

TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (XI): A Letter from Christ

Near the end of 57 AD, Saint Paul wrote a letter to the Christians living in Corinth. The Apostle realizes that some of the people there do not know him personally and may even have heard false rumors about him. So one of his main concerns in the letter is to make clear the characteristics that a bearer of Jesus' gospel message should have.

In this context we find one of Paul's most beautiful images. He wonders whether he needs to send a letter of recommendation so that the community may know more about him, in order to win their esteem anew. But filled with faith in God's ability to transform hearts, he says that his true letter of recommendation is the heart of each of the Christians in Corinth. It is the Holy Spirit himself who writes in their souls, through the message Saint Paul has brought them: *you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor 3:3).*

How do we too become a "letter" from Christ? How does God transform our lives little by little? *We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).* Saint Paul shows us here the "method" the Holy Spirit uses in transforming us. We become more and more like Christ with the passage of time, and reflect his glory as in a mirror. This is the authentic "dynamic" of our spiritual life.

To want what Jesus wants

Jesus doesn't want our prayer to be an isolated element in the midst of our other activities, with little power to transform our lives. In the Sermon on the Mount He tells us: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you...' (Mt 7:21-23).* These are hard words. It not enough to have followed Him, nor even to have done great deeds in Christ's name. Something much deeper is required: learning to conform our lives to God's will.

The meaning of these words of our Lord shouldn't be hard for us to understand. Since prayer is the path and expression of a relationship of friendship, it should be marked by a characteristic the classical authors saw as proper to the love between friends: *idem velle, idem nolle*, to want the same things and to reject the same things. Prayer changes our lives because it brings us into harmony with the longings of the Heart of Christ, with his zeal for souls and his eagerness to please his heavenly Father. Otherwise, if our prayer failed to lead us towards the likeness of Christ's glory

that Saint Paul speaks of, without realizing it could become merely a form of “self-help therapy,” sought for the peace and solitude it provides. In that case, prayer would not fulfill its principal aim: to transform our life through an authentic friendship with Christ.

Hence the criterion for authentic prayer will never be merely the strong feelings and spiritual enjoyment it provides, or the number of resolutions we make or degree of concentration we attain. Rather our prayer should be evaluated in light of its power to transform our lives—how it helps us to overcome little by little the inconsistencies between what we believe and what, in the end, we actually do in our daily life.

An identification attained over time

Saint Paul himself, who received the grace of encountering the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, tells us that the first Christians were very aware that the goal of their prayer was identification with Christ. He exhorted the Christians in Philippi to have the same sentiments as Christ Jesus (cf. *Phil 2:5*), and he assured those at Corinth that “we have the mind of Christ” (*1 Cor 2:16*).

To have the same “sentiments” and the same “mind” as the Son of God incarnate is something we could never attain by our own efforts alone. It is the result, certainly, of our struggle to act as Jesus would have acted in seeking the good, but always in the context of the communion proper to the love of friendship. Thus, through grace, we open ourselves to being assimilated to Christ’s way of being.

Since it is the result of a relationship of friendship, identification with Christ, the fruit of prayer, grows over time. Saint Josemaria said that God leads souls along an “inclined plane,” transforming their hearts little by little and giving them the will and strength to correspond ever more fully to his love. “In this adventure of love we should not be depressed by our falls, not even by serious falls, if we go to God in the sacrament of penance contrite and resolved to improve. A Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behavior reports. Jesus Christ our Lord was moved as much by Peter’s repentance after his fall as by John’s innocence and faithfulness. Jesus understands our weakness and draw us to himself on an inclined plane. He wants us to make an effort to climb a little each day.”¹

We are filled with hope when we realize that our miseries—even those that deeply humiliate us—are not an insurmountable obstacle to growing in God’s love and identifying ourselves ever more fully with Him. And we are also filled with astonishment: how is it possible for Saint Paul to exclaim so forcefully that nothing *will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39)*?

¹ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.

