

**“The Son cannot do anything
on his own”** (Jn 5, 19)

Meditation on Holy Easter

30DAYS

On the cover: *Trinity*, Leandro Bassano, Borghese Gallery, Rome

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by Don Giacomo Tantardini

Bergamo, 15 March 2010



Christ crucified, detail, Michelangelo Buonarroti, the Church of Santo Spirito, Florence

Let's say a Hail Mary *together*, so we are *all* helped.
Hail Mary.

I am grateful to have been invited to give this meditation. And I'm happy to speak, to try to speak, here this evening in this church, the place where the martyrdom of St Alexander is said to have occurred, a saint to whom I am particularly devoted, not least because the parish in my hometown is dedicated to him. So he is one of the holy martyrs whose name I have known since I was a small child.

And I'm happy to be here for this meditation because I remember another meditation I held, again in Bergamo, ten years ago, on Christmas day 2000, later published as a small book entitled: *Il cristianesimo: una storia semplice* [Christianity: a simple story], the reading of which – so I was told – has been a comfort to many people.

In that meditation I was trying to say that Christianity is simple *because* it is a story of grace. If it originated from us, if it were not an event and hence a history of grace, it would be complicated. Whereas, being a totally gratuitous gift, a totally gratuitous grace that reaches the heart of mankind, Christianity is simple. We don't have to take any initiative *on our own*.

Saying it's simple – I mentioned in that meditation – also means that it is easy. That it's easy! “*Omnia fiunt facilia caritati*”¹ Saint Augustine says. “Everything becomes easy to charity”. Charity is the love that God pours into the heart. When the heart is touched by this love, everything becomes easy. Everything becomes easy for charity, everything becomes easy for the gift of God, for the pouring into the heart of the love of God.

And I concluded that meditation with a phrase of Giussani's, taken from an article on the Holy Rosary – I still remember when I read it in *Avvenire*, on Sunday 30 April in the Holy Year of 2000. Giussani says that our response to this grace, our response to God's initiative, is a prayer. It is not a particular ability, it's simply the impetus of prayer.

And then Giussani, in that article, gives an opinion that is like a suggestion of an overview of the history of recent centuries.

He says: “The Christian people has for centuries been blessed and confirmed in their striving for salvation, I believe, by one thing especially: the Holy Rosary”. “The Christian people has for centuries been blessed...”: how

¹ Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 69, 83.

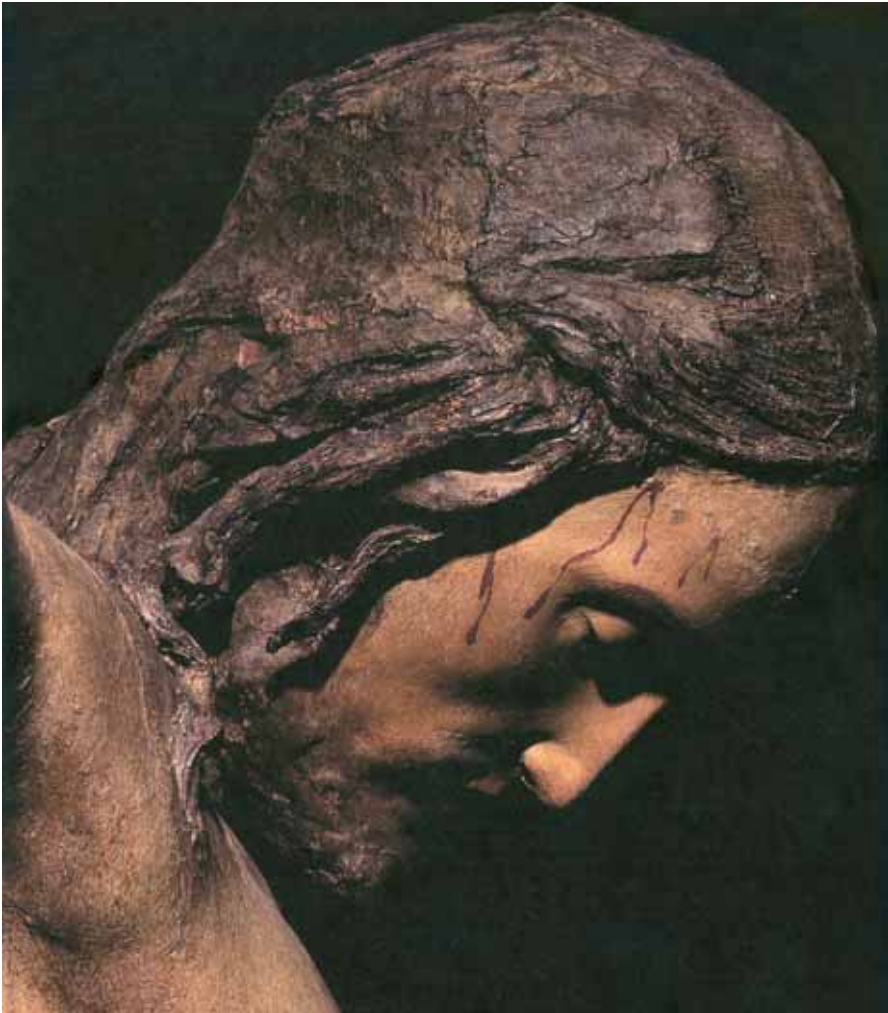
fine it is, that even here, the beginning is to be blessed... The beginning is Another who blesses, who says loving things, who loves. Giussani continues: "... and confirmed in their striving for salvation...": confirmed in the desire to be saved. How fine that is, too! ... *Intent on salvation*: it is like when the baby looks pleading. By what have the Christian people been blessed and confirmed in their desire for salvation? Giussani concludes: "I believe by one thing especially: the Holy Rosary".

