

**MATURITY ACCORDING TO
JESUS CHRIST**

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JESUS CHRIST



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1.

The Lord's sermon

When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying:

Mt 5:1-2

“For were [Christ] to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be. Therefore, having become His disciples, let us learn to live according to the principles of Christianity.”¹ Indeed, if we imitate His way of behaving, not only will we be saved, but we will also achieve the perfection of our human potencies. We learn this “way of Christ” in the Gospel, and in a particular and singular way in the Sermon on the Mount, where the program of our moral and spiritual configuration with Christ is contained.

The Apostle James says: “But the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who for-

¹ Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 10, 1.

gets but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does” (Jn 1:25). The “perfect law of freedom” is Christ’s law, which is summarized in a special way in this sermon, since the perfect law is the doctrine regarding the Christian life and, as Saint Thomas says, “this sermon contains the whole process of forming the life of a Christian.”² For this reason it is sometimes considered the *Magna carta* of the kingdom founded by Christ.

Certainly this is the most important preaching that has taken place in the history of humanity and, doctrinally, it has divided history into a *before* and an *after*. There are many books that have marked milestones in the history of thought, for better or for worse, but no writing can be compared to the three chapters in which Saint Matthew summarizes the main lines of Jesus of Nazareth’s religious thought.

My goal here is not to offer an exegetical commentary on this Biblical text. On the contrary, my desire is very simple, since I am only attempting to be inspired by the Sermon on the Mount in order to indicate the basic features that define a mature and balanced Christian life according to the thoughts of Our Lord. This is because I start from the position that in this preaching, Jesus has before His eyes a clear and profound idea of what a real man or woman is, one who is mature, balanced, and perfect.

² “Sermo quem Dominus in monte proposuit, totam informationem christi-
anae vitae continet” (*ST* I-II, q. 108, a. 3).

2.

Eight properties of maturity

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.*

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Mt 5:3-12

The Beatitudes are the gateway to the Sermon on the Mount, the “aquatint” of Christianity, black on white. Against the background of the Beatitudes, everything stands out sharply.

With reason, then, they have become one of the preferred topics for many exegetes, Biblical commentators, preachers, and theologians. Saint Thomas said that the Beatitudes express the most perfect acts performed by the virtues when they have been perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, they are the zenith of Christian supernatural actions, or the point of arrival for the whole of the work of Christian maturity.

However, it is also clear that a port is reached only after having navigated the path that leads toward it. The Beatitudes therefore also contain the *direction* in which a person must advance in the itinerary of maturity. Each one of them alludes to an *attitude* that is proper and essential for maturity. Whoever makes an effort to walk by these paths *is on the path to maturity*. From the degree that a person reaches each of these mental and spiritual dispositions, they can also be measured on the scale of human maturity. On the contrary, whoever is missing one of the *attitudes* likewise suffers from immaturity.

Hence, they are not optional, but rather indispensable qualities. They are eight *basic* properties of maturity that describe the relation

of the person with the most fundamental fields of life: the material world (i), the emotions (ii), moral failings (iii), holiness (iv), the sufferings of others (v), the emotional and sexual sphere (vi), resentment and division between people (vii), and the mystery of personal suffering (viii).

The phrases that Jesus Christ uses for the Beatitudes help us to probe the thoughts of our hearts and the positions that we have in the face of these pressing realities. Spiritually, they betray our belonging to one of two possible masters: to God, or to the world. Psychically they reveal the maturity or immaturity of our character.

(i) “Blessed are the poor in spirit”; said in other words: “blessed are the detached.” This beatitude “probes” the maturity of our relation with created goods, both exterior (material) and interior (psychic and spiritual).

Poverty of spirit implies freedom in the face of earthly goods, of having or not having (that is, what Saint Ignatius labels as “indifference”³). It also supposes a certain distrust (and, to a certain point, despair) of the solutions that worldly realities promote, that is, to recognize that these solutions cannot solve our problems completely nor, and indeed even less, can they satisfy our spiritual needs; only God can respond to the needs of our spirit. To live this Beatitude requires, lastly, the spiritual attitude of the *truly poor person*: humility (the “poor” person in the Bible is one who *recognizes* that he is in need and dependent on God, and understands that he receives

³ For Saint Ignatius of Loyola, indifference is an interior attitude of detachment and availability in God’s hands with respect to all things: to not be more inclined to one thing than to another as long as the Divine will remains unclear.

everything from Him). Its most lucid and important expression is detachment from self, which we can call a “healthy forgetfulness of self” (because there is also a sick forgetfulness⁴).

There follow innumerable goods from this attitude, goods that bring our character to a true blossoming; among them we can point out serenity in the face of material difficulties, peace of soul in moments of want, and trust placed exclusively in God. In turn, humility, which we have pointed out as the condition for being truly poor, flowers in realism, in forgetfulness of self, and gives a great power before God (“God hears the prayer of the humble,” cf. Ps 10:17).

In contrast, the lack of this attitude translates into an anxious mood or earthly greed. In the material order, it shows itself in the vices of greed and stinginess. It gives rise to a lack of peace, anguish, lack of trust, and worry. In the spiritual order, we find ourselves with egoism and live completely self-absorbed. This is why a lack of a healthy “forgetfulness of self” is at the center of all neurotic behaviors. In fact, the group Neurotics Anonymous—based on the methodology of Alcoholics Anonymous—affirms that neurosis is “caused by a person’s innate egoism, which impedes them from having the ability to love.”

If we want to probe our heart regarding this particular aspect, we should ask ourselves: Am I attached to a particular thing or person?

⁴ The one who does not “forget themselves” in a healthy way by going outside of themselves in order to seek out an ideal or the good of their neighbor, runs the risk of ending up in a bad form of “forgetfulness of self,” which is that in which a person “avoids” themselves, as through alcoholism, drug addiction, and other forms of addiction.

What are my fears (these betray attachments)? What effects have been caused, both in me and well as in others, by my attachment or trust in earthly things? Do I live thinking of myself? Do I make everything revolve around me, around my tastes, around my concerns? Am I the definitive criteria of my judgments?

When some serious lack of independence is detected, a lack of independence with respect to earthly things, it will be necessary to work not only on poverty but also—and above all else—on forgetfulness of one’s self, since the fight against the “obsession with one’s self” is at the foundation not only of every spiritual journey but also of any psychological treatment that is supposed to produce serious results. It also depends on working to acquire humility and trust in God.

(ii) “Blessed are the meek”; that is, “blessed are those who control their emotions.” The one who is meek controls their anger, their rage, their ire. They are able to forgive. This Beatitude implies the subjection of the passion of anger, that is, “to tame” one’s heart, just as is done with an impulsive and unpredictable animal. It supposes the virtue of humility (in fact, the Greek work used in this Beatitude, which we translate as *meekness*, also means humility).

From this follow numerous good things: peace of soul, which flows from the quieting of the passions; a great spiritual strength, since the one who dominates their emotions can count for their service on all the energy that their uncontrolled passions would consume; it makes the soul attractive since, as the saying goes, more flies are caught with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar,

and thus it is that this Beatitude has characterized so many saints who exercised a great attraction on others, like Saint Francis de Sales, Saint John Bosco, Saint Francis, and more.

On the other hand, the lack of this attitude represents a form of immaturity that embitters the spirit, making it unbearable for others and even for that person themselves; it enslaves our mind to a tiring passion; it isolates the person, making it hard to deal with them, which is why often they end up abandoned, or, at the very least, avoided; it feeds resentment, exaggerates the faults of the others, gives rise to violence, hate, bitterness, revenge, vengeance, division, and more.

Whoever wants to probe the region of their heart that we call the “irascible appetite” should ask themselves: Do I discover any resentments or bitterness in me? Do I mistreat others with my words, gestures, or attitudes? Am I vengeful, sharp, or violent? Do I have untimely reactions that I later repent of? Is it hard for me to forgive? Do I forgive easily and quickly?

Whoever thinks to cultivate this spiritual trait should discipline themselves in self-control and in the control of their emotions (especially those of anger, fear, and sadness), and, moreover, practice the art of learning to forgive and the basic virtue of humility.

(iii) “Blessed are those who mourn”; that is, “blessed are those who repent of their errors and sins and seek to correct themselves, making amends for their bad deeds.”

This spiritual aspect involves three essential characteristics of human maturity: first, the ability to recognize one’s own mistakes,

sins, and errors, measuring the responsibility that we have had in them. Nonetheless, said recognition should be balanced and realistic, because an awareness of sin should not be confused with a certain *pathological sense of sin* in which case a person tends not to feel forgiven in spite of having received forgiveness from God or from their neighbor. Secondly, we have the ability to repent from those acts. Finally, we have the intention to ask for forgiveness and repair the hurts and offenses (in the measure that it is possible).

From these follows notable goods, such as the ability to constantly correct oneself, and to move forward in life in spite of the mistakes committed; promptly reconciling oneself to God and to neighbor; peace of soul (as Jesus implies in the reward that is attributed to this Beatitude: “they will be consoled”).

On the contrary, immaturity in this realm results in important difficulties among which we must highlight a terrible negative mark for the soul: the lack of sorrow for sin, which can reach the point of becoming something pathological; indeed, the person who is unflinching in the face of the suffering that he himself causes in others is called a *psychopath*; at the same time, the lack of repentance or of empathy can lead to sadistic attitudes. Moreover, it encloses the soul in itself, and sets it against God; it makes the person imitate the main psychic characteristic of those who are eternally condemned, namely, the lack of repentance for the evils committed. It produces desolation and despair. From the false understanding of suffering there also follow great evils, such as a pathological guilt for one’s own sins, the inability to forgive oneself, or the tendency to

continue returning incessantly to past sins upon which God has already poured out His mercy.

The “heart test” should pass through questions such as these: What is my emotional attitude with respect to my sins? What sort of responsibility do I have regarding my acts? Do I understand that, in addition to repenting, I should, in the measure that it is possible, make reparation for the errors committed? Do I do this with serenity, or do I have a disproportionate sense of guilt? Am I aware of the pain that I cause others? Do I avoid making my neighbor suffer, or does their suffering leave me indifferent? And more . . .

In case there are some aberrations found in this realm, a person should work on their understanding of sin, on humility of heart, and in forgetfulness of self. If in this case there is some pathological understanding of guilt, the effort must be made to acquire a true understanding of sin and the ability to forgive.

(iv) “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness”; or, said with other words: “blessed are those who have aspirations to holiness, virtue, and nobility.” This Beatitude *probes* our aspirations and, consequently, the maturity that these reveal: are we indifferent, mediocre, or outstanding in our search for holiness?

It implies the desire for holiness (*righteousness* should be understood in this sense); it also implies the existence in our heart of the vital virtue of magnanimity, since it underscores the character of “greatness” and “effort” by speaking of “hunger and thirst,” and not just simple “desires” (it is an intense, tenacious, and hard-working desire). It also indicates a *total* desire, since this Beatitude is

expressed in the Greek text in the accusative (which shows that it refers to “the whole of justice,” as if it were to say: *those who hunger and thirst for total justice*) and not in the genitive (which would indicate a part of justice).⁵ It is not speaking of isolated acts that are just or holy, but rather of holiness in itself; the person who hungers and thirsts for holiness is a person who wants to be a saint, not the one who aspires to perform some good acts once in a while.

This attitude leads *efficaciously* to holiness, because the Kingdom of Heaven is only conquered by those who make the effort (cf. Mt 11:12); consequently, it is a sign of great spiritual maturity. Moreover, this desire manifests a true and effective will, and gives rise to a great spiritual happiness and a true patience in everyday difficulties because whoever aspires to something great considers as little the difficulties that get in the way of that achievement.

On the contrary, the one who lacks this attitude shows various signs of spiritual immaturity. First and foremost, their heart is directed to ideals that are far from those proposed by Jesus Christ. If our most ardent desires (that is, the ones that shake us, make us

⁵ In some languages, in order to express hunger or thirst, something called the “partitive genitive” is used when what is meant to be indicated is that “a part of that” is desired, and the accusative is used when the desire is for the whole. For instance, in Spanish when we say “quiero agua,” this rule is implied, and what lies under this simplified expression is the old genitive (which would be expressed by “me da *de* agua,” or, “me da *un poco de* agua”); however, we do not say “quiero el agua,” because that would give the impression that all of the water is desired. If a thief says “deme *de su* dinero” (genitive), what would be understood is that the thief wants some of the victim’s money. However, when the thief says “deme *su* dinero” (accusative), it is clear that he wants all of the money. In Greek, this second nuance, the non-partitive, is expressed in the accusative. This is precisely the case of this Beatitude, expressed in an accusative phrase that does not set limits.

impatient, seem to put ants in our pants, and do not let us sleep peacefully until we carry them out) *cannot be summarized in "being saints,"* then holiness is something incidental for us. Moreover, perhaps that goal has been cast out from our lives because we considered it as undesirable or impossible. However, to renounce holiness is the first step towards despair. When these desires are lacking, people *immediately*, although at the beginning it might be unconsciously, begin to accommodate themselves to this life, to settle in, to set up shop; in other words, they become worldly. The only thing that can tear us from worldly attachments is an ardent desire for something great, holy, or noble. On the other hand, a lack of ardent desires is a sign of pusillanimity and gives rise to spiritual sloth.

The heart is searched by asking: What are my main desires? What feelings are awakened in me by the thought of holiness: consolation or annoyance; enthusiasm or disinterest; laziness, weariness, boredom or, on the contrary, interest and enthusiasm? Do I work seriously to achieve holiness? Do I have noble, great, transcendent, and divine projects? Or do I perhaps live a life that just creeps along, content to fly like a chicken, without interesting aspirations?

