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Something Great That Is Love (I): Jesus comes to meet us

First article in a series on discerning one's personal vocation in life, since God has a plan for each man and woman.

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During the month of October, the ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops is taking place in Rome, which Pope Francis has wanted to be about “Young People,

the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” In the Letter he wrote to young people announcing this event, the Holy Father evoked the encounter of the first disciples with our Lord: “Jesus looks at you and invites you to go with Him. Dear young people, have you noticed this look towards you? Have you heard this voice? Have you felt this urge to undertake this journey?”[1]

The personal encounter with Jesus can be difficult to achieve today with “the noise and confusion that is seemingly prevalent in the world.” Nevertheless, “his call continues to resonate in the depths of your heart so as to open it to joy in its fullness.” It will be possible to achieve this, the Pope says, with “expert guides” from whom “you will learn how to undertake a journey of discernment to discover God's plan in your life.”[2] The series of articles that is beginning here seeks to assist young

people on this journey. Guided by Jesus' first disciples, by the teachings of the Pope, the saints, and Saint Josemaria, we can go deeper into this perennial reality: God is calling us. "He has a plan for each person: sanctity."[3]

Saint Josemaria recalled how at the age of sixteen he discovered that his heart was asking "for something great, and that it was love."[4] May we too discover and rediscover—because love is always new, always surprising—*something great that is Love.*

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" And they said to

him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. Those taking part in this Gospel scene must have spoken about it with deep emotion, for it marked the most important moment in their life: the day on which they encountered, for the first time, Jesus of Nazareth.

Meeting Christ is truly the decisive experience for every Christian. As Benedict XVI forcefully said at the beginning of his pontificate: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”^[5] It is also quite significant that Pope Francis reminded us right from the start: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed

personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting Him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.”[6] We want to renew this invitation here, following in the footsteps of the youngest apostle: Saint John.

Who is Christ for me? Who am I for Him?

The fourth Gospel uses a wonderful phrase to capture the identity of the youthful John: he was “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Nothing more needed to be said: John was someone Jesus loved. Over the years this conviction never paled, but rather grew ever stronger: *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us (1 Jn 4:10)*. This certainty in our Lord’s Love for him is surely what enabled him to maintain, right to the end of his life, a deep and contagious joy. The same joy that we sense in his

Gospel. Everything began that day, on the banks of the Jordan.

And in our case, have we too experienced such a heartfelt encounter as the young apostle's? Even if we have been Christians our whole life and have spent many years praying, it is good to stop to consider: "Who is Christ for me? What does Christ mean in my real life, today and now?" Thus we can take stock of our faith. "But before asking this question, there is another question that is inseparable and prior to it, and that in a certain sense is more important: Who am I for Christ?"[7]

In raising these questions, it is only natural that we find ourselves a bit perplexed. Who am I for Christ? Who am I? A tiny insignificant creature? A product of evolution? Just another human being... who has to fulfill his commandments? How does Jesus see

me? We can draw light here from looking at the saints. Once when Saint John Paul II was asked a similar question, he answered: “Look, you are a thought in God’s mind, a beat of God’s heart. This means that you have a value that is, in a certain sense, infinite, that your unrepeatable individuality is important for God.”^[8] What he himself had discovered—what all the saints have discovered—is how much we matter to God. We aren’t an insignificant creature, a servant who is only in the world to do what He wants. We are truly friends. Everything that is ours matters to Him, and therefore He is concerned about us and accompanies us throughout our entire life, although often we fail to realize it.

All this is no exaggeration. Jesus himself told his apostles: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are*

my friends ... I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you (Jn 15: 13-15). These words are still very relevant today. Jesus “is alive and saying it to you now. Listen to his voice with great openness; he has something to say to each one.”[9] Who am I, then, for Christ? I am a friend, whom He loves with the greatest Love. I am a beat of his Heart. That’s who I am for Him. And He, who is He for me?

May you seek Christ!