So I decided tonight to start this meditation on Easter, citing the simplest words of that meeting a decade ago.

The flyer with the invitation for today's meditation quotes a sentence of Giussani: "From the moment Peter and John ran to the tomb, from the moment they saw Him risen and alive amongst them, everything can change". Yes, everything can change. So tonight I would like to try to say how, over the past ten years, prayer has become easier for me than it might have been ten years ago, since it is clearer to my heart that prayer too does not come from us. Also our response, our prayer, is the trust that comes from being drawn in that moment, from being loved in that moment, from being in that moment beloved.

We are invited in these days by the Holy Church – especially during Holy Week – to what we are always invited, that is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. It is the phrase that St Paul twice repeats in the epistle to the Hebrews: “reflect on Jesus” (*Heb 3, 1*). And again: “While keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith” (*Heb 12, 2*). Keeping one’s eyes fixed on Jesus is to look pleading. It seems to me that to look pleading is the summit of what is human. I think even the fathers and mothers here are much more moved when their child looks pleading to be loved than when it does something they ask of it. This pleading look is like the supreme expression of what the human heart can achieve.

But there is something that comes before this pleading look. There is something that comes before the heart’s plea. There is something that comes before the fact that as children we look up and gazing we ask to be loved. There is something that comes before, and this something that comes before is Another who gazes. If the Lord does not gaze at us we do not plead. We are bent in upon ourselves. We do not look pleading. If one does not start to breathe the sweetness of being loved, if one does not begin to breathe the sweetness of being beloved, one does not look pleading to be loved.



So this evening I would like to suggest three passages from the Holy Gospel in which it is clear that the plea of the heart, the gaze full of the plea of the heart, arises from the fact that Another is gazing at us in compassion.



Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, detail of the *Maestà*, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid

“Jesus, tired from his journey,
sat down there at the well.

It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw
water. Jesus said to her:

‘Give me a drink’” (*Jn 4, 6-7*)

The first passage, telling of the Samaritan woman, in the Ambrosian liturgy is read on the second Sunday of Lent, and in the Roman liturgy, again this year, is read on the third Sunday of Lent.

It begins as follows:

“So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’” (*Jn 4, 5-7*).

“Jesus, tired from his journey...” Augustine’s comment on this verse of the Gospel, given in the ancient Ambrosian breviary, is one of the phrases I memorized in my seminary, and have not forgotten since: “*Tibi fatigatus est Iesus / Jesus tired himself for you*”². Tiring himself in search of you, Jesus, that noon sat down at the well. And Augustine adds: “His strength created you / *Fortitudo Christi te creavit*”. He, the true God, created you “*Infirmetas Christi te recreavit / But it was His weakness that re-created you*”³. It was the fact that He, true God and true man, experienced human weakness like ourselves.

² Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis XV, 6*.

