

MEDITATION ON THE THEME OF THE YEAR "I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION" – 3/3

"I do not promise you the happiness of this world but of the other". Mary's words, 3rd apparition.

On Thursday 18th February 1858, while she was inside the cavity itself, Bernadette, for the first time, had just heard the voice of the lady confiding to her that what she had to say to her was not necessary "to put in writing". But now the interview continued and this time it was the lady who took the initiative, asking Bernadette, "Will you do me the honour of coming here for fifteen days?" Following Bernadette's answer, the lady went even further, asserting then, "I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the other." These were the three successive utterances that Mary spoke during the third apparition, during her initial dialogue with Bernadette.

The first disciple of Jesus, Mary is a teacher. She considered both the human reality of Bernadette and the message she wanted to convey to her. The dialogue she established with her developed gradually but, at the same time, it opened Bernadette to another reality, simultaneously marking both a continuity and a rupture. She addressed her as "vous", she showed a very polite sensitivity, she took the risk of Bernadette's freedom. She waited for an answer, as important for her as it was for Bernadette since Bernadette's word would mean a commitment for both of them.

Mary's request was about trust. Indeed, she did not give any details, any schedule and she herself did not promise that she would come to the meetings she spoke of. How can we not be reminded of the call of Abraham, the father of believers, to whom the Lord simply said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12: 1). So, Abraham went, as the Lord had told him (Gen. 12: 4). These words are made explicit in the Gospel by the call that Jesus addresses to the first disciples: "Come and see" (John 1: 39). It is therefore about entering into a relationship of trust which characterises the relationship of the disciple and which is the prerequisite for the experience of faith.

What was asked of Bernadette was not difficult but did need to be put into practice to understand its content. It was something simple but mysterious, which could only be accomplished through a positive response.

Finally, Bernadette was not called during the first apparition, but during the third meeting. She was not ready to hear the word. So, to start with, she had to take the first steps in trust.

For us, the Lord's calls always take our freedom into account. They therefore require a response from us, which concretely expresses our choice. Our response then allows us to be part of God's plan and to benefit from the grace he gives us to carry out our choice.

As with Bernadette, the mission that God has for us takes place in a specific place and for a specific duration, whether it involves marriage, celibacy, religious life, the priesthood. By responding to one or other of these calls, each one receives the necessary grace, sometimes embodied in a sacrament, to enable them to carry out their mission until it is full realised in harmony with God's plan.

However, this is not without difficulty. Everyone must carry their cross. And thus, Mary did not promise Bernadette to appear for fifteen days but asked her to come for fifteen days. In fact, twice, Mary did not appear to Bernadette at all.

But at each apparition, Bernadette's response would also prove difficult. Many times, in fact, she would have obstacles to overcome. For her these were essentially the prohibitions first from her own family, then from the authorities which made it difficult for her to go to the Grotto "as she had promised". However, each time, an unexpected event would turn the situation around ultimately allowing Bernadette to be true to her word.

For us too, it is in the difficulty of living out our commitments that God gradually gives us the graces necessary to transform any difficulty, through the mystery of the Cross, by making it a passage to another reality.

Mary's request, offering Bernadette the grace to come to the Grotto for fifteen days, opened with a promise through Bernadette's positive response, "I do not promise you the happiness of this world, but of the other." This promise was linked to happiness. This is at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus promises his disciples happiness, a joy that no one can take away from them (John 16:22). Mary's promise to Bernadette was also linked to happiness, to life, to fertility, to fullness. What was happiness that she spoke of?

Every human being aspires to happiness. And we can encounter happiness on different levels. However, the happiness of this world is ephemeral while that which Mary offered to Bernadette, the happiness of the other world, is linked to that which is offered by Jesus in the Gospel. This happiness is the fruit of the Cross. Who can take away from parents the joy of having raised their children, giving their life for them through perseverance and faithfulness over the years? Who can take away the deep satisfaction that comes from a job well done with openness, generosity, and competence? Who can take away the happiness of those who have given their lives to serve the poor, the sick, and all those in need? Who can take away the joy of commitment to a word given and lived out to its ultimate consequences? No one can take away this peace, this joy, this happiness. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ", exclaims Saint Paul, who immediately specifies, "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution ... nothing else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35).

When Christians give their life, they like Bernadette, enter into the joy of another world. They then taste the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus presents in the Gospel through the parables. These always teach us something essential about love without which everything else is vain.

In the Gospel, the Lord announces the Kingdom of Heaven as a new reality which leads us to the fullness of love. In Lourdes, Mary leads Bernadette to discover and experience this other world. For us, this other world, which is the Kingdom of Heaven, is present in the daily experience of self-giving.

And now a few thoughts from Pope Francis about the "welcoming of happiness" by the person of Saint Joseph:

"Joseph accepted Mary unconditionally. He trusted in the angel's words. "The nobility of Joseph's heart is such that what he learned from the law he made dependent on charity. Today, in our world where psychological, verbal, and physical violence towards women is so evident, Joseph appears as the figure of a respectful and sensitive man. Even though he does not understand the bigger picture, he decides to protect Mary's good name, her dignity, and her life. In his hesitation about how best to act, God helped him by enlightening his judgment".[18]

Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history. Unless we are reconciled with our own history, we will be unable to take a single step forward, for we will always remain hostage to our expectations and the disappointments that follow.

The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains but accepts. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation, can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning. We can almost hear an echo of the impassioned reply of Job to his wife, who had urged him to rebel against the evil he endured: "Shall

we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10).

Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. In our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude. Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations, and disappointments.

Jesus' appearance in our midst is a gift from the Father, which makes it possible for each of us to be reconciled to the flesh of our own history, even when we fail to understand it completely.

Just as God told Joseph: "Son of David, do not be afraid!" (Matt. 1:20), so he seems to tell us: "Do not be afraid!" We need to set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and courage. In this way, we become open to a deeper meaning. Our lives can be miraculously reborn if we find the courage to live them in accordance with the Gospel. It does not matter if everything seems to have gone wrong or some things can no longer be fixed. God can make flowers spring up from stony ground. Even if our heart condemns us, "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).

Here, once again, we encounter that Christian realism which rejects nothing that exists. Reality, in its mysterious and irreducible complexity, is the bearer of existential meaning, with all its lights and shadows. Thus, the Apostle Paul can say: "We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God" (Rom. 8:28). To which Saint Augustine adds, "even that which is called evil (*etiam illud quod malum dicitur*)".[19] In this greater perspective, faith gives meaning to every event, however happy or sad.

Nor should we ever think that believing means finding facile and comforting solutions. The faith Christ taught us is what we see in Saint Joseph. He did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it.

Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). He is the "Father of orphans and protector of widows" (Ps 68:6), who commands us to love the stranger in our midst.[20] I like to think that it was from Saint Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father (cf. Luke 15:11-32). (Pope Francis. Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*).

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