

13. The space of our fidelity

“Abide in my love” (Jn 15:9c).

This “abiding,” if it is a grace without merit, since it all comes from God, – “We love because he first loved us,” St. John exclaims in his first letter (4:19) – it is a gift that, precisely because Jesus asks it of us, precisely because he offers it to our freedom, implies a responsibility, a being there, that of fidelity. All our fidelity is at play in abiding in the love of Christ.

Often we load the concept of fidelity to God and to our vocation with a quantity of demands, precepts, and obligations. But in reality, the whole fidelity that God desires from us is that of abiding in his love. Then this manifests in a thousand forms, and is expressed in fidelity to specific people, to specific things to do or not do, to specific things to say or not say, to think or believe, etc. But if we separate all these fidelities from the fidelity of abiding in the love of Christ, we are left dissipated, and then we start to lose control of the various pieces of the mechanism of fidelity that we have built or imagined for ourselves. How many engaged monks, nuns, priests, or laity complain about not succeeding to pray well because they are busy and preoccupied by the various tasks and services related to their responsibility. This is humanly understandable, but the saints teach us that when we are attentive to the essential, everything is in order and fits together in its environment.

In the end, outside of abiding in Christ’s love, one falls into sin. Because when I do not abide in this love, I find myself in the space of refusing love that the fallen angels decided on. Lucifer and his followers did not want to abide in the love of Christ, that love which from all eternity had decided to love the human creatures even to the extreme of the incarnation of the Son of God, and to the extreme of death on the Cross. In an instant these angels refused to abide in this love, to abide in such gratuitous, such merciful love, to love the human beings, and what is more sinners, as the Son is loved by the Father. The devil burns with jealousy for this merciful love bestowed upon sinful humanity.

The original sin of Adam and Eve was also, for man, like a slipping away from the love of Christ, away from the love of the Trinity. Eating the fruit, it’s like our ancestors had gone outside of the space of abiding in the love of God, into the illusion, suggested by the serpent, that outside of this love there was a possibility of self-realization greater than within it, more divine than the love of God. The devil knew that it was not true, because he had already gone out from this space and out there he found only the emptiness of the refusal of love, the emptiness of hate. Hell is not outside of God, because God is all. Hell is outside of the love of God, in the sense that it is only a space of freedom that has refused love, and hence also the joy for which we have been made.

We experience this every time that we accede, a little or a lot, to whatever temptation against love. We find ourselves like fish out of water, outside of the habitat for which our heart has been made. We find ourselves in an empty and sad space, grey, without happiness, in an abandoned solitude. And everything seems extraneous to us, without beauty. I always remember one time that, as a young man, I was in the mountains to ski and I don’t remember what ugly disagreement I had had with somebody, but I was full of anger and wounded pride. And while I was going up with the ski lift, on a marvelous day, I was suddenly struck by the landscape, by the snow, by the mountains, by the sky. And I was frightened because all that beauty was extraneous to me, it did not stun me, did not expand my heart as had

normally always happened to me. And there I understood that sin is not only ugly in itself: it makes everything ugly, because the eye of the heart no longer sees the love that is hidden and is revealed in all of creation.

But I say this because we should not forget that when Jesus got to the point of saying at the Last Supper, “Abide in my love,” he was certainly aware that he had come to the point of dying on the Cross precisely to allow all sinners, all the people who had slid away from remaining innocently in the love of God that the earthly paradise symbolized, to allow them all to reenter and abide in this space, thanks to Him, through his grace, in the Paschal gift of the Holy Spirit.

So we must meditate on how we reenter the love of Christ, and how we abide there. Christ asks us to remain in his love, in his love that transmits to us all the love of the Trinity, in his love which is a totally gratuitous gift, in his love that saves the world, in his love that is the treasure, the precious pearl to guard, in his love that we do not merit. He asks us *just* to “abide” in his love, which deep down is almost a passive attitude, a being there that is like lying down, resting, like a child abides, rests in the arms and breast of its mother.

But as Jesus asks it of us, and because of how he asks it of us, we understand that to abide, to dwell is our gift to the infinite and total gift of God.

Our gift adds nothing to that of Christ. But the gift of “abiding” accepts as it were being absorbed into the gift of Christ. If I remain in the love of Jesus, it is like my whole being gets absorbed into Him, in the loving You of the Lord. But the gratuitous love of Christ, precisely because it is gratuitous, does not absorb the other by annihilating them, consuming them into itself like a food that is assimilated. On the contrary it gives them the fullness of their being “other,” of being a “you” for the absolute “YOU” of the divine Person of the Son; and this, in the closest communion that there can be: that of His loving us as the Father loves him.

How can we not think of the episode after the discourse of Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum. Jesus really announced in his Eucharistic discourse, that we are granted the grace of being absorbed, assimilated to the gift of his Body and of his Blood: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.” (Jn 6:54–57)

Then almost everybody leaves him. They do not understand, they interpret according to their patterns of thinking, and they do the opposite of the one thing that Jesus asks for entering into this experience and hence of being illuminated and convinced by it: they go away, that is, they *do not abide*. Unlike the apostles, who, confused and disturbed by the discourse like everybody else, at least understood that only by remaining could they enter into this mystery: “So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’” (Jn 6:67–69)

Peter intuitively feels that if he does not remain with Jesus he does not remain with anyone, not even with himself. He would no longer have a dwelling place, he would no longer have a relationship that gives him life, that gives meaning to his life.