³ *Ibid.*



For you, Jesus sat down tired at the well. And a woman comes to draw water. And this woman says nothing and asks nothing of Him. It is Jesus who speaks and asks. How stupendous this is! This woman comes to draw water and asks nothing, nothing! She draws the water because she needs it. It is Jesus who asks: “Give me a drink”. How clear it is that the initiative does not come from the heart of the woman, but starts from Jesus: “Give me a drink”. If He had not asked, if He had not taken the initiative, the Samaritan woman would not have met Him. She had gone, as every day, to draw water. She was not – let’s say – a very religious woman. “You have had five husbands”, Jesus tells her, “and the one you now have is not your husband” (*Jn* 4, 18). And she, as if to defend herself against this unveiling

of her life, engages in religious discourses. At bottom she was in no way interested in finding out where one should worship, whether on the mountain where the Samaritans worship or in Jerusalem (cf. *Jn* 4, 19-20).

But what most impressed me this year when I re-read this gospel is the fact that it is Jesus who pleads. It is Jesus who becomes a beggar, begging for the heart of mankind. Otherwise, the human heart does not plead. It does not even plead for happiness because *fugitivus cordis sui*, because, after original sin, the heart is far away, mankind is fugitive from its own heart⁴. It does indeed seek happiness, but it seeks it in the pleasures of which it has immediate experience, and mankind's will cannot be drawn away from the images of those pleasures of which it has immediate experience⁵. It requires a *more immediate* and *more attractive*⁶ pleasure to draw away freedom, will, from the pleasures of which mankind wounded by sin has immediate experience.

So it was Jesus who pleaded. The initiative was His. And before mentioning the one thing that strikes the woman – so much so that when she returns to her village she doesn't remember Jesus' words on living water, that is, on

⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* 57, 1.

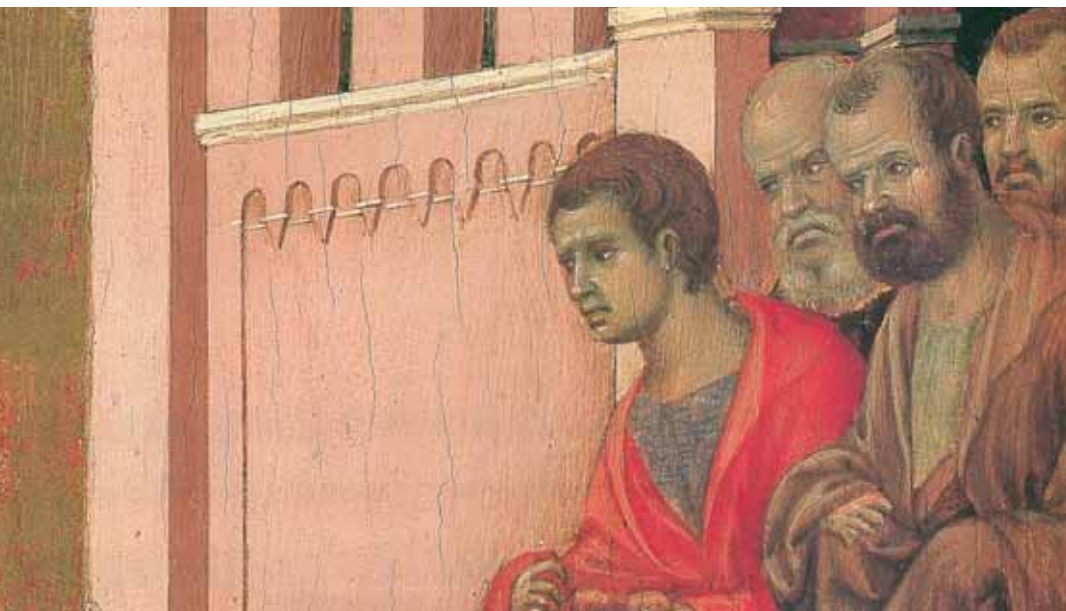
⁵ Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* X, 22, 32.

⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 23 a. 2.

grace, the superabundance of grace, but only remembers the mention of her personal life: “[a man who] told me everything I have done” (*Jn 4, 29*) – Jesus promises the abundance of this grace, the abundance of this water that He gives the human heart. Why? Because, Jesus pleading to be loved – let’s put it that way – by our heart, must first give the heart the very possibility that our heart might love Him⁷. And it is wonderful that Jesus, after promising to give this superabundance of grace, this superabundance of water welling up to eternal life (cf. *Jn 4, 14*), should speak of worship in the Spirit and in the Truth, in the Holy Spirit and the Truth that is Jesus Himself (cf. *Jn 4, 23-24*). He says that one can pray and worship by virtue of His gift. The heart pleads when it is touched by the gift of God, otherwise the heart does not even plead. The heart pleads when the gift of God touches it, when the gift of God moves it. Then it pleads to be loved, beloved, then it pleads for happiness. It pleads in virtue of His gift.

