

5. Being poor

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Mt 16:24–26).

We always have the tendency, born with original sin, to put our assurance in what we possess, in what we accumulate, in the quantity of goods, forces, numbers that we have in our hands. A quantity that never satisfies us, that will never be sufficient. Why? Because our heart is not created for being satisfied by and feeling secure with this. Our heart is made to feel secure and satisfied by Someone, by the Father. Not by what we possess, but by the Father who grants us everything, who wants to grant us everything.

When the prodigal son has his father give him his part of the inheritance, he thinks he is satisfied by this *quantity* of riches that he has in his purse. He thinks he is secure and satisfied by those coins. He lives on that, on that quantity of goods that he not only looked for, but that he obtained, and that he need no longer seek. And it all runs out, the quantity of goods, split off from its source, the father, runs out. Then, the son returns home because he remembers that the father is the source of the goods that he needs to live, and that he is such not only for his two sons but also for all the workers and servants who live and work in his house: “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants’” (Lk 15:17–19).

You can own the whole world, as Satan offers also to Jesus, tempting him in the desert – “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’” (Mt 4:8–9) –, but if you lose the relationship with the Father, the source of life, you lose everything. If you lose your life, your soul, you are no longer yourself, you are no longer the subject of your existence, and the whole quantity of goods that you think you own you lose, because you’re no longer there, you’re no longer anybody, you are no longer an “I” who possesses, who enjoys, who can be happy and satisfied.

A few months ago, I visited a dear old nun of Talavera de la Reina, Sister Teresa. Weakened in mind and body, for a while she has basically not been speaking, but when I entered into her room in the infirmary, she was completely happy to welcome me. Our dialogue was very limited. She understood well what I was telling her, but it was always like the responses had to rise with effort from the depth of her conscience, and often she did not manage to express herself.

At a certain moment I found myself asking her what she thought the most important thing was, about what, according to her, we should focus on to live and revive our vocation in the current moment. After a little while, from the depth of her

conscience she answered me distinctly and with conviction: "*Ser pobres!* – being poor!"

I left her with the certainty that this response was and is like a prophetic word that I should treasure for myself, for the Order, and for the Church. In fact, from that time on I have been realizing more and more that in the following of Christ that is asked of us, being poor is a question of life or death. A poverty that is not only material, but is especially a position of the heart, a poverty of spirit, yes: a "being": "Being poor!" Suor Teresa now lives an extreme poverty: she is totally dependent on the care of her Sisters and of the people who assist her. She cannot really speak any longer, and apparently her serenity too has been taken away, her peace, like one who lives a "dark night." But love has not been taken from her, and her poverty makes it all the more evident.

A few weeks before I had met in Vietnam, in his monastery of Thien Phuoc, really on the eve of his death, another prophetic person whom I had the grace to know and visit in these years of my ministry: Fr. Maxime, almost a hundred years old. He too always called me back to a poverty that is joyous and full of love. One time he told me, smiling: "Jesus came in a manger, but today at times instead of being mangers for Jesus we are like palaces of Pilate!"

When Jesus called the rich young man, he highlighted clearly that possessing the treasure in heaven is indissolubly linked to poverty, a poverty that gives, a poverty in which the detachment from one's own goods is demanded for "being poor," for a splendor of the person that coincides with the gift, the love, and the preference of Christ. "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!" (Mk 10:21)

Perhaps we do not notice enough that when the young man refuses this calling, he betrays not only the love of Christ: he also lacks love for his neighbor, love for the poor. Deep down, Jesus, in loving him, was asking him to let himself be loved to the point of love others as Jesus loved him, as Jesus loved all the poor. He too was, in Jesus' eyes, a poor person who lacked the essential riches of man's life: the treasure in heaven, an incorruptible treasure, eternal life.