When work needs to be done in this area, it will be necessary to meditate on holiness (its nature, necessity, means to obtain it, etc.), to place before our own eyes incarnated examples of holiness that give enthusiasm to our hearts and cultivate—against apathy—real and concrete charity.

(v) “Blessed are the merciful”; or rather: “blessed are those who take pity on the evils that befall others, and seek to provide a remedy for them, those who see their neighbors’ needs more than their own.”

This Beatitude proposes true mercy, which is not to be confused with *false* tenderness. The Hebrew word used to indicate mercy (*cheved*) indicates the ability to place oneself in another’s skin in order to see things as they see them, to feel them as they feel them, and to suffer them as they suffer them. Such was Christ’s mercy, who suffered understanding what we ourselves suffer, from “within,” as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says (cf. Heb 4:15). It does not refer to a merely sensible attitude, but rather one that is principally spiritual: it is a spiritual pain for a spiritual evil, which is sin or separation from God. For this reason it pushes to action, to remediate the evil in the measure that it is possible.

From this follow innumerable goods. First of all, it is one of the attitudes that makes the soul beautiful: a merciful heart is the one that most closely resembles God, since mercy is the divine attribute that is most perceived by men, given that everything that we know about God, we know because He has *mercifully* inclined Himself to us and opens His heart and His mysteries to us. This quality also protects against one of the most corrupting illnesses of the human soul: *spiritual sclerosis or hardness of heart*, that is, the inability to perceive the sufferings of another. Likewise, it also gives the soul a great spiritual and affective sensitivity in dealing with others: the truly merciful avoid making their neighbor suffer, because their main

concern is to alleviate suffering, not to cause it nor to increase it. Likewise, it makes a person loveable and gives them a great ability to form relationships; this is why the merciful person is always sought after and received with veneration, even by those who profess ideas that are completely different (for example, it is notable how religions that differ from Catholicism, like Hinduism or Islam, or even ideologies that persecute it, have sometimes found themselves obligated to respect those who practice mercy, as happened with Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta in India and China). Lastly, mercy makes a person to be turned towards their neighbor, and not centered on themselves, avoiding a focus only on their own problems; in this sense, it is a safeguard against the different forms of neurosis that flow from egoism.

The lack of this attitude gives rise to the spiritual and psychic illness of “hardness of heart” or “lack of empathy.” Likewise, it pushes a person to live centered on their own problems with eyes opened exclusively to their own sufferings; thus, it can give rise to numerous forms of self-pity and neurosis.

In order to probe the heart, we should ask ourselves: Am I indifferent to the sufferings of others? Am I perhaps sensible to the sufferings of others but incapable of helping them effectively? Am I more concerned with my own problems than those of others? Am I capable of carrying the sufferings of others, in spite of the fact that this implies an extra burden for me? Do I think more of myself than others? And the like . . .

If someone notices defects in this area, they will need to work on forgetfulness of self, on the essence of true charity, and on understanding the meaning of suffering.

(vi) “Blessed are the pure of heart.” Even if commentators on the Beatitudes have interpreted this expression differently, I will here consider only one of its meanings, namely, in reference to purity and chastity. In this sense, it is the same as saying: “blessed are those who love and practice the virtue of purity.” Purity or chastity is one of the essential elements of human maturity. Lust and lability in the sexual realm is an unmistakable sign of immaturity since it is a fixation upon adolescent or pre-adolescent behaviors.

This attitude implies chastity not only in exterior acts, but also in interior ones, thoughts, and desires; that is, it is a positive decision to be pure, avoiding playing with fire in all fields and degrees; it also supposes the cultivation of modesty and mortification, both exterior and interior. However, it has nothing to do with the neurotic attitude towards sexuality, which sees sin where there is none, or that is disturbed by indeliberate and involuntary movements of our nature.

It would be too much to list all the good that follow from this disposition: the deep practice of chastity (which encompasses the whole of our affectivity) is the cause of a great balance of soul, gives serenity to the heart, a connaturality with respect to spiritual realities, guarantees a homogeneous sexual maturation and, eventually, a full and harmonious living out of sexuality in the vocation of marriage.

On the contrary, the lack of this condition—which presents itself in the vice of impurity in any of its species, including impurity in intentions, desires, thoughts, in flirting with occasions of sins, in curiosity with what entails a danger of sensuality and lust, etc.—is one of the most destructive and degrading disorders of the human person, because it easily leads to disordered conduct, is transformed into a vice, and can become an addiction (in other words, it becomes progressively more serious). For that very reason, it produces callousness in the face of sin: what at the beginning was seen as bad, easily becomes tolerated, and then to being seen as “normal,” “inevitable,” “necessary,” and the like. Nor is it strange that it would push a person to anti-natural behaviors.

If we want to attempt to probe the heart in this field, in addition to considering how we personally judge disorders against chastity (because many have erroneous judgments in this material), we must also examine our dispositions to live out this virtue serenely: Am I modest? What is my attitude when faced with occasions of sin? Do I unnecessarily expose myself to them? Am I curious with respect to questions about sex? Am I lax in my passions, my lack of mortification? Do I grant myself license that prepares my heart to slide into sin? Am I worldly in my thoughts, gestures, and looks? Do I watch television unnecessarily, or alone? Do I use television, the Internet, movies, etc., as an escape from boredom or loneliness? Do I watch my looks at the newspaper, magazines, etc.? Do I engage in worldly and dangerous readings that incite my imagination? And the like . . .

In case it is necessary to educate purity of heart, the work must be done in various areas: to form an understanding of sin, to learn to control the imagination and the emotions, to purify the memory and imagination by means of meditation, serious study, etc., as well as by healthy and balanced physical work: cleaning, sports, etc. Above all, on the positive side, a person must have a noble ideal, to live the life of grace, to practice charity and to lay down their lives for others.

(vii) “Blessed are the peacemakers”; that is: “blessed are those who are capable of reconciliation and of sowing peace in divided hearts.” This Beatitude is not so much directed to those who “love peace” as to those who “make” peace. It is one of the most standout qualities of a mature heart.

This ability presupposes the previous pacification of one’s own heart. That is where it must start: only when a person has peace in their own heart are they able to sow peace in the hearts of others. The peace that we are speaking of here is that of the soul with God, and also with itself. It is an effect of grace; it is born *in a particular way* by doing God’s will at each moment. To avoid doing God’s will with respect to us *always produces disturbances, a lack of peace, and an interior struggle*. Moreover, it also demands that we learn to shut our mouths when we would like to say something, and to say something when we would like to keep our mouths shut. It also presupposes the art of correcting well and at the proper time (because to reproach at the wrong time sows rebellion and discord), to be prompt to ask forgiveness from those we offend, to always forgive those who offend us, to never speak evil of a person in front of

others, and to always have good spirit (that is, happiness, comfort, and serenity).

From this attitude there arise great advantages: it makes us “children of God,” as the reward attributed to this Beatitude says, because it makes us reproduce one of God’s main works, namely, to make peace. It also makes us to resemble Christ, who came to bring peace among men: God did us the good to “through him reconcile all things for [God], making peace by the blood of his cross, whether those on earth or those in heaven” (Col 1:20). The Messiah is called the “prince of peace” (Is 9:5).

On the contrary, those who are deprived of this attribute are usually those who sow discord, murmur, gossip, attack their neighbors, pour out tensions in communities or groups, and more.

The heart is probed by asking: When I see people who are distant or angry with one another, do I, in a certain sense, take delight? Do I seek to make peace between them? Do I deepen the wounds, “adding more fuel to the fire”? Am I one who murmurs or gossips? Am I quick to ask forgiveness, and quick to give it when someone asks me for it?

A person works on this by acquiring charity (it is very fruitful to read, meditate, and to guide oneself as a plan of action by the Hymn of Charity in 1 Cor 13), watching over our words and the spirit that animates us; meditating on forgiveness, and learning to forgive quickly.

(viii) “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus Christ”; that is: “blessed are we if we are rejected because we resemble Jesus Christ.”

This last attitude summarizes all of the other ones: it implies the acceptance of and love for the Cross without any sort of floundering; in other words, it means to love the Cross and *to choose it*. It unites us to Jesus, who became a “Victim” for our sake; indeed, this Beatitude is only correctly understood when a similitude to Christ is being sought.

However, this Beatitude should not be confused with the persecution or punishments that are suffered because of doing bad things, or the rejection of our neighbor caused by our defects or our bad spirit. There are many people who are persecuted to whom this Beatitude doesn’t apply. In fact, Christ is not referring to people who “feel that they are being persecuted,” because the one “feels” persecuted is, normally, really not in that situation. The saints who were truly persecuted did not exaggerate their condition as such. On the contrary, such a situation demands great happiness: “Rejoice and be glad,” says Jesus. If there is no happiness, that is, peace, conformity with the divine will, then this Beatitude is not being lived out, even if the persecution is real and unjust.

From here follow some goods proper to it: a true similitude with Christ crucified and spiritual fruitfulness, since all apostolic fruitfulness derives from the Cross: “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself,” says Jesus.

Thus it is clear that a lack of this attitude is the same as living the cross with bitterness and disturbance; it means not to understand Christianity. Speaking of persecutions, Saint Paul tells the Thessalonians: “You yourselves know that we are destined for this” (1 Thess 3:3). Another version translates it: “this is what we are for.” If a Christian does not assume this attitude, they will become embittered, because the cross is *inevitable*, and to be in disagreement with what is inevitable is to live a life of opposition. From here it follows that misunderstanding this truth leads to fleeing from all that crucifies us. Others react with dejection, anger, resentment, or even with violence in the face of persecution or calumny. When persecution broke out, the martyrs gave thanks to God. When the immature person hears others speak ill of him, he gets angry and infuriated. The lack of this attitude makes us like the “bad thief” who was crucified with Christ: his way of carrying the cross as a “curse” is the way that it is carried by those who reject it. A lack of understanding of this Beatitude also usually pushes a person to live life with bitterness, to separate themselves from God’s plans, to lose perseverance in their vocations or even in the faith itself. In some cases, it can even produce psychic disturbances on account of living for a prolonged period in a state of interior rebellion. It can even spark latent illnesses that might be physical (insomnia, hypertension, gastritis, ulcers) as well as psychic.

In order to probe the heart, we should ask ourselves: How do I consider the cross? In the face of unjust sufferings (persecution, calumny, unjust criticisms, disproportionate punishments, etc.) what

is my reaction? Is it happiness, conformity with God, and forgiveness for those who cause this pain? Or, on the contrary, do I kick and scream and give in to resentment? Do I feel misunderstood and disgusted, unjustly displaced? Do I complain and murmur against my persecutors (even when they are my legitimate superiors, my parents, or my spouse), etc.?

If there is a need to cultivate this attitude, we must work on developing the understanding of suffering (reading of and meditation upon Blessed Carlo Gnocchi's work, *The Pedagogy of Innocent Suffering*, can be very useful⁶); we should contemplate and meditate upon Christ crucified and the attitude of each one of the thieves, seeing with which one of the three is my vision of suffering is identified; finally, one should ask, often, for conformity with the divine will.

* * *

Here, then, we have the outline, in terms of general and basic lines, of a mature personality.

⁶ The book is available in English through IVEPress.

3.

Overcoming Individualism

You are the salt of the earth.

But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?

*It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out
and trampled underfoot.*

You are the light of the world.

A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

*Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket;
it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house.*

*Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good
deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.*

Mt 5:13-16

According to Jesus Christ, we must be salt and light. We know of some very beautiful commentaries on these two short parables. The application that I want to make here, in conformity with the goal that we have traced out regarding maturity, is very simple:

understanding that Jesus teaches—in addition to the many other possible applications that His words admit—that our maturity (and, ultimately, our happiness) is linked to the overcoming the individualism that oppresses man as one of the consequences of original sin.

(i) The human being is a being of a social nature, both in the natural order (meaning, he is inclined to live in society with men) as well as in the supernatural realm (he is inclined towards the Mystical Body of the Church). “To operate as is fitting” for the human being demands self-development so as to help the good of one’s neighbor. When something does not function according to its nature, according to its intimate, internal structure, it is useless, it becomes frustrated, and unhappiness comes over it. When man does not balance what he does for himself with his efforts for the good of his neighbor, he ends up failing in one of his essential dimensions. Maturity demands that a person go out of themselves; however, they will not go out of themselves except when they seek something that is not themselves, namely, their neighbor.

(ii) The two metaphors are very adequate, because neither salt nor light serve themselves. Salt does not salt itself, and light does not illuminate itself. One gives flavor and prevents the corruption of foods; the other breaks through the darkness and makes things become luminous so that they might be seen by others.

When they do not fulfill this role of service, they receive another role, a humiliating one, as Christ says of the salt: it is only

useful for being thrown out and stepped on by men. Indeed, salt serves so that, thrown on a frozen surface or on the snow, the snow won't freeze, the ice melts, and the passersby do not slip. I think that the application is obvious: if we are not capable of giving flavor to this insipid world and helping it to avoid corruption, the Lord will find a further task for us, useful for others, but not honorable for us: we will serve as an *anecdote* so that others might not slip as happened to us: "You handed us over . . . to become an object lesson, a byword, and a reproach," says Tobit (3:4). "Careful so that what happened to Johnny or Susie does not happen to you." All of those who are in hell "serve" so that those who are still alive might not also be condemned. That is what Dante used them for, setting them as warning signs. "And you, why were you condemned?" "Out of stupidity, because I did what I should not have done." "And you, why have you been so unhappy? Why did you fail? Why have you ruined your life?" "Perhaps because you needed more opportunities to be a saint, to be happy, to *become yourself*?" "Oh, no! Looking back, I see that I left an opportunity at each corner of my life."