There is a prayer in the old Ambrosian liturgy, that I very much like – the second prayer of Lauds on Sundays in Lent – that goes: “... *vigilet in nobis gratia tua* / ... may Your grace keep watch in us”. How fine it is: may Your grace pray in us. Prayer itself is awakened by His gift, by His attraction, by His moving our hearts. “*Vigilet in nobis gratia tua*”.

⁷ Cf. Roman Missal, Third Sunday of Lent, preface.



How splendid to realize that our response is *first and foremost* His gift⁸. This makes life very simple. The image of the Christian life is not that which represents the gift of God on the one hand and our response on the other. If it were so it would not be simple. It is God's gift – the gift of God! – which also stirs our response. It is the *Jesus attraction* that by moving the heart stirs the pleasure of pursuing it. Our very response is *first and foremost* His gift. It's not like a dialogue on even terms: on the one hand the gift of the Lord and on the other we who respond. It is that gift which, by attracting the heart, gives the pleasure of welcoming Him,

⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2008.

gives the pleasure of pursuing Him, gives the pleasure of co-responding⁹. Let us remember Giussani's phrase – which he himself said was the most risky he had uttered in his life – consistency is a miracle¹⁰. Our response is *first and foremost* His grace. And if His grace does not attract the heart, if it does not give the heart the pleasure of being attracted, one does not respond. One responds because of a more immediate, more pleasing pleasure. One co-responds because His attraction co-responds to the heart. Because of His grace's correspondency to the heart, one co-responds by adhering¹¹.

⁹ Cf. John Paul I, Catechesis at the General Audience of Wednesday, 27 September 1978: "Love for God is also a mysterious journey: that is, I cannot start unless God takes the initiative first. 'No one', Jesus said, 'can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him' (*Jn* 6, 44). St Augustine asked himself: but what about human freedom? God, however, who willed and constructed this freedom, knows how to respect it, though bringing hearts to the point he intended: 'parum est voluntate, etiam voluptate traheris'; God draws you not only in a way that you yourself want, but even in such a way that you enjoy being drawn (Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis XXVI*, 4)", in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo I* [Teachings of John Paul I], Lev, Vatican City, 1979, p. 96.

¹⁰L. Giussani, «Tu» (*o dell'amicizia*) ["You" (or on friendship)], Bur, Milan 2000³, p. 171.

¹¹ Cf. Council of Trent, Decree *De iustificatione*, can. 4 (*Denzinger* 1554).



Trinity, Leandro Bassano, Borghese Gallery, Rome

“Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
‘Father, into your hands I commend my
spirit’; and when he had said this he
breathed his last” (*Lk 23, 46*)

Let us read a second passage from the Holy Gospel. It is the account of the last moments of Jesus' Passion according to the Gospel of Luke.

“Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.’ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, ‘Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’ It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this he breathed his last” (*Lk 23, 39-46*).

There is a phrase of St Thomas Aquinas that since I read it has somehow changed my way of regarding the Crucifix, my view of the passion of Jesus. St Thomas's phrase goes: “*Inspiravit [Deus Pater] ei voluntatem patiendi / [God the Father] inspired Jesus' willingness to embrace the passion / ... infundendo ei caritatem / ... instilling charity in His heart*”¹². Jesus' passion is not heroism. It is true

¹²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III q. 47 a. 3.

also for Jesus that His response is *first and foremost* grace. What holds true for us also holds for Him. His response to the Father was *first and foremost* a gift of the Father. The Father not only gave His only begotten Son – “*Sic Deus dilexit mundum ut Filium suum unigenitum daret*” (Jn 3, 16) – but He also gave the Son the will to say yes to the passion by filling His heart with charity, by giving in fullness to the humanity of Jesus that fullness of the Holy Spirit He had already. The renewal of the gift was a new beginning also for Jesus. By giving the fullness of charity He gave Him in fullness the possibility of saying yes, He gave Him in fullness the possibility of co-responding, He gave in fullness to Jesus, as He gives to us, the possibility of obeying.



There is a prayer that priests can recite before Communion, which says: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who through the Father’s will, / *cooperante Spiritu Sancto* / through the work of the Holy Spirit, by dying have given life to the world...”. How splendid to look at Jesus crucified in this manner, recognizing that Jesus’ passion – His obedience, His abandonment into the hands of the Father – is *first and foremost* effect of this fullness of charity which the Father had given him.

