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Very Human, Very Divine (XV): Simplicity, To See the Path Clearly

Knowing that God is always looking at us and living in the present moment can help us grow in simplicity.

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Simplicity, To See the Path Clearly

“Seek what suffices, seek what is enough, and don’t desire more.

Whatever goes beyond that produces anxiety not relief: it will weigh you down instead of lifting you up.”^[1]—

Indeed, the Christian life leads us to seek intimacy with God and to detach ourselves from what does not lead us to Him. It is an interior journey on which we strive at every step to identify and choose “what suffices”: the one thing necessary that will not be taken away from us (cf. *Lk* 10:42).

Experience shows us, however, that this search can be complex. At times life can seem to become a “labyrinth.” We go through moments of inner turmoil and outer chaos, days when our heads are full and our hearts are empty. Moreover, due to our way of being or difficult times in our life, we may start to complicate things, analyzing what happens to us over and over again. At such moments, any decision can paralyze us, and we may find it hard to be in tune with God’s will. We wish life

were simpler and our reasoning more direct. We long for the simplicity capable of enlightening our mind and calming our soul.

How can we discern God's will on every occasion? How can we accept the events of daily life with serenity? How can we relate to those around us without judging or twisting their intentions? It can be helpful to reflect, first of all, on the root of our tendency to complicate things. For there we will discover two dispositions that can help us to unravel the tangle in our soul: humility and abandonment.

The Creator of life and the “creator” of fear

Every artist leaves a mark on their works. God has also left one of the deepest traits of his being on everything He created: unity. He is Unity in the Trinity. The harmony and beauty of paradise show how

nothing was lacking or superfluous in what He created (cf. *Gen* 2:1). The world and man had arisen from Love, because only Love is capable of creating, and Love held everything together in harmony.

But confronting the God who affirms, who says yes, “let there be” (cf. *Gen* 1:3), is the voice of the tempter. Since the devil cannot create, all his effort is bent on “uncreating,” leading us to see the world in a distorted way. From his first exchange with Adam and Eve, the devil has played with our fears in order to make us anxious about the future and to cause us to imagine complicated intentions in others’ words and actions. Thus, little by little, he transforms us into insecure, calculating, worried souls.

Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden’? the devil asks (*Gen* 3:1). He wants us

to focus on the forbidden tree and stop appreciating God's other gifts: all the plants and animals, other human beings, life in the state of grace... We then begin to view the world with suspicion, and our look becomes complicated. Satan makes us believe that we lack something, that God is not sincere, that He is hiding something from us. As the author of the book of Ecclesiastes says: *But this alone I have found: God made humankind honest, but they have pursued many designs (Eccl 7:29).*

Any complication prepares the way for sin. Adam and Eve no longer dialogue or walk with God, and end up hiding from Him (cf. *Gen 3:8*), out of fear of being seen naked and helpless – which is, after all, how the creature always stands before the Creator. The devil is not content with making us fall; he immediately returns with another suggestion,

another “uncreating,” which distances us even further from God. When trust between the Creator and the creature is lost, when we want to hide from his eyes, angst and fatigue enter the world (cf. *Gen* 3:16-17). Men and women then live in fear of the future;^[2] their hearts end up exhausted and thus become fertile ground for sadness, which is such a great ally of the enemy.

The complication that sin brings hinders us from seeing clearly where our true good lies and from making decisions that lead us to God. The book of Proverbs puts it bluntly: *those with a twisted heart come to no good* (*Prov* 17:20). But we long for the harmony of our past close to God, and this memory, this “nostalgia” remaining in our soul, continues to draw us to God. The Good Friday liturgy expresses it thus: “Almighty ever-living God, [you] created all people to seek you always by

desiring you and, by finding you, to find rest.”^[3]

Humility: knowing that God is looking upon us

To see ourselves and the world with simplicity, we first need to find rest in God's gaze. Knowing that He is looking upon us gives us great security: we understand that God loves us in our *truth* and that everything else is of very relative importance. Outside of this gaze, however, we feel the need to protect our fragility, and we close in on ourselves or become paralyzed by fear. Those who take refuge in God's loving look enjoy the serenity of simplicity, because they do not depend on circumstances outside of their control. *We belong to the truth, says St. John, and reassure our hearts before him (1 Jn 3:19).*

We might think here of Simon Peter, who was a good man but whose

heart was sometimes complicated. His love for our Lord combined doubt with decision, obedience with rebellion, courage with fear. His greatest moment of confusion takes place in the courtyard of Ananias during our Lord's Passion (cf. *Lk* 22:65-72). As Jesus is being questioned, we can imagine Peter growing increasingly anguished. He wants to be faithful but does not understand what is happening; the events overwhelm him. He would like to go back to those walks with the Master in the fields of Galilee, when his voice rang out clearly and He solved any problem with a single word or gesture. In those days, it was easy to believe in promises. The future shone splendid and clear.

