

TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (I): Stealing Christ's Heart

Outside the walls of Jerusalem, shortly after midday, three men were crucified on Mount Calvary. It was the first Good Friday in history. Two of them were robbers; the third, in contrast, was the only absolutely innocent man, for He was the Son of God. One of the two thieves, despite his intense suffering and physical exhaustion, was eager to speak briefly with Jesus. His words of sincere humility—*remember me when you come into your kingdom (Lk 23:42)*—touched the heart of God made Man, who assured him that in a few hours he would be in paradise. Saint Josemaria was often moved by the attitude of the “good thief,” who “with a word stole Christ’s heart and ‘opened up to himself’ the gates of heaven.”¹ Perhaps we could define prayer like this: a word that “steals Christ’s heart” and enables us to live, from now on, close to Him.

Two dialogues on the Cross

We too want our prayer, like that of the good thief whose name according to tradition was Dismas, to yield abundant fruit. And we are eager for our own dialogue with God to transform our lives. To steal a person’s heart means to win them over, to earn their love, to enthuse them. We need to “steal” it because we don’t deserve to receive such great affection; to “assault” it because even though we greatly desire it, we have no right to possess it. Prayer is based on something as simple—although not at all easy—as learning how to welcome God’s gift in our heart, letting ourselves be accompanied by Jesus, who never imposes his gifts, nor his grace, nor his Love.

Suffering alongside Dismas on Calvary was his robber companion, whose dialogue with Jesus differed greatly from that of the good thief. He addresses Jesus with words of caustic reproach: “*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*” (Lk 23:39). Both of them spoke with Jesus, but only Dismas was willing to welcome the gift the Master has prepared for him. It was his last and best “robbery,” asking to at least be remembered by Christ. His companion, in contrast, refused to open his heart with humility to the One who wanted to free him from his past and offer him a priceless treasure. He demanded his “right” to be saved, and reproached Jesus for his apparent passivity. Perhaps that is how he had carried out all his robberies: pretending he was taking what rightfully belonged to him. Dismas, however, was well aware that he had no right to anything. And thus he opened wide the treasure chest of God’s Love. He acknowledged God for who He really is: a Father who pours Himself out for each of his children.

In light of these two Gospel dialogues, we come to realize that our Lord counts on our freedom to make us happy. And also that it isn’t always easy to let ourselves be loved. Prayer

¹ Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Twelfth Station, point 4.

can be a marvelous means to discover Jesus' sentiments and thoughts, and to learn what He wants from us. The divine life we share in is a gift. Hence we can view prayer as a channel for receiving the torrent of Love that God wants to offer us, an unexpected invitation to share in his Life in a new way.

To open the gates of heaven

Saint Josemaria reminded us that God “wants to run the risk of our freedom.”² A good way to thank Him for this is to open ourselves also to His. But if we do so, in reality we don't run any risk, but only the appearance of one, since the guarantee of his promise is etched in stone by his burning love for us. And we come to realize how absurd it is to resist God's will, although in fact we frequently fall into this mistake. Saint Paul tells us: *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood (1 Cor 13:12)*. The best way to get to know ourselves is to see ourselves from Christ's point of view, viewing our life through his eyes.

Dismas has come to understand his own life in this way and is not afraid to face the enormous gap between Jesus' goodness and his personal mistakes. He recognizes the King of the world in the humble and disfigured face of Christ; the affection in Jesus' eyes restores his human dignity and, in a surprising way, reminds him that he is infinitely loved. It is true that the “happy ending” of the good thief could strike us as being too easy. But we will never know the drama of the conversion his heart underwent during those final moments, nor the preparation that surely made it possible.

Opening oneself to such immense affection has a great similarity with the discovery that prayer is a gift, a privileged channel for welcoming the Love of a Heart that knows no half-measures or calculations. We receive the gift of a new and fuller life, a much more happy and meaningful one. As Pope Francis wrote: “When we pray, we let Him act [*le abrimos la jugada a Él*], we give Him room so that He can enter and be victorious.”³ God is the One who will transform us, and God Himself will accompany us. He will do everything. All He needs from us is that we let Him act. And this is where our freedom, which Christ won for us on the Cross, comes into play.

Prayer helps us understand that “when He asks us for something, in reality He is offering us a gift. We are not the ones doing Him a favor. It is God who illuminates our life, filling it with meaning.”⁴ This is how we “steal” God's Heart: by opening the door of our life to let Him act, to let Him love and transform us, with a desire to correspond to Him, although we don't know very well how to do so. *Taste and see how good the Lord is (Ps 34:9)*. This is the path for becoming a soul of prayer. As Saint Teresa of Avila wrote: “if we aren't aware of what we are receiving, we

² Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 113.

³ Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, no. 155.

⁴ Fernando Ocariz, “Light To See, Strength To Want To,” article published in *Aleteia*, September 20, 2018.

won't awaken to Love."⁵ What is the last time we told God how good He is? How often do we stop to consider and "taste" this reality.