There is a word of Jesus on the cross that moves me in this regard, and it is the word *abandonment*. Jesus says: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (*Mt* 27, 46, *Mk* 15, 34). And Jesus who says this, abandons himself, “Father, into your hands I abandon my spirit” (*Lk* 23, 46). He has experienced all the pain. But it is a different thing to experience the pain of being abandoned by abandoning oneself. He experienced all the pain, all the pain of being abandoned by the Father. But the Father had given him the fullness of charity, that is the Holy Spirit. The Father had given him the possibility, while He was abandoned, of abandoning Himself. It is different to suffer abandoning oneself. It’s different for a small child to suffer being abandoned in its mother’s arms compared to suffering with no one to whom one can abandon oneself. The Father gave the Son that fullness of charity, through which, abandoned, one abandons oneself.

Jesus' passion is not heroism. It is the child who, abandoned, abandons itself because of a fullness of love that was poured into its heart. It is the child who felt all the experience of human pain abandoning Himself in the arms of the Father because of a fullness of predilection that has streamed into His heart.

How I am moved when this Lent, during the *Via Crucis*, I repeat at each station: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit! The passion is not a heroism: it is a mystery of gratuitous love. He Himself had said: "The Son cannot do anything on his own" (*Jn* 5, 19. 30). He Himself had said: "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I Am, and that I do nothing on my own" (*Jn* 8, 28). Recognizing that the Son can do nothing *of Himself*, one recognizes that He is the Only Begotten of God, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God.

I do not know whether I have managed to express my emotion in looking at the crucified Jesus in this way. In looking at Jesus saying: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" and who, at the same time, abandons Himself into the arms of the Father. He abandons Himself out of a fullness of love that the Father gives him. So also His obedience, which has saved us, is *first and foremost* grace, the Father's predilection for the Beloved Son.



The Risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene, detail of the *Maestà*, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Museum of the Opera del Duomo, Siena

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ She thought it was the gardener and said to him, ‘Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned...” (*Jn 20, 15-16*)



A final passage from the Gospel of John: Mary Magdalene at the sepulcher.

“But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping...” (*Jn* 20, 11). In the preceding verses, the Gospel of John – and it’s beautiful – describes Peter and John running to the tomb (cf. *Jn* 20, 1-10). John arrives first... because he runs faster. In fact, we run because we are loved. Peter loved Jesus more than John loved him. To Jesus’ question: “‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you’” (*Jn* 21, 15). So Peter loves Jesus more than John does. But John is more loved by the Lord. And we run faster, not because we love, but because we are loved. So John arrives first at the sepulcher. “*Meliorum*

Petrum, feliciorum Ioannem” says Saint Augustine¹³. Peter is better, but John is happier. Because happiness does not arise even from our being good, happiness arises from being beloved. Peter is better than John, but John, being more loved, is happier, and being happier runs faster, and so being happier arrives first. And this is very beautiful! John reaches the sepulcher first, but waits for Peter. Because predilection respects every authority. How beautiful this is! When I saw Giussani kneel before Pope John Paul II – Giussani then sick, at the last meeting with the Pope in St Peter’s Square – it was clear that the predilection of grace respected every authority of the Church. It happened in this way to the apostles too. So it will happen this way until the end of the world.

So John arrives first and waits for Peter and then Peter and John enter the sepulcher and see the wrappings, that is, the shroud, flat on the marble where the body had been laid, and the sudarium that had been put over the face. And the way in which the wrappings lay struck John, as if the body had suddenly left the shroud and the sudarium without disturbing anything. The wrappings lay flat because the body was gone. And so John started to believe because of those

¹³ Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis* CXXIV, 4.

little signs. So true is it that Jesus was later to say: “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (*Jn* 20, 29). That is, those who, like the Beloved disciple, start to believe because of small signs.

However, Peter and John returned home. Instead, Mary remained at the sepulcher.

“But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her...”: here also, how evident it is that the initiative is Jesus’.. Not only the initiative of coming, of making Himself seen but also the initiative of pleading. “Jesus said to her: ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ She thought it was the gardener and said to him: ‘Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.’ Jesus said to her: ‘Mary!’ She turned...”: how fine also is this look that comes into being because we are called, comes into being because the heart is caught by a gesture of affection like that. “She turned and said

to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni,' which means Teacher. Jesus said to her: 'Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them: I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord,' and what he told her" (*Jn 20, 11-18*).

