

To Know Him and To Know Yourself (VIII): At the Right Time

When Mary entered her home, Elizabeth saw that Mary was no longer the child she remembered. Elizabeth had probably been present at Mary's birth and known her as a remarkable young girl. But for many years now they had lived apart. On seeing Mary once again, Elizabeth experienced a deep joy. The Evangelist tells us she was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed aloud: *And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* (Lk 1:43).

Elizabeth's joy arose from a life enriched with prayer. Both she and Zechariah were considered holy—*righteous before God*—and many people held them in admiration (cf. Lk 1:6). But only the two of them knew everything that trying to live close to God for so many years had meant; their experiences contained much that couldn't be communicated to others, as happens to all of us. Elizabeth's joy arose from a past filled with sorrows and hopes, troubles and discoveries, but where everything had helped to deepen her relationship with God. Only she knew how hard it had been to accept not being able to be a mother, when this was the most longed for blessing in a Jewish woman. But the Lord had wanted to make her undergo that trial in order to raise her to a deeper intimacy with Him.

Your prayer has been heard

Our relationship with God, our prayer, also always has something unique and incommunicable about it, like Elizabeth's. Our life can sometimes seem like that of the solitary bird in the Psalms (cf. Ps 102:7), but a bird, as Saint Josemaria said, that God wants to raise up like an eagle who soars so high it seems to touch the sun. Only He knows what the right times and moments are for each person. God wants us to attain a "divinizing intimacy" with Him much more than we can ever imagine.

But the fact that only He knows the right time—as He knew the right time for the birth of John the Baptist—is no obstacle to our desiring at every moment a greater intimacy with Him. Nor does it prevent us from constantly beseeching God for this, seeking what is higher, standing on our toes in the crowd to see Jesus who is passing by, or even climbing a tree if necessary, like Zacchaeus. We can imagine how often Elizabeth raised her heart to God and urged her husband to do likewise, until Zechariah finally heard the words: *your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John* (Lk 1:13).

Elizabeth's trusting prayer was forged in the purifying furnace of adversity and time. Her life was drawing to a close, and God's will continued to be a mystery for her. Why hadn't He listened to her prayer over the course of so many years? Why hadn't He given her a child? Was even her

husband's priesthood insufficient to obtain their request? In her obvious need, in her prayer's ineffectiveness and God's apparent silence, her faith, hope and charity had gradually been purified. For not only did she persevere; she let herself be transformed each day, accepting always and in everything God's will. Perhaps this identification with the Cross—which Elizabeth in some way anticipated—is the best way to prove the authenticity of our prayer: *nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done* (Lk 22:42). Like the just men and women of the Old Covenant who accepted the will of the Lord, and Jesus who directed his whole life to the Father's will, we Christians too are called to do the same. It is always the right time to pray: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work* (Jn 4:34).

Time for remembering

Perhaps Elizabeth herself had kept the flame of prayer lit in the elderly Zechariah, until an angel finally appeared to her husband. The Lord is giving a son to her, who was called barren, for with God nothing is impossible (Lk 1:36). Thus by accepting the essential work of purification that He carries out in those who let Him, Elizabeth came to exclaim in prayer what, after so many years, we continue repeating daily: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb* (Lk 1:42).

Knowing that our path towards God brings with it a deep identification with the Cross is essential to realizing how what at times seems stagnation is in reality an advance.

Thus, instead of waiting for better times, or for a prayer more in conformity with our tastes, we will gratefully accept the nourishment that God wishes to give us. "If we look around, we realize that there are *so many offers of food* which do not come from the Lord and which appear to be more satisfying. Some nourish themselves with money, others with success and vanity, others with power and pride. But the food that truly nourishes and satiates us is only that which the Lord gives us! The food the Lord offers us is different from other food, and perhaps it doesn't seem as flavorful to us as certain other dishes the world offers us. So, we dream of other dishes, like the Hebrews in the desert, who longed for the meat and onions they ate in Egypt, but forgot that they had eaten those meals at the table of slavery. In those moments of temptation, they had a memory, but a sick memory, a selective memory. A slave memory, not a free one."¹

Hence we should ask ourselves: *where do I wish to eat from?* What is my memory like? The memory of the Lord who saves me, or that of the flesh, the garlic and onions of slavery? What memory do I satisfy my soul with? Do I want to eat solid food or nourish myself with milk? (cf. *1 Cor 3:2*).

¹ Francis, Homily for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 19 June 2014.

As happened with the Israelites, the temptation can arise in life to look back and long for the garlic and onions of Egypt. The people of Israel came to grow tired of the nourishing manna, which at first they saw as a blessing and a sign of protection (cf. *Num* 21:5). This can happen to us too, especially when we grow cold because we neglect the basic requirements for prayer: striving to be recollected, caring for the small details of piety, choosing the best time, putting our heart into it... Then, with more reason than ever, it is the moment to recall, to stir up in our memory, to seek in our prayer and spiritual reading the solid nourishment that Saint Paul speaks of, which broadens our horizons and raises our sight.

