

## THE OTHERS ARE OURS

Jesus returns to Capernaum and, as soon as he enters the city, a centurion approaches him. The scene surprises those present because it was unusual for a Roman soldier to address a Jew with such respect and consideration: *Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress (Mt 8:6)*. The centurion, although a person accustomed to commanding others, realizes there are so many important things in life that he cannot control. So he doesn't hesitate to ask for help. Jesus, who knows his interior dispositions, replies even before He is asked: *I will come and heal him (Mt 8:7)*. When Saint Augustine comments on this passage, he says that "the humility of the centurion was the door through which our Lord entered to take full possession of what he already possessed."<sup>1</sup>

### **A family concerned about our struggle**

Our Lord is moved when the Roman officer, despite his power and insignia, acknowledges that it is not within his power to help his beloved servant. The centurion publicly states that he is incapable of achieving everything. And this attitude of acknowledging our neediness is, in some way, part of every path of holiness. We admit our own weakness, and realize that God is the main protagonist, and that to carry out his work He counts on the collaboration of those he places on our path. Like that servant, our wounds too require healing and our afflictions need the care of others. "This fraternal solidarity is not a figure of speech, a saying, but an integral part of the communion among Christians. If we live it, we are a sign to the world, the 'sacrament' of God's love ... it is a communion that renders us capable of entering into the joy and sorrow of others and making them sincerely our own."<sup>2</sup>

At Holy Mass, for example, we acknowledge this reality and ask the whole Church to pray for us. "I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned ... Therefore I ask ... you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God."<sup>3</sup> This isn't in any way extraordinary, since we are all born dependent on others. We have not come into the world of our own accord. We cannot survive alone, nor even learn to speak without a community that welcomes us. The need for others is part of our human nature. Saint John of the Cross said that "the virtuous soul that is alone and without a guide is like a burning coal that is alone; it will grow colder rather than hotter ... The blind person who falls will not be able to get up alone; and if he does get up alone he will go off on the wrong path."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine, *Sermons*, 6.2.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, General Audience, 6 November 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Missal, Penitential Act.

<sup>4</sup> Saint John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*, 7;11.

When we receive the assistance of our neighbor we put ourselves in a situation like that of the centurion who asks for help or that of the servant whose illness is healed. This happens, for example, with fraternal correction. This Gospel custom involves another person who, after considering it in his or her prayer, and also perhaps after asking for advice from someone in a position to offer it, suggests to us a specific way to improve some aspect in our life (cf. *Mt* 18:16-17). This help gives us the security of knowing that we are part of a large family concerned about our struggle. Hence fraternal correction is the opposite of criticism, gossip or defamation. While these all involve judgment and condemnation, the fraternal help one receives is an embrace that welcomes a neighbor just as they are and guides them towards the future.

### **The best version of each person**

The permanent conversion that the Christian life entails does not aim to transform us into persons different from who we are, but to help us become, with God's grace, the best possible version of ourselves. The saints have not been called to be impersonal beings, but to imbue their own unique and personal characteristics with Christ's love. Saint Paul after his conversion, for example, was not called to diminish his zeal for the divine, but to channel it towards the fullness of the truth. Each of us has specific characteristics desired by God, with a past lived in a particular social setting, and with a unique way of being. God does not want to destroy this, but to divinize it, to make it an instrument for carrying out his mission. And one of the most important ways He has to transform us little by little is through our relationships, through the persons we allow to become part of our life.

We would limit God's action and plans if we were to think that we can only receive his help through reading his word or through the sacraments. Undoubtedly, these are two privileged channels by which his grace is transmitted to us, but Jesus also speaks clearly about the importance of what our neighbor can do for us. Even more, Christ is our neighbor (cf. *Mt* 25:40; *Lk* 10:16). The incarnation itself, by which Jesus was able to transform the lives of those closest to Him through friendship, reminds us of the salvific value of personal relationships, living side by side with others: "God often makes use of an authentic friendship to carry out his saving work."<sup>5</sup>

In the history of salvation we see that God always acts in a people, in a community, in a family, in a group of friends. To think that holiness is not connected with what others can do for us can be a symptom of isolation, which will never be fruitful. Hence it is only natural that an environment of friendship gives rise to fraternal correction. There everyone is determined to bring out the best in each person, without getting sidetracked by details of little importance. Rather the main concern is the deep longing for holiness that little by little is reflected in different aspects of daily life.

