

14. If I do not wash your feet, you will have no part with me

How is this abiding in the love of Christ possible? It is easy to say, but in the reality of what we live and are, in the reality of our vocation, but also of our weakness as sinners, how is it possible for us to abide in the love of Christ? How is it possible for us to correspond to the infinite love of Christ by accepting to abide in it as the only meaning of our life, as the one purpose and one true joy of life?

At the beginning of the Last Supper Jesus already gives a response in anticipation of these questions, when he rises to wash his disciples' feet and says to Peter two fundamental things. The first is: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand" (Jn 13:7). The second is: "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8).

Then, after the gesture and after having put his clothes back on, he takes his seat in his place of presiding, we could say on his *cathedra* as Master and Lord, and begins the long, sublime teaching of his last discourses:

"Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (Jn 13:12-17)

He has just told Peter that he cannot understand what he is doing now, and now he asks them all if they have understood what he has done. What does this mean? Can or should we understand or not? I think that essentially we have to understand that by ourselves we cannot understand. Peter, opposing himself to Jesus's humble gesture, expressed a closing off into his own understanding of the gesture itself. This is a dead-end road, which never brings to understanding.

A little later, Peter will try again to affirm *his own* understanding of the words of Jesus and his mystery, but he will do it now with hesitation, and by asking. There too Jesus will respond by sending Peter back to the experience of weakness and failure of his own presumption that he will have to face so that he can reach understanding, as we shall see, in a different way.

"Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

"Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.' Peter said to him, 'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.'" (Jn 13:33-38)

There begins to enter into the discourse of Jesus the proclamation that will culminate in verse 9 of John 15: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my

love.” Here he says: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” (Jn 13:34)

Here Peter, as is his habit, cuts off Jesus, interrupting like one who is not really listening, because he gets stuck on a thought and a preoccupation that he throws out there without waiting: “Lord, where are you going?” And later, not satisfied by the patience that Jesus shows him and asks of him: “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Then Jesus gives him an answer full of truth, which seems harsh, which is certainly harsh for Peter, but which prepares his repentance and the possibility that he will be able to integrate his denial into his relationship with Christ, instead of living it out like Judas, alone with himself, that is with total desperation. “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”

Understand that if Judas, after his betrayal, had remembered that Jesus had foretold it to him, without impeding him, without threatening him, without telling him not to do it, he would have been able to return to himself, and return to his awareness of the love of Christ, return into the love of Christ that is so great that it embraces even the most devious traitor. He would have had somewhere to go back to, and abide, through pardon. Peter, after his denial, remembered this. The three Synoptics underline that at the crow of the rooster “Peter remembered the saying of Jesus” (Mt 26:75; Mk 14:72; cf. Lk 22:61). Only Luke mentions Jesus’s direct glance upon him that made him remember the Lord’s words, but it is clear that even if Jesus had not looked at him precisely at that moment, in his memory Peter would have found not only the words, but also the gaze with which Christ had pronounced them. And with the words and the gaze, the love. Thus he could pour out the bitterness of his repentance in the love of Christ, which had already arrived at the peak of the Passion and Death, the one space of consolation and redemption for sinners.

Only this allows us to understand: the memory of the words of Jesus that take us back to the awareness of being loved and pardoned by him. Even before we deny him, He has already opened the door and prepared the space for returning and abiding in his love. This is the “understand later” that Jesus promises to Peter and asks him to expect. That is: we understand the humble love of Christ, that which washes our feet, that which has regenerated us in the water of Baptism, when we return to Him with the experience of life, of our limitation, of our need to be pardoned, and hence of our need to abide in his love in order not to die, in order not to suffocate our life as Judas did. Hanging oneself, which means suffocating one’s own life, is nothing but a symbol of a position of life and of the heart that does not breathe Christ by abiding in his love, as St. Antony, the father of monks, said to his disciples before dying: “Always breathe Christ!” (St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Antony*).

Only in this way can one understand the second saying of Jesus to Peter: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (13:8). If we do not let ourselves truly be loved by Christ as He loves us, we cannot share his love, we cannot abide in it, and hence express it.