I want to suggest only one thing about the tears of Mary Magdalene. Cesare Pavese [an Italian author *ed.*] said that to be desperate one must once have been very glad. I don't think anyone – we can say no one *perhaps* – has experienced such despair as Mary Magdalene in those tears, precisely because she had been so happy, so beloved (cf. *Lk 7, 36-50*). That gaze had forgiven her without condemning. The forgiveness that does not condemn changes life. And yet that extremely beautiful thing she had encountered, that beautiful forgiveness that had changed her life, was gone. The death of Jesus was real! That death had put an end to everything. All one could do was weep desperately. When there has been such real joy, the despair is proportionate to such happiness, now gone. And here too the initiative comes from Jesus. A past encounter is not enough. Not even an encounter with the Son of God is enough – Mary Magdalene had met Jesus, the Son of God – a past encounter is not enough if in the present He does not come forward. Nor is it enough, let's say, that He is risen and



alive – Jesus is risen and alive – if He does not take the initiative in the present time, to come forward, to make His presence known, to call, to attract to Himself. It's not enough to know that He exists, if He doesn't take the initiative. As it is evident in the apparitions of the Risen Lord that it is He who takes the initiative when and how He pleases. It is He who comes near, it is He who makes Himself known, it is He who lets Himself be seen and touched: "Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have" (*Lk 24, 39*). It is not enough to know that He exists, it is not enough to know that He is risen, if in the present He does not take the initiative of calling, as he called Mary, of coming near, of encountering us. Faith is

grace, moment by moment. Faith is His initiative, moment by moment. Faith, moment by moment, is His gift. When St Thomas Aquinas says, “*Gratia facit fidem / it is grace that creates faith*”¹⁴, he adds a beautiful expression: in this moment (if there were anyone here who does not believe) to bring someone who does not believe to the faith and to keep in the faith a poor believer, it takes the same power of grace. To keep me right now in the grace of faith and to bring someone (if there were anyone here who does not believe) from disbelief to faith it takes the same power of grace. In this moment! Faith is, moment by moment, grace.

¹⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 4 a. 4 ad 3.

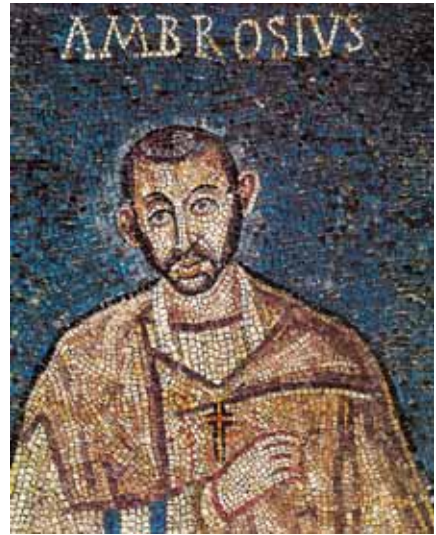


The meeting between the Risen Jesus and the apostles on the Sea of Galilee, detail of the *Maestà*,
Duccio di Buoninsegna, Museum of the Opera del Duomo, Siena

Now I'll read three prayers.

The first – I know it by heart – is a prayer of Saint Ambrose. It is one of the most beautiful of prayers. Ambrose comments on the last verse of Psalm 118, the Psalm that in the Ambrosian liturgy was recited every day, from Prime to Nones. The last verse says: “Like a lost sheep I go astray; seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your command-

ments”. Ambrose asks the Lord to come and seek this straying sheep. Because, says the holy Bishop, “If you tarry, I shall be lost”. This applies to all of us. It does not apply only before the encounter with Christianity, it applies also after the encounter, every day, moment by moment. If You delay in coming, I shall get lost, I am the lost sheep. If you delay, I shall get lost. So Ambrose prays: “*Veni, Domine Iesu, / Come, Lord Jesus, / ad me veni, / come to me, / quaere me, / seek me, / inveni me, / find me, / suscipe me, / take me in Your arms, / porta me / carry me*”¹⁵.



St Ambrose, detail of the mosaics of the Chapel of San Vittore, Basilica of Sant' Ambrogio, Milan

¹⁵ Ambrose, *Expositio in psalmum 118*, Tau, 28.29.