(iii) Once salt has lost its flavor, something terrible happens: "it is already too late." The poet Tennyson places the following words on the lips of one who discovers too late the true price of sin:

Late, late so late! and dark the night and chill!

Late, late so late! but we can enter still.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

The same could be said of the lamp: it should illuminate those who live in the house. Men are lamps when their actions illumine their neighbors, when they “shine.” That is, they illuminate when they make clear that path and glorify God, because the first condition in order to shine is to make it clear that the light that we have is from God. When we do things so that others might think that the shine that adores us comes from ourselves and our work, we cease to enlighten, and rather darken consciences. Hence, maturity means to recognize what we have is a participation from God. On the other hand, immaturity is to believe that it is ours. Maturity cannot exist without humility.

(iv) With these two parables, Jesus reminds us of the social and communitarian aspect of His “way,” that is, the religion that He started. If we want to be balanced Christians, we must think of doing good to others. If we think only of being of use to ourselves and our wants, our family, or our country, *and nothing more*, we do not belong to Christ. Jesus was *catholic*, that is, universal: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”; “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

(v) Every limit that we might want to place on our light is a bushel basket that we set over the light. Our bushel basket might be small like our heart, or big like our house (or our family). But it is always a basket. When a flame burns within an enclosed space, little by little it consumes the oxygen, and it ends up using it all, after which it goes out. The size of the basket or the jar under which we set our light will only determine whether it goes out

sooner or later: no matter what, it will always end up suffocating itself.

This is the reason why so many Christians feel frustrated and do not know why. They feel suffocated by life, that the spiritual air they are breathing is rarefied, that they are burning less and less, and they do not know why! The reason is none other than what Jesus Christ warned about: they burn only for themselves. Jesus said that they must “give light to all in the house.” That house is the whole world.

Said with other words: bearing fruit is proper to the Christian and to every man and woman, whether that fruit is to give flavor or prevent corruption, like salt, or rather to illuminate, like a lamp.

When faith is drowned in individualism, in self-interest (even if that interest were something very important, like one’s own salvation), the faith dies. Saint John Paul II said: “Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!” While the statue of Buddha is eternally looking at his belly button, the statue of General San Martín looks out at snow-covered mountains.

4.

Unity and completeness of the person

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raca,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift

there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.' But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.' But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.' Anything more is from the evil one.

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone

strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Mt 6:17-48

This lengthy section contains many moral and dogmatic teachings. However, since we are only interested in the idea of human maturity that pulses in the background of Our Lord's words, I will limit myself to a few brush strokes.

(i) First and foremost, what stands out in this text is a great truth: Our Lord seeks the *unity of the person*. Indeed, Jesus affirms His relation to the divine law given to the Jews by presenting Himself as the one who *consummates* or *perfects* it. He has not come to "abolish it," but rather to bring it fulfillment. The fulfillment reaches to the point of extending the influence of the law to the source of a person's being and actions: their *interiority*. The Jews

who had come before and those contemporary with Christ only paid attention to the law in what was normative for man's external actions: "You have heard that it was said" (bear in mind that this does not always refer to the Old Testament, but rather also to the Rabbinical traditions, as is clear in the last paragraph—"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'"—which is not found at all in Scripture but rather in the oral teachings of the Jewish teachers); all of these norms that His listeners "have heard said" are norms that govern man's external actions: do not kill, do not commit adultery, divorce only when the law permits it, to fulfill oaths, to practice strict justice, to love one's neighbor, and hate one's enemy, etc.

Jesus Christ *overcomes* those "limits" demanded by human weakness by bringing order and maturity to the source of human actions: the heart. "You have heard that it was said, *but I say to you.*" This is not an opposition between the Old Law and the New, except in cases where the Old Law was not in reality a divine law, but rather a human one (that is, a Rabbinic interpretation, as we have said). There is no opposition because the Old Law prepared for the coming of Christ, and He is its natural fulfillment; it was a shadow that prefigured the reality. However, the prefiguring is imperfect but not false; it proclaims a truth in a way that is still confusing. Jesus is complete and total clarity. He can also demand more because He is the strength that helps to fulfill that law. For this reason we say that the Old Law was limited in light of the weakness of the human heart; this is precisely what

Jesus will say later on regarding one of the points that He overcomes in this section: “Because of the hardness of your hearts [Moses] wrote you this commandment [writing the bill of divorce and dismissing one’s wife]” (Mk 10:5), “but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8).

The demands of Christ, then, reach into man’s interior, and for this reason, for Him:

- The good man is not the one who does not kill (or steal or commit any of the acts against one’s neighbor that we could connect with this), but rather the one who kicks anger out of his heart, who forgives and asks for forgiveness, and who sets into practice the means in order to be reconciled with his enemy.

- The good man is not the one who does not commit adultery (or who does not fornicate, or touch, or speak impurely, etc., or any of the other acts that we could place under this sort of sin), but rather the one who orders his interior desires, that interior gaze that has a woman (or any neighbor) as its object, as a respectful gaze and desire, full of modesty and reverence.

- The good man is not the one who disavows his wife but rigorously fulfills the requirements indicated by the law, but rather the one who does not reject her in any way at all; the good man is one who is faithful, who forgives her when she sins, asks for forgiveness when he sins, and stays united with her until death separates them.

- The good man is not the one who does not commit perjury or leave his oaths unfulfilled, nor the one who, having made an

oath, fulfills it faithfully, but rather the one who has allowed himself to be so filled with the truth that he has no need to swear a oath in order to defend his word; he is naturally faithful to what he says, even if he does not swear an oath. His “yes” is a true and absolute “yes”; his “no” is a categorical “no.” He is not a man of ambiguous words.

- The good man is no longer the one who punishes without exceeding the right measure, but rather the one who forgives with magnanimity, the one who overcomes the debts that in justice he could demand with both forgiveness and generous condonation.
- The good man is not the one who loves strictly those who warrant it by reason of blood, friendship, benefit, or race. Rather, the good man embraces everyone in his love, without exception, even those who do not deserve it.

Earlier, I said that with this Our Lord is directing us towards the *unity of the person*. The old way for living the demands of morality (from without) implies a *break* in the person: the exterior life is something independent of the interior world. In contrast, Jesus Christ points toward an equation where the person could be expressed like this: thought = desire = action. The external action is the expression of the heart’s desires, and these are willful expression of reason’s judgments.

Even more, the main work will need to take place in the realm of the value judgments in our thoughts, because it is according to these that we must desire, love, and hate, and, consequently, act.

(ii) We could say that the value judgments that Jesus *corrects* or *elevates* in this section of the Sermon on the Mount are six (which serve as a model for all possible judgments):

- Not only is the physical life of one's neighbor valuable (You shall not kill), but rather also his good name, his dignity, and his entire person. Hence, I should not insult him, elicit his anger, or live at odds with him. Do I recognize in him the image of God (cf. Jm 3:9) or not?

- Not only is external purity of the body valuable, a purity that is tainted by inappropriate sexual contact, but also purity of soul, the reputation and the dignity of the whole person. The body is profaned by physical contact; however, honor and dignity are degraded with impure looks and impure desires. Do I recognize my neighbor as a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), and do I treat him as such?

- Not only is marriage valuable while fidelity, harmony, and love last, but rather always, in spite of infidelity and lack of love. This is because there are no longer two, but one flesh, and no one can divide what is one. Do I understand the depths of marriage as a sacrament (an image) of Christ's indissoluble love for the Church (cf. Eph 5:32)?

- Not only are words supported by an oath valuable, but rather any word whatsoever that comes from our mouths, if the one speaking has really "wedded" the truth. Every man must "belong to the truth" (Jn 18:37: "Everyone who *belongs to the truth* listens to

my voice”). Do we understand that only the truth will set us free (cf. Jn 8:32)? Do we *belong* to the truth?

- Not only is strict justice valuable, that justice which does not demand more than what it should, and does not punish more than what is merited, like an exact mathematical formula, but rather, and above all, magnanimity and generous forgiveness? Did not God love us when we were yet His enemies (cf. Rm 5:10) and He had not yet pardoned us, then, when we were an object of His wrath (cf. Eph 2:3-5)?

- Lastly, not only is the love born in our hearts for the good and those who are worthy to be loved valuable, but also the love for evil people, for our enemies, and for those who persecute us. Does not God the Father act in this way, making the sun to shine upon both the evil and the good, without taking into account that the first are ungrateful and spoiled?

(iii) By changing our value judgments regarding these realities, the inclinations of our hearts also change, since what is loved is what is valued, and what is desired is what is considered as good and fitting.

In this way, then, the rupture of personality is overcome, a rupture with thoughts and desires (interior life) going to one side, and external acts going towards the other. Both the man who acts correctly exteriorly, but not so in his heart, as well as the one who acts well interiorly, but whose interior thoughts are not translated to the exterior, are both fragmented beings, but perhaps for very different motives. The one who thinks, values, judges, and loves

poorly, but acts correctly and politely, is a hypocrite, a white-washed tomb. The one who bows like a knight before a woman, but undresses her with his desires or in his thought, is a profaner, although his hands and mouth might not have ever touched even so much as a hair of his victim. On the other extreme, the one who thinks, values, judges, and loves well, but who acts exteriorly without any tact or respect, or simply does not act, and rather freezes up, becomes paralyzed, is timid, pusillanimous, or even someone with a complex who feels unconquerable shame or fear at externally manifesting their good feelings and desires: this could be the manifestation of some inferiority complex. In either case, we have a break between what is exterior and what is within.

(iv) On the other hand, Jesus Christ does not only direct His words towards the *unity* of the person, but also to the fullness of their development. The surpassing of the law that Jesus establishes in His “New Law” does not simply go in the direction of the triumph of what is interior, but rather to obtaining the “greatest” ideal. Indeed, the purely exterior law is a minimalist law: respect for the life of another is the bare minimum we should do for him; not attempting to seduce our neighbor’s wife is the least that we should do for her; not dismissing our spouse without serious reasons is the very least we should do for our marriage; to fulfill what we have promised under oath is the bare minimum we should do with our serious commitments; limiting ourselves to only breaking one tooth of the one who only broke one of our teeth is the least we can do to not go against justice; to love those

who love us is the least we can do in the practice of love. In none of these cases is there any mention of a *maximum*. Jesus Christ points precisely at a maximum in each of these orders (which are given to us only by way of example, but are not the only aspects of our lives to which they should be applied).

The minimalism in which many Christians live is a tragedy. It is the experience of living a life of withdrawal, and it is manifested in many attitudes that reveal the desire to live with restrictions: we see this, for instance, in those who ask: “How far can boyfriends and girlfriends go before it is considered a sin?,” “What is the minimum dollar amount of alms that we should give?,” “Up until what point can someone arrive late in the Mass and still meet the precept?,” “Which days are we absolutely required to fast?,” “How many times do I need to forgive my brother?,” “How much of her body can a woman reveal without committing scandal?,” and the like. The people who think like this, think that they have more options for what they can do. However, in reality, acting in this way constricts them, because the action that gives life and fullness is not the sort that is on that side of the fence, but rather on the other. It is not “helping the poor while spending as little as possible” that makes me a better, more decent, freer, more perfect, happier person, but rather “spending on those in need all that we can give without being imprudent.” I am not going to be happier by staying 15 minutes more in bed, thinking how I can “make it to Mass” when I arrive halfway through the homily, but rather I will feel joy when I arrive 15 minutes before the Mass

starts, so that I can prepare myself in order to live it more fully, etc.

The “men of the minimum” want to breathe deeply in a shirt so small that it suffocates them. They have a very mistaken idea of man, and have learned nothing from God, who always lives to the full: He creates infinite species that we will never be able to know, He has made more stars than man can count, He has made a universe that no telescope can see completely and so great that man has neither the intellect nor imagination to fully measure it, He makes the sun shine on the good and the evil, He gives us an infinite capacity to know, and infinite capacity to love, He has given us His own Son, and this Son shed His blood to the last drop for our salvation.

Minimalism condemns to immaturity, and causes bitterness, because it means to always breathe air rarified with mediocrity; maximalism, the father of maturity, make complete and happy men and women, because it means to conquer the summit in each action, even the most trivial ones.

5.

To live facing God

[But] take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.

When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. . . .

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to others to be fasting, except to

*your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will
repay you.*

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Another determining factor to measure maturity, both on the human and the supernatural plane, is the *direction towards which a person lives*. A person can live only in one of two directions: either facing God, or facing the world. When I say “facing,” I clearly mean the interior “face”: the heart.

(i) In the Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord opposes two expressions. One is “in front of,” the other “in secret.”⁷

“Do not practice justice (that is, your good deeds) *in front of others*”; “Do not go proclaiming that you have given alms *in front of others*.” Whoever acts “in front of” others seeks to be seen and honored, as the text itself states.

On the contrary, Jesus commands that one act “in secret.” “Go to your inner room, close the door,” (because some people leave the door or window half-open in order to keep working *in front of those* who are watching and spying) “and pray to your Father.”

In the first case, we find ourselves in front of the public, made up of men: men who see, praise, make human judgments, who

⁷ The two phrases are “delante de” and “en lo secreto” in the Spanish. English translations of the Biblical text aren’t usually consistent in their rendering of the first, and hence Fuentes’ point is less obvious in English. It could be said that the two ideas are opposed by Christ, rather than the phrases themselves – Translator’s note.

give us the pay that we would have received in eternal life, but with earthly currency: an ephemeral glorification that disappears, not with the death of men, but rather after a short lapse of time. Today's applause comes from the same people who tomorrow will boo us. Certainly there were many of the same faces among those who acclaimed Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem and those who a week later called for His death.