On 29 May 1933, a young architecture student spoke with Saint Josemaria for the first time. His name was Ricardo Fernández Vallespín. Many years later he recalled: “The Father talked to me about what was going on in my soul ... He gave me some advice, and encouraged me to be better. I remember perfectly, with a vivid

memory, that before bidding me good-bye, he got up and went to a bookcase and picked up a book he was using. And on the first page, as a dedication, he wrote these three phrases: May you seek Christ! May you find Christ! May you love Christ!”[10]

The apostle John set out to seek Christ, even without knowing exactly who he was seeking. But he knew he was looking for something that would fill his heart. He hungered for a fulfilled life. He wanted more out of life than only to work, to earn money, to be like everyone else.... His heart was restless, and he wanted to quiet this restlessness. Therefore he followed the Baptist. And it was while he was with him that Jesus passed by his side. The Baptist pointed Him out: *Behold, the Lamb of God!* And he and his friend Andrew heard him say this, and they followed Jesus (Jn 1:36-37).

What can we do to follow in the footsteps of the young apostle? First, listen to our restless heart. Give heed to it when it isn't satisfied, when a worldly life fails to fill it, when it wants more than earthly goods and satisfactions. And then draw close to Jesus. In fact, perhaps in a certain sense this is easier for us than it was for John. Many people have already pointed out to us where Jesus can be found: "Usually we learn to invoke God as a young child from our Christian parents. Later, teachers, friends and acquaintances have helped us in many ways not to lose sight of our Lord."[11] Therefore what we need to do now is to seek Him: "Seek him then, hungrily; seek him within yourselves with all your strength. If you act with determination, I am ready to guarantee that you have already found him, and have begun to get to know him and to love him, and to

hold your conversation in heaven.”[12]

May you find Christ!

When John and Andrew began to follow Jesus that first time, they must have found themselves a bit embarrassed. How should they introduce themselves to Him. They couldn't just go up and ask Him: “are you the Lamb of God?” But that was what the Baptist had told them, and it was all they really knew about Him. Perhaps they were debating among themselves what they should do when Jesus himself *turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?”* (Jn 1:38).

Our Lord is moved by young, restless hearts. So when we seek Him sincerely, He himself comes to meet us in the most unexpected way. Saint Josemaria never forgot his first personal and unexpected encounter with Jesus. He was only an

adolescent, with his heart filled with plans and ideals. After a night of heavy snow, he left home in the morning only to discover, with surprise, the footprints left by the sandals of a discalced friar in the snow. He followed the trail and spoke with the friar. This experience left a deep impression on his soul: “If others can make such sacrifices for God and neighbor, can’t I offer Him something?”[13]

That day, like John and Andrew, the youthful Josemaria followed in the footsteps of our Lord, who now made Himself present in some *footprints in the snow*. Many other people probably saw those prints, but for that young boy they were an unmistakable sign that Jesus wanted to enter into his life. And his reaction was very similar to those first friends of Jesus: *They said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to*

them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour (Jn 1:38-39).

Discovering that someone loves us, as a great friend, awakens in us a hunger to get to know that person. Discovering that someone is concerned about us, that someone is waiting for our response and has the answer for our deepest longings spurs us to seek that person. Those footprints had a deep effect on the heart of Saint Josemaria: “He now had, very deep inside, ‘a divine restlessness’ that moved him to a more intense life of piety.”[14]

But seeking Jesus and finding Him is only the beginning. We can then begin to draw close to Him as a friend. We can strive to get to know Him better by reading the Gospels, going to Mass, enjoying intimacy with Him in Communion, caring for

Him in those most in need. And we can make ourselves known to Him, sharing with our Friend our joys and sorrows, our plans and failures. Because after all, this is what prayer is: “drawing close to Him in friendship, often spending time alone with the Person who we know loves us.”[15] Like John and Andrew, who spent that entire day with Jesus.

May you love Christ!