Only in prayer do we come to understand that the truth of these words is grounded on God's initiative. He is the one who first seeks us out and draws us to Himself. At the end of his life, the Apostle John was moved to exclaim: *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10)*. In our prayer, therefore, we become aware that we are in God's loving hands and that our love—always imperfect—is a response to God's love, which precedes and accompanies us. By contemplating that love we are spurred to travel along the inclined plane of an ever deeper identification with Christ.

Always growing in love

Correspondence to the love of God that we seek in prayer is shown in the desire to improve, in the strong yearning to separate ourselves from whatever separates us from Christ. Perhaps with some frequency we have been encouraged to examine our life in our prayer, to ask for light to see whatever is unsuited to our condition as children of God. We have learned to formulate specific resolutions—counting always on the help of grace—to try to please our Lord, overcoming aspects in our lives that separate us, even if only slightly, from Him.

We are well aware that this examination and those resolutions are not meant to be the means to win out in the spiritual life on our own, but are a truly human way of loving. Whoever wishes to always please the person they love strives to be the best person they can be. Knowing that God loves us as we are, we want to love Him as He deserves to be loved. Therefore we strive, with a healthy tension, to struggle a little each day. We don't want to fall into the temptation (which is so easy to do!) of justifying our weaknesses, forgetting that with His death and resurrection Christ has won for us all the grace needed to conquer our sins.²

When Saint Josemaria was still a young priest, many bishops asked him to preach days of recollection and retreats for priests. Some people accused him of preaching “retreats about life and not death.”³ They were accustomed to hearing reflections about their eternal destiny and were surprised when Saint Josemaria also spoke at length about how to live their own vocation consistently in daily life.

This reflects an important characteristic of Opus Dei's mission: to teach people to “materialize” their spiritual life, preventing prayer from becoming an independent and isolated dimension in their lives. As Saint Josemaria himself said, “I wanted to keep them from the temptation, so common then and now, of living a kind of double life. On one side, an interior life, a life of relation with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life, full of small earthly realities.”⁴

² Cf. Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, nos. 102-103.

³ Cf. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. II, pp. 471-472.

⁴ Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 114.

Even though in our times of prayer we don't always tangibly experience God's love (although certainly sometimes we do), in reality He is always present there and acting in our soul. If we strive to respond to His love by struggling in the points our Lord shows us, our life—our thoughts, desires, intentions, deeds—will little by little be transformed. We will come to be for others *ipse Christ*, “Christ who is passing by” for them.

Loving Him in our neighbor

On one occasion, a Scribe asked Jesus: *Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?* And we remember very well the reply: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Mt 22:36-40).* In these succinct words, Jesus makes clear the unbreakable union between love for God and love for neighbor. After his resurrection, before ascending to Heaven, our Lord wanted to insist again on this teaching. When He meets Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus responds to the promises of love from the one who would be the first Pope with the forceful words: *Feed my sheep* (cf. *Jn 21:15-17*).

The ultimate reason for the union of both commandments, and therefore for the need to learn to love Christ in others, is set forth by Jesus himself in his powerful description of the final judgment. There we see the deep union that exists between Himself and each person: *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink (Mt 25:35).* As Vatican II teaches: “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every person.”⁵ It is impossible to love Jesus without loving our neighbor as well, without learning to love Him *in* our neighbor.

When it is authentic, prayer leads us to be concerned about others, especially those closest to us and those who are suffering the most. It leads us to try to get along with everyone through small deeds of service, and to make room in our hearts even for those who don't think as we do. In prayer we find the strength to forgive, and the light to see how to love others in an ever deeper and more practical way, overcoming our selfishness and comfort-seeking and being ready to complicate our lives in a holy way. As Pope Francis reminds us, “the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy.”⁶

The goal of our life of prayer is to acquire a compassionate and merciful heart like that of Jesus—a perfect image of the heart of the Father. A heart that is an unmistakable sign of our identification with Christ.

⁵ Vatican Council II, Pastoral const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

⁶ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 105.