In the second case, the one who observes us is God Himself, because God is "in secret." There are two very curious things in this. The first is the insistence of this expression: it appears five times in the Sermon on the Mount. Second, Jesus never says "God," but rather "your Father." It is the Father who *is in secret* and who *sees in secret*. What is it that the Father communicates in secret? Among other things (the most specific) is His very fatherhood: in secret God manifests Himself to us precisely as Father. It is clear that the "secret place" to which Our Lord alludes is not the solitude of a room; it is the intimacy of heart (the interiority of which we have already spoken), on one hand, and humility as a spiritual and moral attitude on the other.

(ii) This attitude also manifests the finality of our acts. For what or for whom do we act? For men or for God? It is not the quality of the acts that reveals their end, but rather the one from whom we await a response or reward. My works might be supernatural, like giving alms or praying, but if I perform them hoping to please others, or in order to convince them that I am a spiritual person or a saint, then I am still acting *facing men*. If I act hiding

my merits (not the acts themselves, which often must shine like a city set on a hill, as Christ Himself says!), and I only share them with God, then I live *facing God*. This distinguishes the hypocrite from the humble, and also distinguishes the false mystic from the real one. The false one is a man consecrated to the public. There has never been false mystic who did not make the public, in one way or another, aware of their “divine” favors. The divine favors given to true mystics must be pulled out of them by obedience. For this reason, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina did not show his stigmata to Fr. Agostino Gemelli, although he could foresee that Gemelli would react by doubting them and would claim that they were false, but the famed ex-psychiatrist (by then a conventual Franciscan) did not have authorization from Rome, and only religious obedience could obligate the Capuchin to show what there was *between the Heavenly Father and him*. It was “in secret.”

(iii) To seek the approval of others does not mean only to await for others to approve or praise us. It can take many different degrees and forms.

It can be reduced to *curiosity regarding what others think about us*; the desire to know how others have categorized us.

It might also become a search for notoriety, fame, or glory. It might be to be considered a good person.

It might also be reduced to a fairly common form: to seek to have others look upon us, so that they might see how we work, how much effort we make, or, as is more common, *how much we suffer*. For this reason Our Lord warned: “When you fast, do not

look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting.”

How many expressions reveal this eagerness to be seen, to be considered, to be praised, or to be consoled! How many gaunt, long, sad, lost, grim faces and the like, which are nothing more than “poses” that exaggerate pains that are perhaps ordinary, small, or common to most people, but with which we seek to have others see *how tried we are, how great the crosses we bear on our shoulders are, how crucified we are in this life!* Often this can give rise to hysterical and narcissistic attitudes.

The one who is really working to grow in virtue flees from the eyes of others, because to be virtuous is to be interested in God, and to be convinced that prying eyes will ruin our intimacy with Him. Saint Therese of the Child Jesus expressed it by saying, “There are flowers that, when cut from the garden of the soul, lose all their perfume.”

(iv) However, Jesus demands even more. “In secret,” is, for Him, something very strict. It does not only exclude the public outside, but also the internal: that is, *our very selves*. For this reason He clarifies with a Semitic note: “Do not let your left hand know what your right is doing.” With this, we avoid focusing on ourselves, admiring ourselves for our gifts and, in a certain sense, applauding ourselves, or consoling ourselves with a macabre feeling of self-compassion. Rather, we seek the contrary: that we be able to center ourselves principally on God. Those who look at themselves every day in the mirror (be it a physical mirror or

simply the mirror of their own conscience) live rehearsing poses. There is no doubt that it is difficult to give up seeking the approval of others; the pride that we bear as the imprint of original sin makes us seek it *almost instinctively*. However, it happens that, once a person with great effort overcomes this eagerness for vainglory, oftentimes they still have the thorn of *self-approval* anchored within them. This is a sign of immaturity. Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians: “It does not concern me in the least that I be judged by you or any human tribunal; I do not even pass judgment on myself; I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord” (1 Cor 4:3-4).

This demands, therefore, “forgetfulness of self.”

(v) This does not mean that we do not need to examine our conscience. In his rules for discernment, Saint Ignatius gives as a reaction against desolation to insist “on much examination of ourselves” (EE, 319). However, to examine our consciences in a *healthy* way is to inspect it in order to see if we have been tricked by the devil, if there are things to correct, or gifts from God that we should delve more deeply into and take more advantage of. It is not to look at ourselves to see *the good that we have done*, and even less does it mean to seek *the approval* of my own conscience, which is what those who want to *feel that they are doing good* do. The mature person is the one who confronts his or her actions with an objective rule of action (the divine commandments, the duties of their state in life, what religious obedience has imposed on them,

the rules of the place where they live, the healthy and usual customs of their culture, etc.), and then *does not regard* his or her emotional states. The immature person principally (and sometimes even exclusively) seeks the approval of their feelings. They want to feel secure, at peace; they want (as is often said) “to find themselves,” etc.; and this is the same as conforming oneself with a *subjective rule* that is changing and deceptive. In the case of the mature person, they remain alone with God, because every objectively good rule is a participation in God’s law, and hence it sets them facing God. The immature person, on the other hand, lives alone with themselves, with their endless subjectivity. Hence, this immaturity can affect the politician as well as the monk and even the hermit. This is because we can detach ourselves from the looks of others, but then we remain still bound by our own look, which prevents us from being concerned only with God. Yet, nevertheless, it is only at the point of “detachment” that God communicates His heart to us.

6.

Maturity and Prayer

In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you are to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one.

...

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.

Mt 6:7-13; 7:7-11

The mature person is a person of prayer: prayer reveals a person's maturity or makes them mature; it should be understood that we are speaking of "serious" prayer.

(i) Our prayer shows the level of maturity of our relationship with God, because our way of praying reveals how we understand who God is, and how our religiousness is. By analyzing our prayer, perhaps we will find out that we are very immature. For example: if exclusively sentimental and exterior prayers predominate in our forms of religiosity; if we reduce prayer to formulas; if our prayer seems rather like a contract "*do ut des*" (I give—my prayer—so that you might give me what I ask); if we seek rather consolations or magical solutions without counting on our own personal efforts; and, above all, if what we say in our prayer is incompatible with the style of our life and of our *commitment* to God.

Our prayer can also reveal a distorted image, or even the absence, of God. For instance: if it is difficult for us to speak with God as with a tender and most personal Father (as is revealed in the expression Abba, "Dad" – "Daddy," used by Jesus); if we see Him rather as severe and avenging (as often occurs in scrupulous people), or if it simply is hard for us to understand how He is present in our hearts. For many Christians, including many religious, prayer is something empty, or it is a moment where they reflect (meditate) upon God or upon man, but it is not the act in which *God is spoken to and God is listened to*.

(ii) From the text of the Our Father and from what Saint Matthew says in the passage from chapter 7, verses 7-11, we can grasp six characteristics that are proper to the prayer of a mature person (clearly, Jesus is describing His own experience of prayer):

(a) It is trusting, that is, certain. The way we pray reflects our trust. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” The Lord assures, promises, and guarantees. Do we trust blindly in the value of our prayer? “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Mt 17:20). Trust is a sign of maturity. Among other things, immaturity is doubtful and distrusting.

(b) It is decided. “Ask, seek, knock.” It is an activity that the soul undertakes with decision and firmness. It demands overcoming spiritual laziness, called *acedia*, which becomes afraid in the face of every spiritual activity that is demanding and laborious. The one who wants to pray but without making an effort does not pray: he naps.

(c) It is constant. The verbs used by Jesus do not know limits. He does not say “once in a while,” or “every so often.” He speaks of them as if they were incessant activities. Barclay translates this verse in the following way: “Keep on asking, and it will be given you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you.” He bases this translation on the following, saying: “In Greek there are two kinds of imperative; there is the

aorist imperative which issues one definite command. ‘Shut the door behind you,’ would be an *aorist* imperative. There is the *present* imperative which issues a command that a man should always do something or should go on doing something. ‘Always shut doors behind you,’ would be a *present* imperative. The imperatives here are present imperatives; therefore Jesus is saying, ‘Go on asking; go on seeking; go on knocking.’” The immature person becomes discouraged when they see that their requests do not receive an immediate reply, when they ask but God delays His response. How long did God make Abraham pray in order to receive the son that God Himself had promised? Twenty-five years!

Moreover, God demands that we always pray because in the harmonious development of man’s life, the discovery that human life is a permanent dialogue with our Creator and Father plays a fundamental role. Jesus prayed without ceasing. Earlier we had spoken about “living facing God.” In reaching maturity, man discovers that he is an interlocutor with God (“*partner* of the Absolute,” said John Paul II), or, rather, God is his only absolute interlocutor. The human heart is always saying things that other men cannot understand or respond to properly; only God can. “My heart is restless,” wrote Saint Augustine. It is a restlessness that can find no peace apart from God. A person is immature when they are “mute” in their deepest dimension, that aspect in which they ask themselves about the most fundamental things of their existence, questions to which only God can respond.

(d) However, it is not wordy: “In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words” (6:7). The pagans had the habit of prayer by repetition of certain formulas, to the point of fatigue, which ended up producing a sort of self-hypnosis. In their challenge with Elijah, the prophets of Baal spent half a day jumping and shouting: “Baal, answer us,” until falling into a sort of diabolic delirium (cf. 1 Kgs 18:26-29). The same is said of the crowd of Ephesians, who for two hours shouted: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:34). Something similar takes place in some modern religious sects and in certain liturgical misrepresentations. Likewise, many Jews prayed in this way. Jesus teaches that this is opposite of true prayer. The immature person could be a charlatan, talkative, loquacious, verbose, but empty of inner words, of concepts pregnant with existential meaning and responses, because these can only be found in dialogue with God. To pray, few words, even one, are enough: it is the word of the heart that looks to God in an act of adoration.

(e) It is filial. The foundation of trust is the conviction that one is dealing with our Father. We cannot doubt this precisely *because* prayer consists in asking for necessary things from our Father. Can God, since He is a Father, do anything but listen to us?

(f) It is ordered, as can be seen in the structure of the Our Father: what is most important is first, then what is second, and the order cannot be changed. This idea is already presented to us in the Our Father.

(iii) Indeed, the Our Father teaches us what should be the mature person's desires and the order of their hopes. There is nothing superfluous in the balanced person. What are his concerns?

(a) First and foremost, God. First the things of God; only afterwards the things of man. The immature person sets his worries and desires before divine things. What is the mature person concerned with? (1) With God's glory; (2) with the primacy of God above all things (His kingdom); (3) with God's will (that is, the divine plan, especially regarding the person themselves). Here we have the first three petitions that Jesus teaches.

(b) Only afterwards does what is necessary for man come, synthesized in one phrase ("daily bread") which summarizes what is necessary for the body and for the soul. The mature person is neither anxious nor mistrustful; this is why there is no specification as to what is necessary each day. The mature person asks for "bread," that is, "what You know that I will need today." "You know." It is an act of trust. Once again, the foundation of that trust is the divine fatherhood. That is why Our Lord says: "Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him."

(c) Then he asks for harmony—reconciliation—with God ("forgive us our trespasses"); and the mature person knows that should be asked for in the same way that *they themselves forgive others*.

Only the immature could hope that God would forgive them at the same time they are cruel or hard with others.

(d) Finally, they ask to be freed from evil, meaning both protection so as not to fall into temptations, as well as not ending up being enslaved to the Devil (the Evil one), as happens with sin. The mature know that temptation is inevitable in this life, that it is a part of their daily struggle; hence they do not ask to be spared from temptation but rather *not to fall into them*.

(iv) The immature easily betray themselves in the priority they give to their desires or in the things that are “missing” from their petitions. For the immature, the center of their concerns tends to be the “bread,” what is needed daily; or, they ask for forgiveness, but without having themselves the disposition to give an example by forgiving others from their heart (“from their heart” means without demanding anything in return, that is, just like how we hope God forgives us); or they want to be freed from temptation, meaning, to be exempted from testing (and not just from falling), showing that they are unaware of the human reality and the divine economy. Above all, immaturity is shown in that, for these people, God does not occupy the center of their thoughts and hearts; for them, God is a name written within a beautiful heart carved onto the tree trunk, but He is not the sap that gives life.

7.

Our traveling judges

If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions. . . .

Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.

Mt 6:14-15; 7:12

In the paragraph Jesus lays out the so-called “Golden Rule” (7:12).

(i) However, this rule is known in two different versions. A version that was most widespread among the ancients has a negative form, as can be read, for instance, in the book of Tobit: “Do to no one what you yourself hate” (4:15). This formulation is a part of human patrimony, because it comes from common sense. For instance, it is one of the basic principles of Confucius. Tsze-

Kung asked him: “Is there one word with which to act in accordance throughout a lifetime?” Confucius said, “Is not *reciprocity* such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” The Greeks and the Romans maintained the same principle. Socrates related that the king Nicocles advised his officials: “Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you.” Epictetus condemned slavery on the following principle: “What you do not wish to suffer, do not try to inflict upon others.” As one of their basic maxims the Stoics had the saying: “What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others.” It is said that the emperor Severus Alexander had that phrase carved into the walls of his palace so that he would never forget it as a rule for life.

However, this negative form of the Golden Rule does not imply anything extraordinary; it is something without which people cannot live together. Indeed, it only implies not doing certain things; it demands that we abstain from certain actions. It is never too difficult to not do certain things. That we should not harm other people is not an especially religious principle; it is, rather, a civil principle. It is a sort of principle that could very well be fulfilled by a person who has no faith whatsoever, or even no interest in religion at all. A person could always refrain from harming others, and yet, at the same time, be completely useless for his neighbors, meaning, that *he does not do anything at all for them*. A person could fulfill the negative form of the Golden Rule simply by inaction, by not doing anything that could break it.

