we are united with God. Giving ourselves

time and time again continues to take effort, but it is subsumed in the gift we know, the infinite love that embraces us. The men and women of God live in a "paradoxical blending of bliss and pain,"^[10] like Jesus on the Cross. They feel the deep certainty that they are receiving more than they give; their soul "feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long."^[11] Like our Blessed Mother, they know that God is doing great things in them (cf. *Lk* 1:49); that the one who always loves first, the source of love, is loving in them.

Ultimately, then, holiness consists of entering and remaining in "the Blessed Trinity's love for man"^[12] which has its origin in the Father and reaches us through Jesus, the beloved, the first to be loved: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (*Jn* 15:9). The love of the Father and of Jesus in which we want to abide is the Holy

Spirit: that is why we call Him the sanctifier^[13] and giver of life.^[14] "The saints of God? Why, each of the saints is a masterpiece of the grace of the Holy Spirit!"^[15]

Combat, closeness, mission

These lines have outlined the main ideas of the series now beginning. Each chapter will provide different perspectives on the path to holiness God calls us to, each in our way: "on the right, on the left, zigzagging, on foot, on horseback..."^[16] The central themes of the series can be summarized in three words that echo our Father's main teachings: combat, closeness, mission. All three motifs run through the series from beginning to end, because they are always present on the path to God, but we might pause for a moment to consider the reason for the order. On this path, what is fundamental is God's love for us.

We need not insist on the naivety of the belief that we can live free from God without meeting with interior and exterior resistance. It may not be the hidden engine of the path to holiness or even its starting point, but the struggle soon appears: "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be hasty in time of calamity" (*Sir 2:1-2*). Trial, temptations, and struggle are inevitable in a world wounded by sin. "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (*Mt 11:12*). Starting our reflections here helps us address an excessively naive and idealistic view of the path to heaven. But it would be equally naive and superficial to think that holiness consists primarily of struggle. Holiness consists in living from God and letting Him live in us (cf. *Gal 2:20*).

"God is always near us. [...] He is there like a loving Father. He loves each one of us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children — helping us, inspiring us, blessing... and forgiving."^[17] God's closeness assures us that He hears us in prayer and at all times. He also shows it to us through our brothers and sisters in the faith, through friendship, spiritual accompaniment, and the sacraments... Christians always know themselves to be closely accompanied by God and by their brothers and sister; we are always at home. This, in turn, brings us closer to others, that we might share the warmth of the home that we have received. Blessed Guadalupe experienced this, like many others: "Her confidence in God's closeness and in his love for her filled her with simplicity and serenity and made her unafraid of her mistakes and faults, so she could always advance, seeking

to love God and others in everything."^[18] —

The path to holiness is, therefore, not a solitary path, nor is it an individualistic project for self-salvation. Everything in Christian life speaks of relationship and family. The Lord, our brothers and sisters, our children, our parents, our friends, our colleagues... are the reason for our efforts and our victories. If it weren't for them, perhaps we would stop fighting. Perhaps we would give up, but we know that, just as we can count on their support, they count on us: they need us. "I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing."^[19] — That's how the saints lived: for God and from God; for others and from others.

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When Saint Josemaría thought about the destination of our journey, he imagined the moment when "all the Greatness of God, all the Wisdom of God, and all the Beauty of God, all the vibration, all the color, all the harmony" would be poured out into "that little clay vessel that is each of us."^[20] And he stepped aside, imagining his children ascending even higher than himself: "I have a weakness and it is that I love you very much. I think that my Heaven will consist of slipping through a little door and putting myself in a corner, looking at and loving the Blessed Trinity. And from there, hidden, I will see my daughters and sons very high, very close to God."^[21]

^[1]. A. Luciani (Blessed John Paul I), «In occasione del restauro dell'organo della chiesa di Canale

d'Agordo», in *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 9, EMP, Padua 1989, pg. 457.

[2]. Saint Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 7-VI-1975, cited in S. Bernal, *Monseñor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Apuntes sobre la vida del Fundador del Opus Dei*; Rialp, Madrid 1980, 6th ed., pg. 174. Cfr. also, for example, *The Way*, nos. 218, 255, 399, 737; *Furrow*, no. 817; *The Forge*, nos. 777, 818.

[3]. This is one of the main threads running through the Gospel of St. John. Cfr. for example the conversations with the Samaritan (*Jn* 4:10-14) and Martha (*Jn* 11:25-27); cfr. also *Jn* 5:39-40; 7:37-39; 10:10.

[4]. Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 214.

[5]. *Ibid*, no. 301.

[6]. Benedict XVI, Audience, 15-II-2006.

[7]. Cfr. *Lk* 10:22; *Jn* 5:26; 17:24; *Ps* 2:7.

[8]. *Friends of God*, n. 310.

[9]. *Friends of God*, n. 111.

[10]. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6-I-2001), no. 27.

[11]. *Friends of God*, n. 307.

[12]. Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 85.

[13]. Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 739.

[14]. Cfr. *Roman Missal*, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed; *Catechism*, n. 202.

[15]. Saint John XXIII, Address, 5-VI-1960.

[16]. Saint Josemaría, quoted in A. Sastre, *Tiempo de caminar*, Rialp, Madrid 1989, pg. 252.

[17]. *The Way*, n. 267.

[18]. F. Ocariz, "Guadalupe: un camino al cielo en la vida cotidiana," *ABC*, 13-V-2019.

[19]. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 273.

[20]. Saint Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 20-X-1968, quoted in A. Sastre, *Tiempo de caminar*, pg. 625.

[21]. Saint Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 5-IV-1970, quoted in A. Sastre, *Tiempo de caminar*, pg. 625.

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