After communion, I very often recite the hymn I learned as a little child: “Dear Jesus, come to me and unite my heart with Thee”. It is not enough – again here – that He come, it needs to be Him to unite my heart to Him. If He does not attract my heart and unite it to Himself, even if He comes, I don’t love Him. Nor is it even enough if He come: every time I receive communion He comes, but it requires more than His only coming... “Dear Jesus, come to me and unite my heart” – my heart – “with Thee”. Even my poor loving Him can only be the result of His attraction, can only be the result of the fact that He takes my poor heart and brings it – and the heart lets itself be brought for the pleasure of being brought – brings it to Himself.

Second prayer. These are the last words written by St Theresa of the Child Jesus. She wrote them to the Prioress of the Carmel – who was one of her sisters – a few months before her death. Let me read a few sentences: “Simple souls don’t need complicated means: since I am among those, one morning during Thanksgiving, Jesus gave me a *simple* means for accomplishing my mission. He made me understand these words of the Canticle: ‘*Attract me in your footsteps, we will follow the fragrance of Your perfume*’ (*Song of Songs* 1,4). O Jesus, so we don’t even need to say: In attracting me, attract the souls that I love. The simple words: ‘Attract me’, are enough”.

How clear this is, in the world in which we live. It’s enough that in the world there is one person running after Jesus for all the world to notice. The beauty of the moment we are living is this, because the world has become small. It’s enough that there is one person running after Jesus, someone running because they are attracted. Not because they decided to run. Deciding *for oneself* to run is a different thing from being attracted. When one is attracted, one runs without even noticing that one is running. Otherwise running after someone becomes a chore in itself. When it is clear that a person is running because Someone Else is attracting them on, all the world notices. Whereas if it is *of your own accord* that you are running that does not in itself witness that He is risen and is alive. It must be obvious that you are attract-

ed by Him. Otherwise it might be your own initiative, if you decide *of your own accord* to run after Jesus. And we do not overcome the fear of death by what we ourselves do (cf. *Heb 2, 15*). The fear of death is defeated when it is clear that it is a presence that attracts us, when it is clear that you do nothing but run after, letting yourself be attracted like a small child running to catch hold of a beautiful thing.

St Theresa writes: “Mother, I believe it necessary that I should give you some further explanation about the passage in the Song of Songs, ‘Attract me, we will follow’, because what I wanted to say seems hardly understandable to me [the same is true of what I have been trying to say tonight]. ‘No one can come to me’, said Jesus, ‘unless attracted by *My Father* who sent me’ [*Nemo venit nisi tractus / no one comes if not attracted*’¹⁶]. Then, with sublime parables, and often without even using this genre so familiar to the people, He teaches us that it is enough to knock for it to be opened, it is enough to search in order to find and to stretch the hand out humbly to receive what we ask... He also says that all we ask *His Father* in His name He will give. Of course that is why the Holy Spirit, before the birth of Jesus, dictated that prophetic prayer: Attract me, we will follow. What, then, is it to ask to be at-

¹⁶ Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis XXVI, 2*.

tracted, if not to be united in intimate fashion with the object that captivates our heart? ... Beloved Mother, here is my prayer: I ask Jesus to attract me into the flames of His love, to unite me so closely to Him, that He may live and act in me ... The more I say: Attract me, the more the souls who come to me ... will run quickly to the



Theresa of Lisieux

fragrance of the perfume of their Beloved ...; surely, as St Mary Magdalene remains at the feet of Jesus, hears His sweet and fiery word. Seeming not to give anything, she gives much more than Martha, who busies herself with many things and would like her sister to imitate her. It is not the work that Martha performs that Jesus blames: His divine mother had humbly submitted to this work all her life since she had to prepare meals for the Holy Family. It is only the disquietude of His ardent host that He would like to correct ”.

The last prayer. It is as if the Lord in recent years had made prayer more confident. And He had made it possi-

ble to see that prayer is accomplished by saying “thanks”. And so one asks to say “thanks”. Prayer is accomplished when gratitude, “thank you”, becomes like breathing, the breathing of every moment. “Giving thanks *always*” (Eph 5, 20). Many times the apostle Paul urges to give thanks *always*. So let me read you this prayer of St Bernadette. When the sweetness of being loved is so superabundant, one gives thanks, it is then easy to give thanks for everything. The “thanks” arises here also from the sweetness of the gift. The “thanks” does not arise *per se* for the gift, but arises when the gift makes the heart happy. A week ago it was the birthday of my youngest nephew, and his parents invited me to their home. They gave him lots of presents, but I was



struck by the fact that he was pleased by the wrapping paper of one of the gifts, and he made a lot of confetti out of it and spent ten minutes tossing it into the air. This example is just to say that one does not give thanks for the gift, one gives thanks when the gift makes the heart happy. You may give a child a wonderful thing, but if his heart is not happy with what you have given, he will not thank you. And so it is with Christian life. We give thanks when the gift is overflowing with sweetness in the heart. When the gift overflows with happiness in the heart, then one gives thanks.