(ii) However, Jesus gives the principle in the positive form: “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” Laid out this way, the rule is more demanding. Christ’s commandment now comes to oblige us to respect others and, what is even more rigorous, *having our very selves as the measure*. It is very easy to know what we want for ourselves, or what we hope for from others: attention, gentleness, help, affection, respect, charity, tolerance, companionship, friendship, loyalty, trust, and many more things. Jesus tells us: do precisely that for others. Even further: begin by doing those things yourself for them, even if they do not respond in kind. Here we return to find what we had observed earlier: the doctrine of Jesus Christ is a morality of the *maximum*.

(iii) This rule, which is so short and simple to lay out, is, nonetheless, very dangerous. In fact, it has a tremendous power of indictment. How frightful to think that we will be judged *by* our own actions! By saying “by” our actions, I am not using the expression in the objective sense (meaning, “about our actions,” which is obvious), but rather in an instrumental sense: our actions will be our judges, our measure. It is as if God the Just Judge were to tell the angels: “Look at their actions and take them as a model: do with him as he has done with others.” Our actions (what we do to others) are our “traveling judges” that we carry with us no matter where we go.

(iv) There is yet another meaning in Our Lord’s expression that often gets passed over and ignored. When we say, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” we should under-

stand that phrase as “Do unto others that which you want them to do to you, *since it is precisely that which you are receiving from them by doing it to them.*” This requires some explanation. First and foremost, I was not precise enough when earlier I said that we should do good to others, *even though they do not respond in the same manner.* In a certain sense, our neighbor cannot avoid responding in like manner because that reward *is given in the very moment that I perform the action.* This truth cannot be doubted when we apply it to the deplorable acts that we could come to commit: when I put down my neighbor, I put down myself; when I torture my neighbor, I do harm to myself. However, this law is even truer for good actions. John Paul II calls attention to it by recalling, speaking of mercy, that “the moment that we perform [an act of mercy] we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us.”⁸ To understand it as something “unilateral,” as a good that I am doing to others, is a serious mistake. In reality, with my merciful actions, not only do I do good to my neighbor, but also my neighbor does good to me: the extraordinary good of giving me the opportunity to do good. Each time that I do good, *I grow, I mature, I perfect myself in the same line of the good that I do.* My neighbor allows me (willingly or unwillingly) to do him good (forgiving him, giving him counsel, listening to him, giving him alms, etc.); he is my greatest benefactor. If I reply to annoyance with patience, I receive a bath of patience; if I teach, then I grow in knowledge; if I give faith, then I grow in faith; if I forgive, then I

⁸ John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 14.

myself find forgiveness. If this neighbor who receives the good of my actions pays me back with indifference or treats me poorly, this does not affect my repayment, since it has already been charged. In any case, he takes from me a certain extra, small in comparison with the extraordinary prize of having allowed me to grow in my charity. This is what Saint Bernard wanted to say when he wrote the oft-repeated sentence: “Love is its own reward.”

(v) Among the demands placed by this rule, one of the toughest is that of forgiveness. We certainly want others, beginning with God Himself, to understand us, to forgive us, to have patience with us, to constantly give us another chance, etc. However, very rarely do we do this ourselves with those who surround us. Jesus teaches us this in the parable of the unforgiving servant whose master forgives him a great deal, and yet later he refuses to pardon a small thing from a friend. The disconnect is clear: when he finds out, the master takes back his forgiveness and punishes the servant.

We could say that nothing shows forth the balance and maturity of a person as their disposition or willingness to forgive. Or, perhaps we could express in the opposite manner: nothing indicates the immaturity of a person as much as anger and resentment. Jesus Christ has been so aware of this that He seems to challenge us like children when He insists on this point by adding a clarification to His teaching on the Our Father. He speaks to us as though we were crafty, or like we were playing stupid on this

point. Indeed, verses 14-15 from chapter 6 of Matthew take up again and expand the petition of the Our Father in Mt 6:12: “forgive us as we forgive.”

This is clear: this is the point of the prayer taught by Jesus that hurts us the most because it is the *only* point in which Our Lord demands that we *commit ourselves* to something. All the other points are petitions: give us our daily bread, forgive us, deliver us from evil, lead us not into temptation. This is the only point that makes us promise to forgive. And how much it costs us!

This is why we disguise our anger in many different ways in order to keep our desire for revenge. We clothe it with justice (“I treat him this way because he deserves it”), or with fraternal correction (“I did it for his good”), of powerlessness (“It is impossible to deal with these people”; “Our friendship is over”), of authority (thus we punish those under us, but in way that is inopportune or exaggerated), of misunderstanding (“I do not do what they tell me because they do not understand my situation”; and with this reason, we disobey peacefully), of just complaining, etc.

However, resentment feeds envy, hate, violence, persecution, injustice, hardness of heart, silence, isolation, sadness, etc., and often these attitudes reveal that resentment, even though one might make the effort to deny that it really is resentment.

(vi) Mercy towards and forgiveness of enemies have a huge ability to make people mature. In other words, not only do they *reveal* the level of maturity of a person, they also *produce* that ma-

turity in them. In the measure that a person forgives, they mature and grow, and become more perfect spiritually and psychically.

8.

In the face of earth and eternity

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. . . .

No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and mammon.

Mt 6:19-21, 24

The relation of men with riches is a theme that is reiterated in the Sermon on the Mount. It appears in the Beatitudes and returns in the context of Divine providence. However, it suggests many more things than the problem of money and material goods, and also reveals the image of the mature person that Jesus has in mind.

(i) Negative part: “Do not store up on earth.” Jesus has a great deal of compassion on us. Indeed, He wants to save us from useless bitterness. Everything that is stored up on earth ends up making us bitter, because it vanishes either by itself (moth and rust) or by the cunning of others (thieves). How bitter sound Solzhenitsyn’s reflections as he describes in his *Gulag Archipelago* the dramatic journey in train that the political prisoners took to the frozen camps in Siberia, suffering during the trip the divestment not only of their dignity but also of the little things of value that their families had given them to sustain them in those terrible times of solitude, the things that they were wearing the moment that they were arrested, or what they had managed to hold on to in order to eat during the long trail to seclusion:

“You were too slow about it; you didn’t eat up your fat bacon; you didn’t share your sugar and tobacco with your friends. And so now the thieves⁹ empty your bundle in order to correct your moral error. Having given you their pitiful worn-out boots in exchange for your fashionable ones, their soiled coveralls in return for your sweater, they won’t keep these things for long: your boots were merely something to lose and win back five times at cards, and they’ll hawk your sweater the very next day for a liter of vodka and a round of salami. They, too, will have nothing left of them in one day’s time—just like you. This is the principle of the second law of thermodynamics: all differences tend to level out, to disap-

⁹ This refers to the thugs who were imprisoned for non-political crimes and whom the Communists (since they were “socially related”) protected, permitting them to harass and steal from the prisoners arrested for political reasons.

pear. . . . Own nothing! Possess nothing! Buddha and Christ taught us this, and the Stoics and the Cynics. Greedy though we are, why can't we seem to grasp that simple teaching? Can't we understand that with property we destroy our soul? So let the herring keep warm in your pocket until you get to the transit prison rather than beg for something to drink here. And did they give us a two-day supply of bread and sugar? In that case, eat it in one sitting. Then no one will steal it from you, and you won't have to worry about it. And you'll be free as a bird in heaven! Own only what you can always carry with you: know languages, know countries, know people. Let your memory be your travel bag. Use your memory! Use your memory! It is those bitter seeds alone which might sprout and grow someday." Thus writes a man who has felt the elusiveness of earthly things!

(ii) Positive part: However, the words of Jesus do not mean simply not to store up, but rather *not to do so here*. This is why Jesus adds: "Store up treasures in heaven." This does not mean that we should send our goods up to heaven like a person transfers their money to a foreign bank. In reality, it is not so much a question of the place we store up our goods, but rather of the sorts of goods that we intend to obtain: to store up *on earth* means "to store up earth," earthly things; to store up *in heaven*, means to "store up spiritual and supernatural things." No one can steal supernatural goods; they do not wear out, nor are they destroyed. To store up these goods means to do good in conditions that are valuable for eternity, meaning, being in a state of grace.

(iii) We can thus see how the Lord's brief phrase means to tell us: "Live facing eternity." It helps us to understand that beautiful expression that Jesus adds: "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be," which could also be expressed as a warning: set your hearts on heaven. Saint Paul would later write: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above . . . not of what is on earth" (Col 3:1-2).

(iv) As earlier we described the mature person as someone who lives "facing God," in like manner we here add this aspect of "facing eternity." This is because these two dimensions are not necessarily equivalent. Someone might accept God's existence, but deny their own eternal survival and existence (denying the immortality of their soul). Here we are told: think that you must *live eternally*, and bear in mind that there is a two-fold eternity: of happiness or of mourning. The mature have pondered the weight of this life and know that they will not live forever in this world—which is why they do not settle nor store up treasure as if to live here permanently—but rather that they must pass fleetingly through time in order to be introduced into eternity. From here follows this "looking towards what is eternal which, because it is permanent, is also the ultimate truth."

Therefore, it is a sign of great immaturity not to judge our actions according to their eternity value. *Quid est hoc ad aeternitatem?* This action, how much is it worth—*what does it mean*—for eternity? A fear of facing this truth, a fear of thinking on death, on di-

vine judgment, or eternal destinies, are also signs of immaturity. This is why the poet says:

It is better to sleep
upon these harsh and ugly thoughts [of death and judgment]
than to lay your head
on a pillow of wood or stone¹⁰

(v) How is treasure stored up? Not so much by doing acts (which is undoubtedly necessary) as much as putting one's heart into it. Perhaps my treasure might not be a mountain of money; perhaps my treasure is made up of one single little coin that I have set in my heart. Where your treasure is, there is your heart, because where your heart is, that is your treasure. You store up treasure, that is, you create a treasure, by directing your heart towards something or someone. What do you think of most insistently? What disturbs your sleep? What distracts you from your duties? What fills you with spirit in moments of fatigue? What upsets you? The answers to these questions will trace the silhouette of your treasure.

Hence, do you want to store up treasure in heaven? Then think on heaven; ask for it; research what heaven will be like. Pray.

(vi) Jesus addresses a possible subterfuge: do not think that you can play both sides, assuring heaven for yourself while arrang-

¹⁰ José María Pemán, *A Saint in a Hurry: El Divino Impaciente; the Story of Saint Francis Xavier* (Sands, 1935), 58.

ing it so that you do not neglect your earthly home. No one can serve two masters. The mature person is the person of only one lord. However, they serve not just any lord, but rather the only one who can pay them eternally well. There are two forms of immaturity: that of the one who serves a bad lord (who is, more than immature, crazy), and that of the one who believes they can serve both masters, that is, fool the both of them, taking a piece from each of them. The promised land is only conquered by the strength to leave the ship that is broken on the rocks and swimming to the shore, naked, without luggage or impediments.

9.

A trustful leap

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

(i) We can find a great difference between a mature person and an immature one in the attitude they have towards life: the immature one is a upset person, while the mature person maintains a background of serenity of the supernatural order, even when they are crushed by real and weighty problems. I add “of the supernatural order” so we do not fool ourselves with a hidden form of immaturity: a way of running from the anguish when it reaches “peak levels” by completely lowering our arms and falling into a depressive fatalism similar to that of the ancient Stoics: “It is impossible to solve our problems; let us die crushed by them.” To pronounce this gloomy maxim internally may give a certain external serenity to our mood, but it is nothing more than the serenity we usually see in the faces of the deceased.

(ii) In this text, Jesus Christ is therefore referring to an “anxious worry,” which we could also call grief or anguish. In Greek, the word used is *merimna*, which means *worry, anxiety*. In a letter written on a papyrus, to which Barclay’s commentary alludes, a woman writes to her absent husband: “I cannot sleep at night or by day, because of the *worry* (*merimna*) I have about your welfare.” Anacreon, the poet, writes: “When I drink wine, my worries (*merimna*) go to sleep.” “The Jews themselves were very familiar with this attitude to life. It was the teaching of the great Rabbis that a man ought to meet life with a combination of prudence and serenity. They said, ‘He who has a loaf in his basket, and who says, ‘What will I eat tomorrow?’ is a man of little faith.’”

(iii) Here we come across a singular paradox. The virtue that Jesus proposes for the mature person is the attitude that the little child has and tends to lose as he or she grows: a total, and almost blind, trust in their parents. It would seem that maturity is achieved by a *psychic regression* to attitudes of early infancy. In reality, however, it only appears this way. The small child lives in the here and now completely trusting in his parents' protection and care; the child lives this way even when the parents do not care for him as they should. The child has an incredible idea of his parents, and does not live in the future, but rather in the immediate present; his future his parents will think of. As the child becomes an adolescent, a young adult, and an adult, he understands that his parents have many limitations and he comes to distrust them. This process can be aggravated when, as a child, they experience the abandonment of one parent or even both, or when they suffer great evils, like some abuse, *without their parents realizing it*, because, in that case, that *feeling of being protected by the provident eye of adults* instantly falls apart. The feeling of abandonment is the great evil of our times, even though it is nothing new.