Hence wonder is an essential part of our life of prayer: being amazed by a marvel that exceeds all our hopes and dreams. And we will often feel the need to exclaim: "How great you are, how beautiful and how good! And I, how foolish I am, by trying to understand you. How little you would be, if you could fit in my head! But you fit in my heart, which is no small feat."⁶ By praising God we realize the truth of our relationship with Christ; the weight of our personal concerns lessens and previously unsuspected horizons open up. These are the consequences of having "run the risk" of placing ourselves in the hands of God's freedom.

Infinite ways of praying

When Saint Josemaria was in Mexico, he told the story of a son of his, a philosopher, who unexpectedly had to take charge of his family's business: "When he started to tell me about running a business I looked at him and laughed. And I told him: A business? The money you earn will fit here in the palm of my hand, with room to spare." Years went by and one day he saw him again and said: "Here is my hand. Didn't I tell you that you could put everything you earn here? He got up and, with everyone watching, kissed the palm of my hand. And he said: there it is. I gave him a hug and said: you have paid me more than enough. Get going, you thief, may God bless you!"⁷

In our prayer we can kiss God's hand, and give Him the only treasure we have: our affection. For some people, a gesture like this, addressed to our Lord, will be enough to enkindle in them a prayer of affections and resolutions. For them a look seems much more expressive than a thousand words. They would like to experience everything that refers to God. In their encounter with our Lord, they want to feel the breeze on the shore coming from the Sea of Galilee. Their senses respond and their closeness to Jesus fills their heart with peace and joy. It is a joy that needs to be shared with others, and they open their arms with Christ to embrace the entire world and try to help Him save it.

But there are infinite ways of praying, as many as there are persons. Some people, for example, simply seek to hear some consoling words. Jesus is always ready to offers words of encouragement and praise for the one who needs it: *Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!* (*Jn* 1:47). He will speak them to us if we open our heart to Him. No one has ever spoken words of Love as He did, with so much affection and truth. When we hear them, the love we receive is reflected in our look. Thus we learn to look through God's eyes. And we discern what

⁵ Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 10, 3.

⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Notes from his preaching*, 9 June 1974; in *Catechesis* 1974/1, p. 386.

⁷ Saint Josemaria, *Notes from a family get-together*, 27 November 1972; in *Dos meses de catequesis* 1972, vol. II, p. 616.

each friend of ours would be capable of doing is if they let themselves be accompanied by God's grace.

There are some people whose greatest joy is to serve others, like Martha, our Lord's friend who lived in Bethany. Jesus, when He visited her home, didn't tell Martha to sit down, but rather invited her to discover the one thing necessary (cf. *Lk* 10:42) in the midst of her daily activities. People like Martha are probably comforted, as they pray, by the thought that God acts through them to bring many souls to heaven. And they like to fill their prayer with faces and names of specific people, with the realization that they are co-redeemers amid all their activities. In fact, Mary was able to choose "the better part" because of Martha's efforts to serve. Martha's only concern was to know that those around her were happy.

Other people, in turn, find their heart more easily moved by small things, by gifts, even if of little value. Theirs is a heart that is always thinking of others and that is quick to grasp anything related to those they love. Such people may find it helpful to dwell on all the gifts God has lavished on them. "Prayer, because it is nourished by the gift of God present and at work in our lives, must always be marked by remembrance."⁸ They may also feel spurred to try to "surprise" God with a thousand tiny details. The "surprise factor" is important for them, and it isn't hard for them to guess what will please our Lord. Although it's a mystery, even the smallest gesture fills his Heart with gratitude and makes his eyes shine. Each soul that we strive to draw close to his Love—like Dismas in his final moments—steals his Heart anew.

Without trying to exhaustively list all the possibilities, there are also souls who need to spend time with the Person they love. They may find themselves drawn, for example, to try to console Jesus. Any time "wasted" with the one they love seems little to them. To grasp the divine affection in Jesus' Heart, they can find it helpful to consider Nicodemus, who was received by Jesus in the quiet of the evening, in the intimacy of a trust-filled home. As a result of this time spent together, Nicodemus will find the strength to stand up for Him in very trying circumstances and stay close to Christ when others flee out of fear.

At times we can think that getting to know ourselves means identifying our missteps; this is true, but it is only part of the truth. Getting to know our own heart in depth and our most intimate longings is crucial for being able to listen to God, for letting Him fill us with his Love.

Jesus' conversation with the good thief was brief but intense. Dismas discovered a "crack" in Christ's immense and loving Heart: an easy way to "assault" it and gain entry. The robber's humble petition illumines for us God's will, which so often can seem obscure and painful. His only desire is that we be happy, very happy, the happiest people in the world. The good thief

⁸ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, no. 153.

entered through this cleft and won the greatest treasure. Our Lady witnessed how Dismas defended her Son. Perhaps, with her glance, Mary beseeched Jesus to save him. And Christ, unable to deny his Mother anything, said: *today you will be with me in Paradise (Lk 23:43)*.

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