Bernadette writes thus: “For the poverty of Mum and Dad, for the ruin of the mill..., for the extra mouth I was to feed, for the children cared for, for the sheep I grazed. Thank You. Thank You, O my God. For the prosecutor, for the commissioner for the gendarmes, for the words, harsh at first, of my parish priest. For the days on which you came, O Virgin Mary, for those on which you did not come...”: how fine that distinction is! It is not true that everything is equal. The Lord is always there. But it is not true that when He comes it is the same as the moment when He does not come. He is always present. But also for Bernadette it was different when Our Lady appeared than when she didn’t appear... Christianity is not a metaphysical certainty. It is a relationship between people, is a *free* relationship of people. “For the days when you came, O Virgin Mary, for those on which you

did not come, I will never be able to thank you enough except in heaven. For the slap received, for the jokes, the insults, for those who took me for a liar, for those who considered me to be self-interested, thank You, O Lord... Thank You, thank You, because if there had been a more insignificant young girl on earth, You would not have chosen me”: how fine the word *insignificant* is! When he spoke of St. Francis, Pope Benedict



Bernadette Soubirous

XVI three times called him small and *insignificant*¹⁷. Yet the Church at that moment was upheld by that small and *insignificant* religious. Pope Innocent III had seen in a dream a small and *insignificant* person that upheld the architrave of the Cathedral of Saint John Lateran.

Bernadette continues: “For my mother who died far away from me, for the pain I felt when my father [her father went from Lourdes to Nevers to visit his daughter who was in the convent there], instead of stretching his

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, at the General Audience of Wednesday, 27 January 2010, cf. Benedict XVI, “*Francesco, piccolo e insignificante*” [Francis, small and insignificant], in *30Giorni*, No 1, 2010, pp. 47-54.

arms out to his little Bernadette, called me “Sister Bernarda”, thank You Jesus. Thank You for having filled with bitterness the too tender heart You gave me [and when there is bitterness, one suffers, and it is the sweetness of predilection that makes one give thanks also for that bitterness]. ... Thanks for having been the privileged object of reproach whereby the nuns would say: ‘What luck not to be Bernadette!’ Thank You for having been Bernadette. And for this soul that You gave me, for the desert of inner aridity, for Your darkness and for Your revelations [here too the darkness is darkness and the revelation is revelation], for Your silences and Your lightning, for all, for You, absent or present [and it’s different when He is absent – and one remains kneeling and that’s it – than when He is present – and one weeps with happiness. And He is always present. But it’s different when He is present-absent from when He is present and embraces the heart], thank You, thank You Jesus”.



Mary and the apostle John, detail of the *Maestà*, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Museum of the Opera del Duomo, Siena

And let me finish up with three phrases of the Saint Curé of Ars.

The first:

“What did the Holy Virgin and Saint Joseph do? They looked at, contemplated, wondered at the baby Jesus. That was their full occupation”.

Their whole occupation was to look at that child. How struck I was by the word *occupation*! Augustine says that “*totum atque summum negotium* / the activity – *negotium* – the all-encompassing and total occupation” of the Church is to put hope in prayer¹⁸, it is to put hope in the pleading look.

A second phrase:

“Coming out of Mass we are just as happy as the Wise Men would have been if they could have carried off the baby Jesus”.

What a beautiful image! Because it says that it is only the present that makes happy. Coming out of Mass we’re as



The Saint Curé of Ars

¹⁸Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XV, 21

happy as the Wise Men would have been, when leaving the house, had they carried off the baby Jesus with them. Because it is not enough to have seen Him once and is not enough to have found Him once, if we don't carry Him in the present, or better, if we are not carried in the present.

Then a last phrase, again from the Saint Curé of Ars, the one I like best:

“I've always simply been the child spoiled [so says the Saint Curé of Ars] by Providence. I've never worried about anything and I've never lacked anything. How beautiful it is just to abandon oneself “. At bottom, my life, too, can be summed up in those words: I have been a child spoiled by the love *of* Jesus Christ.

If it's possible for you, please leave in silence. How dear to the heart is the silence of our churches! In the words of the prayer to Saint Riccardo Pampuri: “... you have prayed in the silence of our churches...”.

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