(iv) Jesus is not proposing some regression to infancy, but rather a "decanting": the attitude is the same, but with reference to God the Father, and no longer founded on the puerile ignorance of the limits of our parents but rather on faith in the limitless love and power of our heavenly Father. This attitude is not a turning back but rather a *conquest* of our spirit. Nonetheless, what is kept is

that attitude in its foundation (blind trust), and for this reason it has been called “spiritual childhood.”

(v) In these ten verses, Jesus gives four arguments in favor of this trust and against useless worry:

- “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” The answer is obvious, and so is the meaning that the Lord wants to give it. We receive both life and our bodies from God; hence, we should not distrust that we will also receive from Him that which is much simpler than life and than the body.

- He gives us the example of the birds that do not live with worry, that do not attempt to store up resources for an invisible and unpredictable future, and, yet, they are kept alive. Jesus does not mean to say that the birds do not work; a sparrow wins its daily food with more work than many men. Rather, the lesson is directed to teaching that the birds do not worry. There is no stress to be found in birds regarding a future that they can neither see nor predict, trying to find their security in the things that they store up and accumulate for the future.

- He also reminds us of a great truth: what results can worry bring us? For as much as it upsets me, can I add something substantial to my life? Jesus literally says: for as much as someone worries and tries, can they add a cubit to their height? A cubit is 45 centimeters so, in other words, the Lord is speaking of adding height or life to something that is worthwhile. The answer He is looking for is, ‘no.’ Worry spends us, but it does not help us. In the end, the only thing it gives us is “nonsense.”

- The same lesson is taught through the example of the flowers. The lilies of the field to which the Lord alludes were “the scarlet poppies and anemones. They bloomed one day on the hillsides of Palestine; and yet in their brief life they were clothed with a beauty which surpassed the beauty of the robes of kings. When they died they were used for nothing better than for burning. . . . If God gives such beauty to a short-lived flower, how much more will he care for man? Surely the generosity which is so lavish to the flower of a day will not be forgetful of man, the crown of creation.”¹¹

(vi) Nonetheless, the real problem of anxious worry is the wrong idea of God upon which it is based. Jesus says this with total clarity: “all these things the pagans seek.” The pagans had a very mistaken, almost “liberal” (in the modern and philosophical meaning of the word) idea of God: a God who—in the best of cases—made things, but then disregards them; He is a God who is often capricious and unpredictable. Is this our *subconscious* idea of God? Could it not be, perhaps, that our worry sinks its feet in the mud of the misunderstanding of who God is? In order to gain trust, should I work properly on trust, or should I perhaps begin by learning something more about the God that Jesus Christ has revealed? This is a very important point for many people for whom their shoes hurt the heel of their faith in God. Do I know who God is? Do I understand what “God” means?

¹¹ William Barclay’s commentary on this passage.

(vii) It is to be assumed that when one correctly understands who God is, trust is naturally born. The child does not trust just any person; on the contrary, normal children tend to fear strange people, and not only them, but even relatives who do not visit often. Why does a child trust in his father, and why does he run to him when he needs something, or fears something, or is suffering something? It is not because he is older, but rather because that older man is his father; he is bound to him by the link of life that is called *fatherhood*. In the same way, we do not *spontaneously* trust in God because He is infinitely great and powerful (many pagans thought of God as such and feared Him precisely for that reason), but rather because He is *Father*. This is why Jesus says: “*Your heavenly Father* knows that you need them all.”

(viii) Jesus points out two applications of this teaching. The first is that trust in God the Father is worked on (obtained) and manifested by starting to seek and work for the Kingdom of God and holiness (this means “justice,” that is, a true kingdom of God in each heart, beginning with our own, and in society).

Hence it is that trust is obtained: how does one learn to walk? By walking! How does one learn to swim? By swimming! In other words, in the exercise of what we want to learn, we learn. In the experimental sciences, we cannot wait to learn first from a book, and then go out to work as experts with what we learned from the papers. Without exercise, without practice, there is no real learning. In the same way, trust—the experimental science *par excellence*—is obtained *by trusting*. The most logical way to do so is by

dedicating oneself to the things of God, *leaving God to take charge of our affairs*. On the other hand, mistrust consists in *concerning ourselves with all of our things because, if we do not, no one, not even God, will be concerned about them*. Thus Jesus taught His Apostles; this is why they asked Him: “Master, we have left everything to follow you.” “Everything” means their poor jobs, houses, families, and their future. Jesus praises them, saying, “[You will] receive a hundred times more now in this present age . . . and eternal life in the age to come.” How many want to obtain this trust, without taking a risk, meaning, without trusting! “Father, what can I read in order to work on trust?” In order to “know” what trust is, many things could be read, but in order to obtain trust nothing can be read; the thing that must be done is to *throw yourself out there, to take a risk*.

It is in this way that trust is shown: how must trust do I have? I can measure it by the acts that I do and that *only a person who trusts in God would be inspired to do*. To what point do I surrender myself to the things of God, leaving God to be concerned about my things? That, and nothing else, is the measure of my trust!

(ix) The second application is very similar to the preceding one. Not only to be dedicated to the things of God, but also to think of “today,” leaving not only our things (family, goods, work, etc.) in God the Father’s hands, but rather our “future.” “The Jews had a saying: ‘Do not worry over tomorrow’s evils, for you know not what today will bring forth. Perhaps tomorrow you will not be alive, and you will have worried for a world which will not

be yours.' If each day is lived as it comes, if each task is done as it appears, then the sum of all the days is bound to be good. It is Jesus' advice that we should handle the demands of each day as it comes, without worrying about the unknown future and the things which may never happen."¹² This is a great act of trust in God.

¹² William Barclay's commentary on this passage.

10.

Judgments that poison and judgments that purify

The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness.

And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be. . . .

Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.

Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove that splinter from your eye,' while the wooden beam is in your eye?

You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye.

Mt 6:22-23; 7:1-5

In this chapter, I put together two paragraphs from the Sermon on the Mount that make reference to the way we judge our neighbor.

(i) The first passage compares the human eye with a lamp, but not in the sense of an artificial lamp but rather with a “skylight”: it is a window by means of which the light enters. Indeed, in ancient times (this text is two thousand years old!), the main sources of illumination were skylights by means of which natural light entered. As is obvious, the quality of the light would depend on the cleanliness of the glass or whatever was used to make the window: scratched, dirty, or dark-colored glass would leave the house in gloom; a transparent and clear one would illuminate all the corners.

It is decidedly clear that Jesus is not speaking here of the material images that enter by means of the eye, but rather the judgments that we make of them, and this because our eyes are not inert but rather living. It is on account of the spiritual disposition of the eye that our window can be called a “good or bad lamp.”

(ii) The text speaks of a healthy or good eye and of an evil one. The words good and bad are used here with a meaning fairly common in New Testament Greek. “The word for *good* is ‘haplous,’ and its corresponding noun is ‘haplotes.’ Regularly in the Greek of the Bible these words mean generous and generosity. James speaks of God who gives generously, and the adverb he uses is ‘haplos.’ Similarly in Rm 12:8, Paul urges his friends to give in liberality (haplos). Paul reminds the Corinthian Church of the

liberality (haplotēs) of the Churches in Macedonia, and talks about their own generosity to all men (2 Cor 9:11).”

“The word which is translated evil is ‘poneros.’ Certainly that is the normal meaning of the word; but both in the New Testament and in the Septuagint ‘poneros’ regularly means stingy or grudging.” This is the meaning that it has in the book of Deuteronomy, when, in establishing that every seven years all debts must be forgiven, it guards against letting “your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing,” because the year of forgiveness is approaching (Dt 15:9): “kai ponéreusestai ho ofthalmós sou.” The idea is to look with a bad or stingy eye, giving little, because the lender knows that in a short while he will no longer have any right to reclaim it.

(iii) From here, then, it follows that Jesus is speaking of the disposition of heart towards our neighbors that is manifested in the judgments that we make of them. He tells us that our judgments, our “look,” towards our neighbor, will illuminate or darken our interior. In other words, they will poison the soul or purify it.

(iv) What does that stingy or greedy look towards our neighbor consist of? It is not a look that has something to do with money. A judgment that “lacks generosity” means a judgment that devalues our neighbor, one that lowers or sinks him. This refers to various vices of judgment. The first deformation of our look comes from the prejudices that we form of our neighbor. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?,” says no one less than the

honored Nathaniel. If he, whom Jesus considered a “righteous man,” had his prejudices, what should we expect of ourselves? To have a prejudice is to judge things before the right time, or without having sufficient knowledge of them. Prejudices are “early judgments.” Prejudices are always opposed to justice, because it does not honor it, unjustly judging without having all the required elements for a judgment. It is also opposed to prudence, because all prejudice implies hastiness in judgment (and hence sins by precipitation) or a lack of sufficient elements in order to give a prudent judgment (and hence it sins through lack of circumspection). It also sins against the truth and objectivity, because the judgment based on a prejudice will always be false or partial. Regrettably, we are filled with prejudices against our neighbor, against God, and against ourselves. When we do not trust God, we act by prejudices; when we think that we are unable to do what we in reality have never attempted to do with all our strength, we are prejudiced against ourselves; when we think that holiness is something too far away from us, we are guiding ourselves by prejudices; when we think that this or that person cannot change or that they will never convert, we are being driven by prejudices, and we could make an endless list. To reach maturity, we must examine ourselves constantly about the foundations of our judgments, our objectivity, the proofs upon which we base our thoughts and judgments; in other words, we must unmask our prejudices and walk in truth and objectivity.

(v) The second ill look should to attributed to jealousy and envy. Often we see things negatively because we want to see things negatively. It hurts us to see the good that shines in certain people; in general, this happens in those people who are similar to us or share our same level of living, profession, work, etc. That is, those persons whose tree canopy casts “shade” on us. Envy is the principle of anti-forestation which can be expressed as a friend put it: “Everything that casts a shadow on us must be cut down.” The predisposition to find defects in our neighbors has the power to always find them; it also have the power to produce hallucinations and, hence, it sees defects even when they do not exist. It also has the power to produce stubbornness, and so we continue seeing the defects of our neighbor even when facts have proven us wrong. Lastly, it has the power to make us into liars, and hence it makes us persist in being convinced of our neighbor’s defects even when the falsity of them is clear. Lies, in turn, are easily transformed into calumny. We have the greatest proof of all of these steps in the trial of Jesus Christ.

(vi) The third astigmatic vision comes from presumption. To presume is to have an elevated opinion of ourselves, or, better said, an understanding of ourselves that barely resembles reality (a little more modest). Hence, it primarily affects that the vision that one has of themselves. Presumption is born from a disordered love of self, and it gives rise to blindness regarding self: what is not seen, in this case, is one’s own defects. As a consequence, it affects our vision of our neighbor, producing a loss of vision: the

one infatuated with themselves does not look down at their neighbor simply *because they do not even give them a look*. Such persons only have eyes for themselves. However, even regarding self, that vision is one-eyed and blurry: they do not see the part of them that has defects, while the virtues they think they see in themselves are usually out of focus and not what they seem.

(vii) On the contrary, a generous look consists of a benevolent vision, full of charity. Thus, as Saint Peter says, “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pt 4:8). The other Apostle says, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7). This does not mean that love is stupid but rather that it is prepared to accept any excuse that has a foundation and it always hopes that a good explanation releases our doubts about our neighbors’ actions.

(viii) From here follows the admonition that is contained in the second text: do not judge your neighbor. However, this must be rightly understood, because there is no doubt that someone will think that Jesus simply commands that we should never judge. That is not the case, nor do other expressions have that meaning, expressions like that of Saint Paul when he says: “Why then do you judge your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother?” (Rm 14:10), or “Who are you to pass judgment on someone else’s servant?” (Rm 14:4). Moreover, he says: “Do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes” (1 Cor 4:5). The same person who says this also says elsewhere: “Reprimand publicly those who do sin” (1 Tm 5:20).

Likewise, Christ tells Peter: “If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you. If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church” (Mt 18:15-17). This is why, as Saint John Chrysostom explains: “[Christ’s] injunction therefore in these words is as follows, that he who is chargeable with countless evil deeds, should not be a bitter censor of other men’s offenses, and especially when these are trifling. He is not overthrowing reproof nor correction, but forbidding men to neglect their own faults, and exult over those of other men. For indeed this was a cause of men’s going unto great vice, bringing in a two-fold wickedness. For he, whose practice it had been to slight his own faults, great as they were, and to search bitterly into those of others, being slight and of no account, was spoiling himself two ways: first, by thinking lightly of his own faults; next, by incurring enmities and feuds with all men, and training himself every day to extreme fierceness, and want of feeling for others.”¹³

Jesus’s words do not mean that we should not help our neighbors to correct their errors, but rather that first we ought to correct our own in order to really be able to help others. If we have been blindfolded or eyes blinded because they are blocked by a beam, as Our Lord says with deliberate exaggeration, how will we be able to attempt to see the defective lint that is hidden in our neighbor’s eye?

¹³ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, Hom. XXIII.

(ix) Maturity thus impels the person who sees defects in their neighbor to first consider themselves and see if they have not also fallen into the defects that his eyes see in others and, having seen in himself those defects, he should consider whether, in comparison with others, his are like a beam compared with splinters. Then, realizing that he himself needs purification, he ought to apply himself to it with all his strength, in order to better help to purify the eyes of others since, in these operations, the one who has clean hands helps better.

11.

Holy things to the holy ones

Do not give what is holy to dogs, or throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Mt 7:6

Here is a saying that has several possible applications to our level of maturity.