Now our Lord is not there to rescue him from the agitated waters, and fear overwhelms him. Peter yields to pressure and denies knowing the Master. The Gospel tells us that,

shortly afterward, their eyes met:
*The Lord turned and looked at Peter;
and Peter remembered the word of the
Lord, how he had said to him, "Before
the cock crows today, you will deny
me three times."* He went out and
began to weep bitterly (Lk 22:61-62).
Jesus' look cleared away Peter's
confusion. When our Lord looked at
him, Peter suddenly saw himself in
his *truth*, through God's eyes. "Look
at me," the future Benedict XVI
prayed on Good Friday, "as you
looked at Peter after his denial. Let
your look penetrate our hearts and
indicate the direction our lives must
take."^[4]
—

Seeing ourselves as we are, seeing
our real situation clearly, can lead us
to weep bitterly, like Peter. But it is
the only way to stand on solid
ground and abandon the anxiety that
comes from pretending to be
someone we are not. We need to look
at ourselves through God's eyes and

say to ourselves: “I am the way that I am, and God wanted me this way, for something great.”

St. Josemaría summed up all the reasons for Christian prayer in one short phrase: “to get to know Him and to get to know yourself.”^[5] —

Undoubtedly, our conversations with God are the right time to gain a serene vision of our problems and ourselves in order to unravel, with God’s grace, the tangle of our thoughts. The guidance we receive in spiritual direction and the means of formation will also help us. Trusting someone who knows us well can help us to uncomplicate our interior world and to quiet the inner voice that tries to entangle our thoughts. St. Josemaría said that the goal of the Christian formation offered in Opus Dei is simplicity: “Our asceticism has the simplicity of the Gospel. We would complicate it if we were complicated; if we left our heart in

darkness.”^[6] Hence sometimes the first step in gaining simplicity will be simply welcoming advice with a good disposition and looking for ways to put it into practice in God’s presence.

Abandonment: *now* is the time for love

The difficulty of abandoning ourselves in God’s hands can have many causes: an inferiority complex, weak self-esteem, resistance to living with our own mistakes... On the other hand, the pace of work today tends to complicate life and can have repercussions on our way of being. The ability to do more every day means that the number of decisions we have to make increases; we find it is difficult to prioritize tasks, and competing with our colleagues and professional ambitions can put pressure on us and weigh on our souls. We want to live a simple life,

but reality seems too complicated for us to do so.

Faced with this panorama, St. Josemaría invites us to concern ourselves with the present, the *kairos*: the opportune moment for holiness. After all, *now* is the only time when we can receive God's grace: "Do your duty 'now,' without looking back on 'yesterday,' which has already passed, or worrying over 'tomorrow,' which may never come for you."^[7] The past and future can become weights that prevent us from clearly discerning God's will. Jesus tells us: *Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil* (Mt 6:34). Concentrating on a task without worrying about what others will think or what effect it will have on our lives, will help us to focus our will and to make better use of our talents. We certainly need to reflect on our experiences and plan

for the future, but this should not prevent us, close beside God, from concentrating on loving here and now, because love can only be given and received in the present moment.

When He shows himself to the apostles with his glorious body for the first time, the Risen Lord sees their agitation: *Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself"* (Lk 24:38-39). The events his disciples lived through during the preceding days collide with what they see before their eyes; the scandal of the Passion still weighs too heavily on their hearts. But if it is really Jesus before them, the future is suddenly wide open... So strong are their emotions that our Lord has to bring them back to the present with a friendly question: "Have you anything to eat?"

Jesus renews the familiar experience of sitting down together to eat a meal with Him, and so brings his disciples out of their confusion. Striving to serve others in their specific needs and carrying out our daily jobs with love and care, while abandoning in God's hand problems that escape our own control, is usually the best way to avoid becoming entangled in our own confusion and to become ever more truly *as simple as doves* (Mt 10:16).

* * *

When reading the Gospels, we may find ourselves far from the “faith of the simple”: the faith of the people who, perhaps without knowing much about the Law of the Lord, gladly accepted Jesus' message. This simple acceptance of the Word of the Lord may contrast with our own difficulty in trusting Him. Perhaps ours at times is the “faith of the

complicated.” But God never ceases to invite us at every moment to recover that lost harmony, the simplicity that is “the salt of perfection.”^[8] We need to see the path home, to paradise, clearly. Following the way of simplicity, we will rise above our problems with the agility that comes from love. Lifted up by grace, we will be able to contemplate reality through God’s eyes.

^[1] St. Augustine, *Sermon* 85, 5.6

^[2] Cf. *Eccl* 6:12, *Mt* 6:25-34.

^[3] *Roman Missal*, Good Friday, Universal Prayer.

^[4] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Stations of the Cross*, 2005, First Station.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 91.

^[6] Cf. *Notebooks* 3, p. 149 (AGP, library, P07).

^[7] *The Way*, no. 253.

^[8] *The Way*, no. 305.

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