For the youthful John, the day he found Jesus was the day his life changed. Of course, he still had a long way to travel. Alongside Jesus he would experience the miraculous catch of fish and the journeys through Palestine; the words that brought joy to one’s heart and the miracles; the affectionate care for the sick, the poor, the outcasts.... But above all, those hours of conversation alone with the Master. The dialogue that began one

afternoon, next to the river Jordan, and that would last his entire life.

We have all experienced how deeply a friendship can change us. That is why parents need to be watchful concerning the friends their children make. Without even realizing it, our relationship with our friends transforms us little by little, leading us to love what they love and reject what they reject. Friendship unites so deeply that two friends can be said to share “one and the same soul that sustains two bodies.”[16]

In this sense, it is striking to see the transformation in the life of the young apostle. He and his brother James were called the *sons of thunder* (Mk 3:17), and several incidents in the Gospels show us that this wasn't an excessive term. For example, that time when some Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus and his disciples to their village, and the two brothers

asked the Master: *Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?* (Lk 9:54).

Nevertheless little by little, as their friendship with our Lord grew, they learned to love as Jesus did, to understand others as Jesus did, to forgive as Jesus forgave.

The same can happen to each one of us. Encountering Jesus and getting to know Him will lead us to want to love as He loves. We shouldn't be surprised to see our heart being consumed with this desire; rather we should be filled with gratitude, because our Lord wants to count on us to make his Love present in the world. That is what happened to Saint Josemaria. Those footprints in the snow gave him the deep conviction that he had a mission to carry out on this earth. "I began to have intimations of Love, to realize that my heart was asking for something great, and that it was

love.”[17] We too need to discover, behind these calls of our heart, the echo of the voice of Jesus that we often hear in the Gospels: *Follow me!*

Living our entire life with Christ

Looking back on his life, John saw how much had depended on the opportunity to follow Jesus. That is how God acts in each person: “The surpassing love of Jesus impels to great works, and incites to the continual desiring of greater perfection. Love wishes to be raised up, and not to be held down by any mean thing.”[18] That is what happened to John, to Peter, to James, to Paul, to Bartimaeus, to Mary Magdalene, and to so many other people since Jesus came into the world. Our Lord’s presence in the world is no less real today than back then. In fact, Jesus is even more present now, since He can live in each one of us. More than inviting us

to share in the mission He has received from his Father, Jesus wants to love with our life, with the heart of each one of us. *Abide in my love*, he tells us (*Jn 15:9*), in order to reconcile this world with Him, to transform hate into Love, selfishness into service, rancor into forgiveness.

The youthful apostle, who had discovered the Love of our Lord, accompanied Him right to the Cross. Later, with the rest of the apostles, he received a mission that would shape his entire life: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation* (*Mk 16:15*). We too, if we listen to our restless heart and follow Jesus, if we find Him and follow Him, if we are his friends, will discover that He is relying on us. He will ask us to help Him, each in our own way, in the Church. As a friend who, since he loves us, asks us to take part in an inspiring endeavor. “Today Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life,

is calling you, you, and you to leave your mark on history. He, who is life, is asking each of you to leave a mark that brings life to your own history and that of many others. He, who is truth, is asking you to abandon the paths of rejection, division and emptiness. Are you up to this?”[19]

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[1] *Letter of Pope Francis to Young People*, 13 January 2017.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Fernando Ocariz, notes from a get-together with young people in Argentina, 5 August 2018.

[4] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 86.

[5] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas est* (25 December 2005), no. 1.

[6] Francis, Apost Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 3.

[7] AGP, Library, P03, 2017, p. 146.

[8] Saint John Paul II, Address to young people from Kazakhstan, 23 September 2001.

[9] Benedict XVI, General Audience, 2 August 2006.

[10] *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, commentary on no. 382.

[11] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 1.

[12] *Friends of God*, no. 300.

[13] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, p. 85.

[14] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, p. 85.

[15] Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 8, 2.

[16] Saint Gregory Nazianzen, *Sermon 43*.

[17] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, p. 86.

[18] Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book 3, ch. 5.

[19] Francis, Prayer Vigil with Young People during the World Youth Day in Krakow, 30 July 2016.

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