(i) This text was used often by the primitive church as a mandate to preserve the treasure entrusted by Jesus to the Christians from both external as well as internal attacks. The exterior threat was represented by pagan immorality, which was highly degraded and therefore dangerous for recently converted Christians. However, the faith was being upset from within by the first heretical speculations that wanted to achieve a symbiosis between Christian and pagan thought, or between the Christian and some Judaizing deformations, as Saint Paul's epistles bear witness to, strongly

criticizing the Gnostics. The newborn Church needed to defend herself with all her strength in order not to be assimilated to one of the many competing religions in the pagan pantheon.

From here arose the zeal with which they delicately cared for the sacred mysteries and in particular the most sublime of them all: the Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration began precisely with these words: “The Holy Things are for the Holy Ones.” Theodoret cites what is said to be a saying of Jesus: “My mystery is for me and for them that are mine.”

The *Didache*, or the “Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles,” one of the oldest Christian writings which seems to hail from apostolic times, says: “But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving [Eucharist] but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs.’”¹⁴ In agreement with this, Tertullian complained against those heretics who admitted all sorts of people, even pagans, to the Lord’s table, and that, by doing so, “‘that which is holy they will cast to the dogs,’ and their pearls, although (to be sure) they are not real ones, ‘they will fling to the swine.’”¹⁵

With this, the Church did not refuse to receive those who wanted to enter into her, but rather sought to maintain the purity of the faith, so that the Church might not have been assimilated

¹⁴ *Didache*, 10, 4.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione*, 41.

by and finally swallowed up by the paganism that surrounded her.¹⁶

If we apply this idea to the mature person, then we should say that a mature person is the one who knows how to defend their treasure (that of their faith and of their virtue) from the paganizing temptation that always threatens it. A sign of maturity is the care that they take in not exposing their faith or the fragility of their own virtues. On the other hand, it is a sign of immaturity to not recognize the weakness of one's faith, and to expose it to discussions and controversies that can parch it prematurely with doubt and hesitation. This is why the Church has often prohibited discussions regarding topics of faith for those who are not prepared for them, yet many enthusiastic converts do not understand this measure that they consider to be "excessive prudence." How many things there are that place the purity of faith in danger! We can list conversations, readings, pastimes, worldly stories, movies, and the like, that, while perhaps not openly immoral, contain poisonous principles that are difficult to refute for the one who is not prepared, and, for this reason, they leave terrible shadows of doubt! Likewise, this saying of the Lord could also be applied to the modesty of chastity, the defense of the treasure itself of chastity and of sexuality of the looks of others.

(ii) A second meaning of this text is taken from the possible Hebrew structure of it. Indeed, in the language spoken by Jesus and His apostles, *holy* is said as *qadosh* (QDS), but the Aramaic

¹⁶ Cf. William Barclay's commentary on this passage.

word for *earrings* is *qadasba* (QDS); in other words, the consonants are exactly the same, and in the ancient orthography the words would be identical. It is probable that the original saying was not “holy” but rather “earring,” and thus it would be similar to saying “in the Talmud, ‘an ear-ring in a swine’s snout,’ a proverbial phrase for something which is entirely incongruous and out of place. It is by no means impossible that the original phrase ran: ‘Give not an earring to the dogs; neither cast ye your pearls before swine,’ in which case the parallelism would be perfect,”¹⁷ making reference to “do not do what is out of place.” In this sense, the Lord’s mandate would refer rather to not giving something important (represented metaphorically by pearls and earrings) to those who are not yet prepared to receive it. I think that this meaning is further reinforced by the continuation of the phrase by Jesus: “lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces.” With those who are not prepared, one must advance progressively and with prudence. There are truths that many are not prepared to hear and accept peacefully. Jesus too advanced gradually. The revelation regarding His Body as food and His Blood as drink was very carefully prepared by Jesus and, even with that, the majority of His listeners turned against Him and abandoned Him. Likewise, the truth regarding the resurrection of His Body, after His death, was used by His enemies as an affirmation regarding the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, etc.

¹⁷ William Barclay’s commentary.

This second meaning can be applied to maturity by understanding that maturity demands a sense of *location* and knowledge of people. The immature often act *out of place*, either with untimely zeal, or misguided shyness. In contrast, the mature know how to wait and how to prepare those to whom they are going to reveal the truth or for what will be demanded of them. Saint Paul explains this very well: “Brothers, I could not talk to you as spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as infants in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it. Indeed, you are still not able, even now, for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:1-3).

The immature demand for themselves that which they are incapable of receiving or maintaining, and they attempt to bring to others what they are not able to understand or value. The immature want to reach the goal without having passed through long and difficult steps that lead to it; they always believe themselves to be already “sufficiently mature,” whereas the truly mature are very discreet when judging themselves prepared to undertake a great task. From here it follows that the immature are impatient and that they judge others to be indifferent or spiritless, but later, they themselves do not persevere in the task undertaken. The mature are cautious and perhaps slow, but not cowardly; they are different from the coward in that, once they have set foot on the battlefield, they stick to it without giving up so much as an inch of their field.

(iii) A third explanation of the principle would be to understand it positively: “what is holy for the Holy One.” If what is

holy should not be thrown to the dogs, it is because it must be given to the one to whom it belongs, that is, God, the Holy One. In this sense, this phrase would allow for understanding it as an invitation to give God the best of what we have. The best of ourselves, our gifts, qualities, time, etc., we should give to God, not spend it on idols, which are bad payers.

Maturity, then, is the ability and the will to give God whatever is the most noble of our persons.

12.

An uncomfortable path

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.

Mt 7:13-14

The teaching of these two verses summarizes one of the most ancient ways of teaching the moral life: the doctrine of the two paths. Thus, for example, Psalm 1 says:

Blessed is the man who does not walk
in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the way of sinners,
nor sit in company with scoffers.
Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy;

and on his law he meditates day and night

But not so are the wicked, not so!

They are like chaff driven by the wind.

(i) There is a path of the just, and another for the unjust, and life sets us at a crossroads, that is, at an intersection of the paths, or, at the very least, a point where the paths divide. If the paths diverge, then so too do men and women diverge; among them are those who take one path, and those who take the other. Jesus Christ is, thus, a “sign of contradiction,” (Lk 2:34), “a stumbling block,” “a watershed.” Regarding the text of Lk 2:34, Barclay says: “It is not so much God who judges a man; a man judges himself; and his judgment is his reaction to Jesus Christ.”

(ii) Here freedom intervenes. Jesus commands: “Enter.” God always appeals to the use of our free will. The Book of Deuteronomy says: “See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I am giving you today, loving the LORD, your God, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and ordinances, you will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. If, however, your heart turns away and you do not obey, but are led astray and bow down to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life,

then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land which the LORD swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them” (30:15-20).

Joshua said the same thing to the Jews a little before they crossed the Jordan: “If it is displeasing to you to serve the LORD, choose today whom you will serve, the gods your ancestors served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Jos 24:15).

Perhaps the most famous text in this regard is that of Jeremiah: “And to this people you shall say: Thus says the LORD: See, I am giving you a choice between the way to life and the way to death” (Jer 21:8).

(iii) Jesus Christ tells us with complete clarity that the path that leads to life is the way of the cross. The following dialogue is found in the “Tablet,” attributed to Cebes, a disciple of Socrates:

—Tell us, then the path that leads to True Knowledge.

—Do you see that high mountain pass, where there is no one, that is almost like a desert?

—I see it.

—Do you see a small entrance, facing a seldom-walked path, by which few pass, as with every rugged and steep path, which seems to be quite dangerous?

—Yes, yes.

—Do you not see a mountain, with a lengthy ascent, on either side of which there are deep precipices?

—Yes, I see it.

—That path leads to True Knowledge.

—It truly seems a bitter and difficult path.

Jesus Christ has never tricked us regarding His life program. It is a program of denial, the cross, persecution, and of suffering (which might have the shape of disaster, of death, of illness, of misunderstanding, etc.). Christ never preached ease, but nor did He preach the useless twisting of muddled minds. Hence, this perspective helps us to clarify some important issues.

(iv) First and foremost, contrary to what many think, the mature person is not the who is inclined only to what is difficult and who despises what is easy. This is what the “complicated” person does, because to complicate means precisely that: “to do in a difficult way what could be done easily.” When they see the fastest way to do something, the mature person, if they are sure that it is also the right way, does not complicate things. However, the mature person *is* characterized, on the other hand, by “distrusting” what seems easy and attractive because they know that true greatness is the result of effort. For this reason, they know ahead of time that all the advertising that offers “Learn German or Chinese *effortlessly*” or to “speak Russian *in fifteen days*” is phony (in contrast, the immature *think that there should be a way to do important and great*

things without sacrifice, and for this reason their library accumulates dozens of these methods, and they seek magical solutions for everything). Virtue, which is the only thing that is really worth the effort, is the fruit of a laborious conquest: there are no happy marriages without great interior struggles to learn how to forgive, to be happy, to tolerate, to be magnanimous. Nor is there perseverance in good without important efforts, just as there do not exist good pianists who have not passed through many tedious hours practicing innumerable exercises and scales.

(v) Nor are the mature the ones who are inclined to take the long route when they can—and it is appropriate—to take the short one; the bad strategist always takes the longer route. Nonetheless, the mature initially *distrust* the shortcut because they know that it is only with great difficulty that something fast and immediate produces a lasting result. In “The Poetic Art,” Horace advises Pisos that, when he writes something, to have it in hand nine years before publishing it, so that he can continue perfecting it. Virgil spent the last ten years of his life writing “The Aeneid,” and when he was dying, he would have destroyed it if his friends had not prevented him, because it seemed very imperfect to him. Plato’s *Republic* begins with a simple phrase: “I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston, that I might offer up my prayers to the goddess.” Plato left no less than thirteen different versions of that initial phrase: the great writer corrected it time and again until he achieved the perfect cadence. No one has ever produced a masterpiece by a shortcut. In this world we

must constantly confront shortcuts that promise immediate results, and the long journey, the results of which cannot be seen except at a distance. However, the things that last are never done in a hurry; for this reason, *usually*, the best path turns out to be the longer one. The immature do not understand this; as a result, they never reach maturity.

(vi) The mature person does not bind themselves with numerous and unnecessary rules. This is more proper to the perplexed and to the scrupulous. However, the mature know that nothing has even been achieved without discipline, and that all those who do not want to be bound to precise rules, ones that are measured and necessary, that is, those who improvise, those who act following their stomachs, the negligent, never build anything, never finish anything, and never reach any port. A famous example of this is Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834), of whom it was said that “never has so great a mind produced so little.” He left Cambridge University to enter the army; he left the army because, in spite of his learning, he did not know how to brush a horse. He returned to Oxford, and then left without any degree. He began to publish a journal entitled “The Watchman,” which, after ten issues, collapsed. It was said of him that “he lost himself in visions of work that needed to be done, that were always to be done. Coleridge had all the gifts of poetry except one: that of sustained and concentrated effort.” He had all sorts of books in mind, and, as he himself said: “The only thing left is to write them.” “I am,” he said, “on the verge of sending to the printer

two volumes out of eight.” However, those books did not exist anywhere except in his head, because he could not submit himself to the discipline of sitting down to write them. His biography seems like so many of ours! No one has ever reached the heights without discipline, and, if they have reached it, they have not remained there.

(vii) However, the real difference between the narrow gate and the narrow path on the one hand, and the wide gate and broad path on the other, will be the end of each. We should not wager all of our discernment of things looking only at the *difficulty* of their starting point, but rather at their end. We must always look to the end of the path, because what seems easy at first could become quite bitter and hard in the future. Every path might appear very tempting at the beginning, and every difficult path might seem disheartening at first. However, our judgments might change completely if we look to where one and the other path end. If the charming road ends in a ravine and the rough one in a pleasant valley, we will regret very much having taken the easy path and discarded the difficult one. From here arises one last difference in character between the mature person and the immature: the second compares tickets according to the itinerary and the advantages that the travel agency offers, without asking where the trip ends. The first, the mature, on the other hand, choose the company and the itinerary *solely from those that go where they want to go*, and often they find that there is only one risky flight, on an old and uncomfortable glider. However, the mature do not hesitate,

because they know where they are going. They see things, not under the light of time, but rather in light of eternity. The immature do not think on eternity, although, sooner or later (and sooner rather than later) they find themselves faced with it, and not in a way that they would have wanted.

(viii) There is one last detail that we find in Saint Luke's version which says: "Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough" (Lk 13:24). It is clear that Saint Luke is looking at things from the point of view of where they arrive. When those who have chosen the wrong path see where they are being led, if they have the grace to see their final end before they fall into it, they will react like desperate people who want to change their lives in order to enter through the other gate, the uncomfortable one, but they will not be able to go through it since, as it has few suitors, it might happen that it will be closed soon. Here again sounds the echo of those words that we transcribed a few chapters earlier: *Late, late, so late!* The lesson is very clear: do not wait until the last day to change gates.

13.

Discernment and caution

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Just so, every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. So by their fruits you will know them.

Mt 7:15-20

“The Jews, the Greeks and the Romans,” writes Barclay, “all used the idea that a tree is to be judged by its fruits. ‘Like root, like fruit,’ ran the proverb. Epictetus was later to say, ‘How can a vine grow not like a vine but like an olive, or, how can an olive grow not like an olive but like a vine’ (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2:20). Seneca declared that good cannot grow from evil any more than a fig tree can from an olive.”

According to Jesus Christ, the mature person is a person of discernment (“You will know them”) and caution (“Beware”). The first is part of prudence in its intellectual side; the second, part of prudence on the practical level. Hence, the mature person is a person of prudence, because without prudence there is no virtue whatsoever.

(i) Jesus is very clear: maturity is opposed to being naïve and a clown. The immature person sucks up everything that offends them, which is a dangerous attitude for the one who lives in a world like ours, plagued by risks.