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<sup>5</sup> Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 5.

The Pope reminded us that “growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others ... In many holy marriages too, each spouse becomes a means used by Christ for the sanctification of the other. Living or working alongside others is surely a path of spiritual growth. Saint John of the Cross told one of his followers: ‘You are living with others in order to be fashioned and tried’ ... A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father’s plan.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Every help is a gift**

The centurion in the Gospel is aware that he is asking Jesus for a favor. He knows that if the Lord decides to enter the house of a pagan, He will have to purify Himself afterwards. So he doesn’t demand that Jesus come and work the miracle: *only say the word, and my servant will be healed (Mt 8:8)*. And it is this attitude that wins the miracle from Jesus. The centurion is gracious in asking Christ to help him. “To love is to be gentle and thoughtful ... Being gracious is not something that a Christian may accept or reject ... Loving kindness builds bonds, cultivates relationships, creates new networks of integration and knits a firm social fabric. In this way, it grows ever stronger, for without a sense of belonging we cannot sustain a commitment to others.”<sup>7</sup>

Some ways to strengthen this attitude can be: not having any qualms about asking others for help; being available to listen; making our likes known without imposing them; sharing our concerns and dreams with others... The “environment of friendship, which each of us is called to carry with us, is the fruit of many efforts to make life pleasant for others. Growing in cordiality, joyfulness, patience, optimism, refinement and in all the virtues that make living with others agreeable is important for helping people to feel welcomed and to be happy.”<sup>8</sup> All of this generates a way of being that, although not easy to describe with words, is easy to detect. It is easy to draw close to a person who is kind and gracious, and to want to do a favor for them; it is easy to open up a dialogue and speak sincerely with them about our concerns.

We find it easier to love someone with whom we can talk openly, although their weaknesses may be evident or we have few things in common. We all have the experience that there are people we find it easier to suggest something to. They always appreciate it. Their face reflects the peace with which they receive it, and perhaps we notice the impact that our small contribution has on their lives. They don’t become defensive since they realize that the one who is trying to help them is not “attacking” them. They don’t sense that their personal value is being questioned. Fraternal correction is born in a Christian community, in the home, in the family, and we are loved there for who we are, and not for whether we do something well or badly. In contrast, when we find it hard

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<sup>6</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, nos. 141-145.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nos. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 9.

to let ourselves be helped it can be a sign that perhaps we want to be loved for what we are not. That is why it is also important to permanently nurture the ground in which this help can arise; sharing the desire for holiness goes hand in hand with sharing many other things, including our longings, concerns and joys.

Someone who fosters this disposition to be kind and gracious, to make it easier for others to help them, is also often amazed to see their affection and is grateful for the work of mercy that fraternal help or correction involves. Young children are often grateful because they don't take loving gestures for granted. Saint Josemaría once confided to some of his children: "Lately I am asking our Lord more than ever – and also asking our Lady – to help me become small, to become a child. In human external affairs, we need to be strong and resilient; but in the spiritual life, we need to be small. Then we won't fall into pride when others correct us. We will be grateful for the help others give us to be better. Otherwise it would bother us."<sup>9</sup>

If we become more childlike, we will remove the barriers that isolate us from others. We will create a gracious and friendly environment in which it is easy to perceive that a correction is a gift, a free help. And with God's help we too will hear the words Jesus addressed to the centurion and that work the miracle of healing his servant: *Be it done for you as you have believed* (Mt 8:13).

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We want to help as many people as possible, and we will achieve this only if we learn how to rely on the support of others. Saint Josemaría stressed that each person, "besides being a sheep ... in some way is also a Good Shepherd."<sup>10</sup> To attain the cure of his friend, the centurion needed to recognize his neediness; to be a good shepherd, he had to experience being a sheep. Then the words of Scripture become a reality: *a brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city* (Prov 18:19). We cannot limit charity to what we do for others, as there is also a lot of love behind accepting a helping hand.

Being grateful for living surrounded by people who want us to be the best version of ourselves spurs us to conversion, which is the foundation of holiness. Saint Teresa of Avila said: "It is impossible, I think, taking our nature into consideration, that anyone who fails to realize that he is favored by God should have the courage necessary for doing great things."<sup>11</sup> And God's favor also reaches us through our relationships with those around us.

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<sup>9</sup> Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 2 October 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Josemaria, *Letters* 25, no. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 10, 4.