

Meditations: Sunday of the Eighteenth Week of Ordinary Time (Year C)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 16th week of Ordinary Time.

- The mirage of vice
- Vanity and discretion
- Greed and detachment

IN TODAY'S second reading, Saint Paul encourages the Colossians to set

their hearts on the “things that are above.” And therefore he urges them to root out all that is worldly in their lives: “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (*Col 3:5*). Indeed, a life plagued by vice makes it difficult for us to be able to contemplate God face to face in heaven. Moreover, it also prevents us from tasting true happiness already here on earth. Although vice can sometimes seem attractive, giving the impression of offering a sure and intense joy, the truth is that it is like a mirage: it seems real, but it isn't. Often it exploits a deep human need (to love and be loved, well-being, peace...), and leads us to believe that a good way to satisfy it is through sin. However, it is a common experience that this path leads nowhere. Although it may provide relief for a time, it ends up demanding more frequent and intense experiences without offering true peace. It

therefore gives rise to a state of permanent dissatisfaction and even a certain inability to enjoy the simplest pleasures in life. Acts of vice can only provide a tenuous and short-lived consolation.

“The human heart can indulge in evil passions; it can pay heed to harmful temptations disguised in persuasive garb. But it can also oppose all of this. However arduous this may be, the human being is made for goodness, which truly fulfils us. And we are also able to practise this art, causing certain dispositions to become permanent.”^[1] These dispositions are the virtues, which enable us to form the habit of choosing the good not only from time to time, but in a stable way. A person who practices the virtues is better able to govern their passions and thus act with greater freedom. They don't want their heart to be filled in a random way, but in a more authentic

and deep way, consistent with their Christian identity. “True virtue,” St. Josemaría said, “is not sad or disagreeable, but pleasantly cheerful.”^[2] Certainly, the path of virtue entails struggle and effort to renounce the lure of vice. But the decisive factor is not embracing sacrifice for sacrifice’s sake, but realizing that thus we allow grace to purify us, building up an inner freedom that enable us to enjoy life close to our Lord. “Spiritual combat, then, leads us to look closely at the vices that shackle us and to walk, with God’s grace, towards the virtues that can flourish in us, bringing the springtime of the Spirit into our lives.”^[3]

VANITY can lead us to try to build our own happiness on what others think of us. In Hebrew, the term used

to refer to this vice means “vapor” or “mist.” Knowing this, we can better understand this Sunday’s first reading, from the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” (*Eccles* 1:1-2). The sacred author wants to help us realize that all the desires of the vain person – greatness, recognition, success – are like vapor or mist: they only provide a fleeting, superficial satisfaction that disappears with the first rays of the sun. “Ecclesiastes shows us the vanity of things in this world, so that we realize it is not worthwhile setting our heart on things that are transitory, on things that are futile or lack solidity.”^[4] —

In a certain sense, vanity leads one to instrumentalize relationships with others, who are seen merely as dispensers of approval. For someone who is vain, “his person, his achievements, his successes, must be shown to everyone: he is a perpetual

beggar for attention”;^[5] “he considers himself the sun and the center of those around him. Everything must revolve around himself.”^[6] Jesus warned us against doing good works solely in order to be seen by others, since in doing so, human recognition is preferred to a divine reward (cf. *Mt* 6:1). And He praised simple and discreet gestures such as that of the poor widow who gave a small offering without anyone noticing it (cf. *Mk* 12:41-43).

If we look around us, we will surely recognize many people who silently sacrifice themselves for us. The Christian life is made up of so many small acts of self-sacrifice that often go unnoticed by others: smiling when we are tired, avoiding comments that offend others, sharing our time with those we might not get along with, making a hidden effort that many people benefit from. But God values these hidden deeds

highly: “Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you” (*Mt 6:4*). And that reward will be a more stable and authentic happiness – that doesn’t depend on the “vapor” of the changing opinions of other people but on the certainty of pleasing God.

IN TODAY’S GOSPEL, Jesus speaks about a rich man who has a plentiful harvest. Faced with such abundance, he thinks that from now on his life will only involve enjoying himself and having a good time. “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Therefore Christ warns: “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his

possessions” (*Lk* 12:13-21). Indeed, the vice of avarice leads us to think that happiness is a matter of accumulating experiences and possessions; while anything that requires renunciation is perceived as a tragedy. This is what happened to the rich young man: he didn’t see how he could be happy if he lost his possessions. The evangelist tells us that he went away sad, the result of entrusting one’s happiness to riches.

But in the Gospel we also see many other people who, faced with our Lord’s call, didn’t hesitate to choose Him above all else, abandoning whatever they had. Peter, James and John left their boats on the shore (cf. *Lk* 5:11), and Matthew renounced his lucrative job as a tax collector (cf. *Mt* 9:9). Although at first these actions would have involved a real sacrifice for the apostles, in reality they achieved a greater good, because instead of accumulating goods that

sooner or later are used up, they chose to fill their heart with something that never disappoints or disappears: love for Christ. Hence Saint Josemaría was certain that whoever decides to give their life to our Lord in reality loses nothing.^[7] However, this doesn't mean completely ignoring material needs. "Naturally, you have to use earthly means," the founder of Opus Dei said. "But put a great effort into being detached from all earthly things, so that you can deal with it with your mind always fixed on the service of God and of your fellow men"^[8] We can ask our Lady to help us to have a free heart, to see as gain everything that brings us closer to her Son.

^[1] Francis, Audience, 13 March 2024.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 657.

^[3] Francis, Audience, 3 January 2024.

[4] Saint Basil, *In principium Proverbiorum* 1.

[5] Francis, Audience, 28 February 2024.

[6] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 101.

[7] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 21.

[8] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 728.

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