

9. From the encounter to adoration

“Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.” (Mt 2:11a)

Since we are used to thinking of the Magi as the statuettes in our manger scenes, we think of this as if it were taken for granted, as if between entering and seeing and falling down and adoring there were not a dramatic leap in freedom, in awareness, in the heart of these men.

What different is there between the drama lived out by the Magi and the one lived out by the rich young man? At the level of freedom, at the level of the heart, of an impression from the presence of Christ, the poverty of Christ, the scandal of a divine presence that has lowered itself in the simplest way to being human, at the level of all this, there is no difference between the Magi and the young man. Just as there is no difference between the Magi and the shepherds of Bethlehem, between the Magi and old Simeon, between the Magi and the Baptist, between the Magi and the apostles, between the Magi and Zacchaeus, or the Samaritan woman, or Nicodemus, etc.

Of course, in the episode of the Magi, everything is concentrated in half a verse: “Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.” But this helps us better understand what happens, reduced to the skeleton, in positive and negative, also for the rich young man, or for Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, etc. For each of them the encounter with Jesus is contact with the offering of what can bring fulfillment to the conscious or unconscious search of a lifetime; and for each of them the point is choosing, deciding. What? The issue is *deciding on the passage from the encounter to the adoration*. The issue is deciding on the passage from the experience of a presence that in one way or another surprises us, attracts us, but also contradicts us in its form, which we have not foreseen – like that of a poor Child, or of an adult man who lives in poverty, without goods and without power, like a slave, whom many despise to the point of wanting to eliminate him –, the issue is deciding on the passage from the experience of this presence to the recognition that precisely this presence is the most precious thing that exists for me, for everyone; the most worshipful presence that can be encountered. And this adoring recognition expresses itself in a way that entrusts one’s whole life to this Presence, that falls down in offering, in confiding all of oneself to Him.

The adoring prostration of the Magi means that they recognize the absolute value of this Child so really that they let their whole person be as it were absorbed by this absolute value, be entirely taken by this treasure, within the apparently insignificant and restricted environment of this treasure that in reality is He who holds the universe in his hand and in whom all things hold together.

The episode of the rich young man helps us understand all this in the negative. The rich young man, like the Magi, enters where Jesus is found, and seems to have already decided what the Magi expressed, because he starts from prostration: “such a one ran to him and, kneeling before him...”. But it is still a formal prostration, which recognizes in Jesus the Rabbi who can give an authoritative response to his question about the meaning of life, but does not recognize that Jesus is, in person, *the Answer* to this question. He acts as if the Magi, after a long trip, had insisted on receiving from Jesus an oracle about the stars instead of recognizing that Jesus was in person all that they were seeking. On account of which, when Jesus, recognizing the sincere search of this young man’s heart, offers himself

to him as what he is – the complete Meaning of life for which it is worth leaving everything –, the young man does not prostrate himself any longer in adoration like the Magi, because this would mean consigning his whole life to Jesus, all that he is and all that he has. So he goes away. Before Christ, either we adore with all that we are, including our sin, our incapacity to abandon ourselves completely, to have faith, to leave our goods for Him, etc., or we go away: “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mk 10:22).

But what is the great difference between the rich young man and the Magi, or Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, or the saints, like St. Francis of Assisi, to give just one significant and paradigmatic example? Maybe some capacity? Maybe some generosity? Maybe humility, or some other virtue? If it were so, maybe no one would have been capable of following Jesus except for Mary Most Holy. What is the big difference between the Magi and the rich young man? It seems to me that the essential difference is between joy and sadness. Encountering Jesus, the Magi find joy, the rich young man sadness. Or better: the rich young man, meeting Jesus, does not accept the joy that the Magi found in Him, and not accepting that joy, the young man is left alone with sadness.

In what sense? In the sense we were speaking of earlier: that joy is linked to the discovery of a treasure. It is Jesus who speaks of treasure to the rich young man, and not of just any treasure: “you will have treasure in heaven” (Mk 10:21). The Magi preserved that greatest joy announced by the star, for they worshiped Jesus with their whole being. These Eastern sages, rich and powerful enough to present themselves to King Herod, who fall down to worship a poor Child in the arms of his mother, with that gesture they consign themselves completely to Him, they recognize him as the treasure of their life. The young man, on the other hand, did not recognize Jesus as a treasure for himself, for which it would be worth losing everything, and, disregarding Jesus in the literal sense – giving him little regard, little value – he lost the joy that he could find in Him, a very great joy, great up to heaven, like the treasure.

Understanding that the joy is linked to the treasure, and that the only treasure that guarantees joy is Christ, is the most important thing to recognize in life and in vocation. But it is an understanding by experience, by surprise. An understanding in which the joy itself is proof. Joy in us, the true joy, is more a sense than a sentiment. As we see light with the vision, as we hear sounds with the hearing, as we feel objects with touch, as we sense aromas and stinks with the smell, and taste flavors with the taste, so joy is a sense with which we perceive a reality mysterious but real. Which? The reality of the treasure that is worth more than everything, which gives value to everything, which never loses its value, never loses its solidity, which is eternal. Exactly: “a treasure in Heaven.”

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:19–21)

Behold, our true joy is where our heart is with our true treasure, with our incorruptible, eternal treasure that no one and nothing can take from us. Joy is, in us, the sense of incorruptible treasure, of inalienable treasure, of inexhaustible, eternal treasure. When this sense does not find or does not accept the gift of the treasure, it goes dull in sadness. It is like become blind or deaf, or, better, it is like having sight while living always in the dark, or having hearing while living with one’s ears completely blocked.