The Lord speaks of “ravenous wolves,” an expression very similar to the one that Saint Peter will use to refer to the devil as a “roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour” (1 Pt 5:8). If the devil is a roaring lion, his minions are wolves. To devour is his office and his hobby. Sooner or later, the immature will end up as victims of his jaws. To be devoured means to be converted into one of them; the immature are eaten by the wolves when they become like them in vice, in their “worldliness”: they devour the life of grace which is like eating out their hearts.

In the face of this, Jesus demands two attitudes: discernment and to be careful.

(ii) Regarding discernment, here Jesus Christ gives few, but substantial, criteria. First and foremost, He points out that “they come in disguises,” that is, they “appear” like sheep, but are really wolves.

Jesus' words, "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes?" should be understood bearing in mind that "there was a certain thorn, the buckthorn, which had little black berries which closely resembled little grapes. 'Or figs from thistles?' There was a certain thistle, which had a flower, which, at least at a distance, might well be taken for a fig. . . . [In this sense Our Lord wants to say that] there may be a superficial resemblance between the true and the false prophet,"¹⁸ but that the difference jumps out when they are carefully examined. By pointing out that the evil ones are disguised as good, Christ teaches us not to judge by the *first and superficial* impression that we have. A disguise is something that covers exteriorly, but the person continues being who they are. Earlier, it was said that "we should not judge," and we had pointed out that this hyperbolic affirmation should be interpreted in the light of many other affirmations; this is one of them. Here Jesus does not say that we should make a judgment of those who come near to us with the appearance of being good people, judging them to be wolves wearing a mask. Rather, what He tells us is that we should neither be in a hurry to canonize them, nor to be enthusiastic about them without first examining them attentively. A disguise is usually imperfect in its details, and His allusion is an invitation to make a complete examination; only after probing all the aspects of a person and their doctrine, and after having approved such an inspection, can we give them credence.

¹⁸ William Barclay's commentary on this passage.

However, it is also true that our inquiring judgments do not affect everyone that we have contact with. Jesus speaks of “false prophets,” those who present themselves as *having something to teach us*, asking for the submission of our minds or our wills to their doctrines or facts. It is these that we should make pass through the screening of discernment, not the milkman or the maid with whom we have daily contact.

(iii) The second criterion is indicated in the word that Jesus uses to define the false prophet: he or she is “a wolf.” A wolf is a carnivorous animal, a harmful one. A person is a wolf when they look upon others as *food*, with *voracious eyes*. What is proper to the false prophet, being a wolf, is to take advantage of others for their own interests. Their vice is greed, be it for money or for honor. From here follows that a criterion in order to distinguish true prophets from the false ones is the *motive* for which they seek souls. The wolf seeks them either for material *gain*, or for *personal prestige* (in order to feel a sort of self-praise or self-approval), or in order *to pass on their own ideas*, which are not those of Christ. The true prophet seeks out souls in order to do good to them, to bring them to the truth, and such a one is characterized by their disinterest in self, in order to appear silently behind their message and in order to transmit Jesus Christ and not themselves, like John the Baptist: “He [Christ] must increase, I must decrease.”

(iv) The third criterion is the fruits: “By their fruits you will know them.” “Every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit.” For the examination to be completed, it must

therefore include the fruits. This makes it clear that those people who make “hurried judgments” cannot have good discernment, since every plant needs time in order to bear fruit. Those who trust in their first impressions cannot have observed the fruits of anything or of anyone. There are different fruits that we can take considering the false prophets whom Jesus fought against during His public life, the scribes and the Pharisees who pressed in on Him, and which Christ must have had in mind during this discourse:

(a) The first true fruit is that of *interiority*; in contrast, evil is only *exteriority*. Jesus fought a great deal against the Pharisees, whom He placed among the evil prophets since they made holiness consist of only exterior matters, in the purely legal and ceremonial fulfillment of the things of God. “These [the interior things] you should have done, without neglecting the others,” the exterior. Without an interior life, there is no real faith.

(b) The second fruit of a good tree is, precisely, *to give fruit*, that is, something positively good (since such is the idea that we always have of the word “fruit”). When the doctrine or the person of someone produces a positive fruitfulness around them, meaning, virtues, good works, that tree is good. When something produces works that are *less good* than those that already existed, it is really not producing fruit but rather *trimming back* the fruit that was given earlier; it is even clearer when the tree gives poisonous fruits, that is, defects appear that were not there before, or that had previously been conquered, like vices. The Pharisees fought to keep

people away from Christ, not in order to offer them something better, but rather only to keep them from “following after Him,” as they say, full of distress.

(c) The third good fruit is firmness in good convictions, in faith, and in good resolutions. In contrast, bad fruits would be doubt, hesitation, the abandonment of one’s resolutions, etc. In this sense, any teaching that removes the rock-like firmness from religion, any teaching that excludes the cross, all doctrine that eliminates a healthy fear of condemnation, or places the truths of the faith in the judgment seat, are fruits of false prophets. The enemies of Christ were, as Saint Paul says, “enemies of the cross of Christ.”

(d) One last fruit we find in the relation between faith and life. The good tree always keeps these two dimensions united; the evil one separates them, and preaches but does not live what it preaches. “Do not follow their example. . . . They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them.”

(v) A fourth criterion we can see reflected in the exhaustive affirmation of Our Lord when He says that a good tree *gives* good fruit, and *cannot* give bad ones; on the contrary, a bad tree *gives* bad fruits, and *cannot* give good ones. If we take His words literally, they seem like an exaggeration, since sometimes some unripe fruits are gathered from good trees, and the contrary can happen with bad plants. Sometimes Jesus does use hyperbole. However, He could also want to say that, in order to discern correctly, a

person must know how to wait and look for the *confirmation* of the fruits, that is, how they develop in time. The devil can make, accidentally and temporarily, good things happen when these, in the long run, turn out to be less good, distractive, or even harmful for the person involved. In order to discern it is not enough, then, to consider the first moments when the things appear to be good, but rather their last development. The wheat and the tares look like each other in the beginning, but, as they grow, they are easily distinguished.

(vi) One last criterion that we can take is that of the *resistance* of the fruits. Good fruits *resist* the onslaughts of their surroundings; the bad fruit breaks off easily. This is the criterion that Gamaliel recurred to before the Sanhedrin: “Have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them” (Acts 5:38-39). The success of the works in the face of trials and difficulties are the touchstone. Thus we see that no human power could destroy the truth of the messages of Lourdes or of Fatima, in spite of the weakness of the witnesses (weak and uneducated children) and the fierce opposition of worldly powers, while so many false visionaries have been swept away forgotten.

(vii) “Beware!” Discernment ends in a practical attitude. We distinguish between good and evil in order to avoid the latter and embrace the former. We avoid evil by distancing ourselves from

it, not giving it credence, and denying it our attention and curiosity; we embrace good by practicing it.

When, in spite of pointing out the false prophets, we flirt with error or we sin through curiosity, not only do we run the risk of falling into their nets, but also—as a just punishment—we can end up with our ability to discern wasted or atrophied. This is why we see many Christians who, in past times, clearly held the truth about many things, but now are “confused,” “dizzy,” and even trapped by the nets of lies.

This is because if the indissoluble connection between discernment and caution is broken, all prudence is shredded to pieces.

14.

Doer of the word

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'

Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.

Mt 7:21-27

In this last paragraph from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus distinguishes between the true disciple and the false one based on

their attitude when confronted with the Word of God. “The Word of God” is the same as saying “the Divine will,” since in His Word God expresses His will.

Here Jesus is speaking of “disciples,” that is, of those who “accept” God’s will. Those who reject it are not even to be considered in these verses.

(i) Once again we are confronted with the *mature person* and the *immature* according to the vision of Our Lord. The touchstone in order to distinguish one from another is, in the end, *responsibility*, and this is the topic that Jesus is discussing here. “Responsibility” is etymologically derived from “responder,” *to respond*, or perhaps from “res ponderare,” *to weigh the thing*.

The responsibility of each individual is measured by the way of weighing—that is, valuing—that which with God confronts them, and by their awareness of their duty to respond before God, society, and themselves.

(ii) The immature person spoken of here does not, properly speaking, reject the divine will *outright*, the one who is opposed to God’s will in that way is the *fool* or the *crazy person* of whom Scripture often speaks. However, without rejecting God’s will, the immature do not assume it responsibly; they do not make it efficacious in their own person. The Lord says they “did not act on it.” Perhaps they did not reach the point of “pondering” it with the right value and urgency. The immature take things in—including the divine will—with superficiality; perhaps they do so with enthusiasm, as Our Lord says in the parable of the sower.

However, such ones do not let God's will transform them interiorly, becoming incarnate, as it were, in their own will. In other words, the two wills do not unite. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the things that Jesus places on the lips of these immature persons could be considered as usual "priestly" expressions: we prophesized (we preached), we expelled demons (by blessing, exorcising, forgiving), we did miracles (cancelling out sins, transubstantiating bread into Christ's body, converting souls), etc. Among priests, there are many who are irresponsible with respect to God's word. God is deployed by means of them (through their priestly power), but this does not transform them, just as the water that passes through a duct does not change it. They build upon sand.

(iii) In contrast, the mature *build upon rock*, as Jesus says. The firmness of the foundations of the balanced person can be understood in different senses. "The Rock is Christ," Saint Paul says, on account of which the short parable of the house built upon rock has often been understood as built upon Christ. However, it also means every stable foundation, like God's word and the divine will. God's plans are immutable, and those who attempt to separate themselves from them work in vain, because men cannot frustrate those plans; these will infallibly be brought about, even though those who are opposed to them contribute to them in a way that is very different from the way that God offers them if they wanted to work according to His Will. This is because God offers everyone salvation, meaning, to freely incorporate them-

selves into His plans. The one who rejects that will see it fulfilled *despite himself*. “God frustrates the plans of the nations”:

“The LORD foils the plan of nations,
frustrates the designs of peoples.

But the plan of the LORD stands forever,
the designs of his heart through all generations (Ps 33:10-11).

(iv) It could be objected that if these people say that they have performed miracles and have preached in Christ’s name, then they could not have been opposed to His plans. Nonetheless, this is the way that it is. The divine plan is principally directed to the conversion of hearts; preaching, miracles, and signs of power are nothing more than “doorways” for transformation of heart. Of what use are those things if souls are not transformed in Christ? The key to understand this is in the Lord’s phrase: “I never knew you.” Those men who have expelled demons and who have preached Christ, did not know Christ, nor did Christ know them. This is because the knowledge of which Our Lord speaks is a communion of persons. These men build their lives on an externally correct frame, but their building had no soul. They acted like Christ’s disciples, without actually becoming true disciples.

(v) From here arises the tremendous drama of *responsibility*. All that God gave them (*power* over demons, *eloquence* of words, *the charism* of healing, etc.) should have been used responsibly. Responsibility demands that those powers should be used first upon oneself: expelling one’s own demons, that is, one’s vices, letting

oneself be transformed by the Word. In Saint John's Gospel the Lord says: "Whoever rejects me and does not accept my words has something to judge him: the word that I spoke, it will condemn him on the last day" (Jn 12:48). The one who preaches Christ's word can also reject it: they preach it for others, but block it in their hearts. To preach does not mean to accept. To convert is to accept. To transport water does not mean to drink it; the aqueduct brings life to the fields, but within it, nothing ever comes to life. In its stone womb only moss can grow, and, as the water passes more dizzily, not even that. Preachers who let the Word of God pass through their minds and from their mouths like a violent river that falls down bathing others but without wetting them are *irresponsible with their own souls*.

(vi) "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man." The mature person is the one who is responsible before God for what they have received through Christ's words—that is, God's will. Our responsibility is that that word be transformed into "practice," into "life." "And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool," immature, irresponsible.

(vii) —"Lord, I have raised someone from the dead." —"But with your life, what have you done?" —"Lord, I have preached marvelously about you." —"But, what have you done with your heart?" What the Lord awaits from us is that His word—His plans, His idea of us—should become reality. What have you

made of yourself? What are your interior fruits? What can you present me of yourself?

(viii) Regarding the immature person, Jesus says: “[he] was completely ruined.”

15.

A teacher with authority

When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Mt 7:28-29

In the short preceding pages, we have tried to present the Sermon on the Mount from the particular perspective of the “notion” of the mature—that is, perfect—person in Jesus’ mind. I think that the connection made, although it is very summarized and general, has brought us to outline the main features of human maturity:

A mature person is one who is . . .

interiorly free in the face of what is earthly and passing;

master of their affections and passions;

able to correct themselves and make reparation for their errors;

a seeker of truth and virtue;
compassionate with the weak;
lord of their heart;
easily forgives injuries;
a friend of sacrifice and of the cross;
not drowned in individualism;
enjoys a great interior unity;
lives facing God and facing eternity;
familiar with God in prayer;
magnanimous and generous;
completely trustful of God;
of a holy sight and without envy;
tough and prudent;
and faithful to their word.

Such a person is the *ideal* that Jesus makes us look at with eyes full of hope and a spirit willing to conquer.

This is what *we must strive to become.*

“The crowds were astonished” at Christ’s doctrine. We too are surprised at the excellence and precision of His ideas.

If people were to know and to put into practice the directives of Our Lord, we can be sure that we would not have so many problems of emotional or intellectual immaturity, and that the

psychic conflicts that this annoying modern life has accustomed us—and desensitized us—to would be greatly lessened.

Jesus speaks with authority because He has it. That authority—to be understood in the topic that we have studied here—is His because He Himself is the mature Man *par excellence*. The image that He transmits to us is a perfect image of Himself.