As though drawn by a magnet

To recall in our prayer all that God has done for us is much more than a simple memory. It is connected with the concept of “memorial” in the religion of Israel; that is, it is a salvific event that makes the work of redemption present. The “prayer of remembrance” that Pope Francis speaks of is a new dialogue about what is already known, a memory of past events that are perceived anew. We call to mind the key episodes in our relationship with God, and understand them and live them in a different way each time. This is perhaps what happened to Elizabeth when, aware of her recent maternity, she perceived in a new way God’s plans for her.

With the passage of the years, at the pace of our dedication and our resistance, our Lord makes known to us his mysteries with new depth. He wants to raise us up very high, in a slowly ascending spiral as it were. It is true that we can fail to ascend and instead keep turning in horizontal circles; or we can even descend rapidly and go off on a tangent, abandoning the dialogue with our Creator. But He never gives up in his determination to carry out his will for us; his plans are of election and justification, of sanctification and glorification (cf. *Rom* 8:28-30).

Like many other spiritual authors, Saint Josemaria describes this process in a vivid and forceful way. The soul “is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet. One begins to love Jesus in a more effective way, with the sweet and gentle surprise of his encounter.”² When we meditate on the mysteries of divine filiation, identification with Christ, love for the Father’s will, the eagerness to co-redeem... and we intuit that all of this is a gift of the Holy Spirit, we realize more clearly our debt to Him. And then gratitude grows impetuously within us. We become more aware of his motions, which are much more frequent than we think: “I am not talking about extraordinary situations. These are, they may very well be, ordinary happenings within our soul: a loving craziness which, without any fuss or extravagance, teaches us how to suffer and how to live.”³

Then we are amazed to discover God’s immense love for us throughout our entire life: day after day, year after year—right from our mother’s womb! *In this is love, not that we loved God*

² Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 296

³ *Ibid.*, no. 307.

but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10). We are amazed to discover that our life has been guided by an enchanting and irresistible love. This is what happened to Elizabeth: He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men (Lk 1:25). After years of darkness, she realized that she is loved infinitely by the One who is the Font of Love—in a way that is totally unmerited and that she can never grasp fully or repay. Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Lk 1:43). How is it possible that God loves me so much? And also, with a certain shame and sorrow: How could I have failed to realize this before?

All sincere prayer prepares our heart to know how to ask (cf. *Rom 8:26*) and how to receive what we ask for. Putting love for God into every aspect of piety, whether great or small, facilitates this path: calling Jesus by his name, expressing our affection without any reserve.... We need to insist and respond promptly to the little touches of love. We need to “remember the beautiful, great things that God has done for each of us,” since a prayer of remembrance “does a lot of good for a Christian heart.”⁴ As Saint Josemaria often recommended: “Let each of us meditate on what God has done for us.”⁵

God is all and that is enough

Elizabeth would so often have turned over in her memory all that God had done for her. How greatly he had transformed her life! And how bold she herself had become! From then on, all her behavior acquires a unique richness. She acquires greater clarity in following God’s plans: *Not so; he shall be called John (Lk 1:60)*; and she sees clearly the work of God in her cousin: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (Lk 1:45)*. Elizabeth now acts as one who speaks with God with her whole heart.

Likewise in our prayer there has to be love and struggle, praise and reparation, adoration and petition, affections and intellect. We need to be as daring as possible, because we now understand that it is not a question of fulfilling, but of loving with our whole heart. The practices of piety, the persons around us, the duties of each day are the same as before, but we no longer confront them in the same way. Our freedom of spirit grows, the “capacity and habitual attitude to act out of love, especially in the effort to follow what God is asking of us in each circumstance.”⁶ What used to seem a heavy obligation now becomes an opportunity for an encounter with Love. Overcoming ourselves continues to require effort, but now this effort is filled with joy.

Faced with the infinity of God’s love and our poor human correspondence, our heart pours out a deep prayer of atonement and reparation. Sorrow on seeing our sins arises and spurs us to

⁴ Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 21 April 2016.

⁵ *Friends of God*, no. 312.

⁶ Monsignor Fernando Ocariz, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

personal contrition. The conviction grows that “God is all, I am nothing. And that is enough.”⁷ Thus we can rid ourselves of the many “shields” that hinder our contact with Him.

And a sincere and deep gratitude arises, which becomes adoration. “To adore God is to acknowledge Him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love.”⁸ We need to employ all the keys of our heart. Then our prayer will be varied and enriching, and not run along the same tired channels. Both when our feelings respond and when they don’t, because what we taste of God’s goodness is still not God. He is always infinitely greater.

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⁷ *Journal of a Soul: The Autobiography of Pope John XXIII.*

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2096.