

6. Falling in love with Christ

Our true interest is to be saved by Jesus Christ. But must we really always wait to be drowned in the sea before we realize this, before we ask for and receive salvation from Jesus? Must we really commit ourselves to losing our life for Him only when we are losing it in a dramatic, tragic moment, like when we are sick, dying, when we are losing everything? But then, what freedom do we have to lose our life for Christ? Is it really true that we cannot give it on our own initiative? For example: must we wait to enter the monastery only when all else falls through, when all is collapsing? It is true that, in dramatic times in history, vocations increase, like after the Second World War, but in reality it is not always so (the pandemic, for example, is not giving us more vocations), and it is not good for it to be like that, because it would mean that vocations are the fruit of disappointment, of fear, and not a free impulse of love for Christ.

In reality, how do vocations to leave all for Christ in the Gospel come about?

In Matthew and Mark, the calling of the first disciples follows immediately upon the scene in which Jesus is described, after the baptism and temptations in the desert, traveling through Galilee saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel!” (Mk 1:15; cf. Mt 4:17). Along the sea of Galilee, Jesus sees Simon and Andrew, then James and John, all employed in their work as fishermen. He calls them: “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mk 1:17; cf. Mt 4:19). They leave everything and follow him. In Luke, the calling is preceded by Jesus’s getting into Simon’s boat to preach to the crowd, then he asks them to go out into the deep and to cast their nets. Simon makes it known that they have toiled all night without catching anything, but at the word of Jesus, who perhaps fascinated him while he was listening to this preaching, they are willing to try again and the net is filled with fish. Peter does not feel worthy of this miracle, of standing near the Lord, but Jesus cuts him off and calls him: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (Lk 5:10). Then the disciples, “when they had brought their boats to land, left everything and followed him.” (Lk 5:11).

Let’s return to the question I put earlier: how do vocations to leave all for Christ in the Gospel come about? What is the motive for which these men, young but already mature, because they work, they have a fishing business, almost all are married, they have a house (you can still visit Peter’s today at Capernaum, and it was certainly a nice house), what is the motive for which they leave all to follow Jesus? The Gospel does not mention any particular quality in them, except that they are fishermen, but to become fishers of men I do not think it is necessary to be fishers of fish, so much so that Jesus will choose the other apostles from other professions. No, it was not first of all their qualities or characteristics that caused their following after Jesus. So what caused it? The Gospel is clear: *Jesus himself, his person, was the only reason that drove them to follow him.* Whoever else might have told them, “Follow me,” they would not have left everything and they would not have followed them.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not order them to follow him: he invited them, he proposed that they follow him, but, as the rich, young man did later, they were not obligated to do it, they did not need to follow him by force. Simon, Andrew, James, John, then Philip and Nathanael, then Matthew and all the other apostles and disciples, including the women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, etc., followed Jesus for Jesus, because of Him. They did not follow him to gain something, like the many fish of the miraculous catch, because they also left those many fish there, with the ship, the assistants, their families, everything. One leaves all to follow Christ only if, at least in desire, Christ is everything for us, only if He, and He alone, is the reason and the purpose of setting out to follow him. The disciples immediately renounce the pursuit of their own interests to pursue the interests of Christ, driven by the mysterious attractiveness of his person.

In human experience, what drives someone to renounce their own interests for the interests of another? The strongest pressure is love, like falling in love between a man and a woman, or parents' love for their baby. In these experiences of great love, the simple fact that the beloved person is there, exists, justifies every renunciation for their sake. Love draws us to consider the interests of the other as more important than our own interests. It's only that, in human experience, often with the passing of time one appropriates the other's interest, transforming it into one's own, to the point of egoism. We become jealously possessive, full of demands, of seeking some payback, with regard also to the beloved person or one's own children.

This tendency, which in us derives from original sin, does not spare even our relationship with Jesus and our vocation. If at the beginning we followed Jesus only because we were drawn by him, and we were disposed to lose everything for Him, in time, as the Apostles themselves did, we too begin to calculate the personal payback of our following him, of our renunciation, of the mission for Christ that we have received. A bit like when Peter asks Jesus, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Mt 19:27). Jesus promises the hundredfold of all that one has left behind and eternal life, but he emphasizes, however, that this recompense is for the one who persists in renunciation, and, in Mark, he adds that the hundredfold is accompanied by "persecutions" (Mk 10:30). What does this mean? That we cannot persist in following Christ for other reasons and with other strength than his own presence and our love for Him. Peter himself, deep down, will not truly follow Jesus in a totally disinterested manner, that is, pursuing only the interests of Jesus, until after Pentecost, with the strength and love given him by the Holy Spirit. And if this was necessary for him, the first of the apostles, how necessary it must be for us! We shall see how.