

3. Prayer, the joy, and the treasure

In the first Chapter I suggested to you that you should ask yourselves if the Order and the individual communities are truly united in prayer. Let's not forget this question. But, if we start from what we tried to meditate on yesterday about Jesus's encounter with the rich young man, we understand that asking ourselves whether we are united in prayer coincides with two other questions that are also connected: "Are we united in joy?" and "Are we united by the treasure in heaven?". Only if we are united in having a treasure in heaven can we be united by a joy that nothing can take away from us. But we have seen that it is impossible to detach ourselves from the treasures of the earth if we do not ask for this from God, because only He can grant us the possibility of this impossible detachment from our riches, of whatever type and nature they may be. Prayer, joy, and treasure are like three circular, coinciding realities. It is important to be aware that, if we attempt to cultivate one of these three realities without thinking of the others, we lose all three, we live all three badly.

Each of us can examine himself, and each community can examine itself, asking themselves if there is something in us of the indissoluble dependence of these three realities. Is the treasure in heaven truly our joy, and are we aware that we cannot possess it without asking God for it with the faith that He loves us and that all is possible for Him?

Understanding or defining prayer apart from this "constellation" composed of prayer, joy, and treasure, makes each of these three elements false, makes them abstract, and above all makes them inconsistent in our life, in our communities. If prayer does not seek the treasure in heaven, that which it is impossible to possess if God does not grant it to us, the treasure that fills our heart with joy, it is no longer a prayer that is important for our life, nor for the lives or others or of the world. It becomes an activity just like others, next to others, which indeed we too often replace with other activities that seem more urgent. In reality it is the treasure in heaven that we replace with other treasures, those of the earth. The result, or symptom, is that we lose joy, true joy, the greatest joy of our heart. We lose the joy of God, the joy in the Holy Spirit with which St. Benedict invites us to live out Lent as well, and penance, and the privation of that which most satisfies us in this world. At times, as I visit communities and participate in the Divine Office, I see that *per se* they pray well, that perhaps they sing well and all is looked after and executed well. But I perceive that something is missing, that in the prayer itself there is a lack, an empty place, something that disturbs and that ultimately prevents one from praying truly. Joy is missing. Let's be clear, I am not speaking of the superficial and exterior joy that certain charismatic groups are very pleased to demonstrate. What's missing is the deep joy of one who lives and prays because the treasure of life is the gift of an Other. At times prayer is missing deep joy precisely because the prayer itself is lived and executed like a treasure of the earth. One prays for the prayer, adoring its forms, its exterior quality, pleased with how it is sung, with how it is prayed. This is the pharisaical prayer that Jesus did not fail to stigmatize, making a caricature of it:

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward” (Mt 6:5). They have already received their reward because in such a prayer there is no space for the treasure in heaven that the Father gives, and thus for true joy. A hypocritical and proud prayer pretends to be treasure in itself, and so rejoices in itself. It does not open the heart and life to joy for the treasure that God gives. Indeed, Jesus goes on to say: “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6).

Even when we pray and celebrate solemnly – and it is important to do it because in the Church and in the Order we have a tradition of very beautiful liturgical prayer, which truly helps one pray –, even in this case we must not forget that the essence of prayer, personal or communal, simple or solemn, is always very simple: it is asking the Father for treasure from heaven, our true joy. If there is this heart, this inner fire, then the solemnity of prayer also truly gladdens us, for it remains truly athirst, in search of a treasure that we cannot give ourselves but only receive from God.

I was talking about this recently in a vigil of prayer for young people conducted by our brothers of Heiligenkreuz, commenting on the passage of the Gospel according to Luke in which Jesus exults with joy, giving thanks to the Father (cf. Lk 10:21–22):

“In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father!’” (Lk 10:21).

Jesus is struck by an unexpected joy, which seems to surprise even him. A very special joy, for it is the joy of God, the joy of Jesus as the Son of God. It is indeed a “joy in the Holy Spirit,” and it is a joy that praises and thanks the Father. Suddenly, Jesus manifests the joy of the Trinity to his disciples.

If this joy is the joy of God, then this should really be the infinite and eternal joy that we all desire and that we never seem to receive, to keep. And if Jesus manifests it to us, we know that this joy of his is granted to us, as he himself is granted to us, up to death. It is not possible that Christ keep this joy all for himself if he grants himself totally to us.

But, exulting with joy before his disciples, Jesus also reveals how it is possible for us to experience his joy: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children” (Lk 10:21).

The condition for receiving an infinite joy is, paradoxically, being little. The “little child,” like a baby, rejoices fully, like Jesus, because it does not seek to enclose all its joy in its heart. There is a space larger than its own heart into which the little one lets its joy expand, and it is this space that Jesus teaches us: it is the space of relationship, of communion, of friendship.

Jesus's joy is in his loving relationship with the Father in the Holy Spirit. If we want to experience Christ's joy, we must not separate it from this love, from this friendship.

If little children have this experience, why couldn't we have it too? Often we do not experience joy because we dissociate it from love, we dissociate it from friendship, from the charity that we are asked to show to each other. We would like to receive joy in our heart without also receiving others into our heart, into our life. If the world is sad, it is not because it lacks joy, but because it lacks receptivity toward the other, it lacks friendship. (Homily at the *Jugendvigil*, Heiligenkreuz, 3.9.2021).

Let us notice that, in this passage of the Gospel, Jesus expresses his joy by formulating a prayer of praise, or we could say a "eucharistic" prayer directed to the Father, which is a prayer of adoration and of love: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth." For Jesus, the treasure in heaven and on earth is the Father, and joy is to possess this treasure through a prayer of communion and of love that embraces all, all of reality, for the Father's love embraces all with his mercy.