



Setting the scene

Discovering Christ

'It is only with the heart that we can see rightly: what is invisible to the eye.'

Antoine de Saint - Expery

History has many examples of people who have elected to change the way they live in response to Christ's invitation to friendship. One of the most dramatic examples is St Francis of Assisi. In his *Testament* which he wrote shortly before his death, Francis recalls an encounter from his early days. At that time, it was not uncommon to see people suffering from the awful wasting disease of leprosy. Francis couldn't bear to be anywhere near such people. He says he was repelled by the sight and offensive smell of them. One day, however, he didn't turn and run. Instead he approached the figure who previously would have repulsed him and embraced and kissed him. Francis had recognised Christ in this person. He later taught his followers to live for a time with lepers so that they could know where God is.

Thirty years after the death of Francis, forty two year old Bonaventure, the newly appointed General Minister of the Franciscan Order, found himself reflecting on Francis, their founder, wondering what had changed him. He was prompted to do this because of the tensions and loss of focus that had engulfed the Order. He chose to withdraw to Mount LaVerna in Italy to reflect on the charism of Francis so that it could be re-kindled amongst the discontented Brothers he was now responsible for. He wrote down the fruits of his reflections in *The Journey of the Human Person into God* in which he concludes that it was

contemplative prayer that impelled Francis to see the world with new vision: a contemplative vision that penetrated the depths of reality. 'If our vision is pure,' says Bonaventure, 'we can see God's image in other human beings.'

We observe another example of a radical response to Christ's invitation to friendship in the life of St John Bosco. Don Bosco, as he was known, recalls how shocked he was when he visited the prisons in the rapidly industrialised city of Turin in the nineteenth century. 'I saw large numbers of lads aged from twelve to eighteen, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them there infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. What shocked me most,' he adds, 'was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison.'

It was then that Don Bosco conceived the idea of being a companion to these boys. 'Who knows,' he reflected, 'if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them...Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin.' And so Don Bosco devoted the rest of his life to being their friend: helping them to make something of their lives. 'It is not enough to love the young,' he would say, 'they must know they are loved.'

Don Bosco's deputy, Don Rua, asked him shortly before he died if there was one piece of advice he wanted to give them. 'Meditate,' Don Bosco replied.

REFLECTION

'I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.'

Jn 15:15

'We meditate to awaken love,' says St Francis de Sales, 'we contemplate because we love.' In contemplative prayer we are invited to fill our minds with the things of God and to ponder and to treasure them.

Do I continually fill my mind with the things of God? Or do I frequently find it easier to give in to things that are not of God: thoughts that make me envious or resentful, for example?

In contemplative prayer we come to see the hidden presence of God in ordinary reality. 'The more one prays,' says Angela of Foligna, 'the more one is enlightened. The more one is enlightened the more one sees.'

Mary Mazzarello's prayer life was very influenced by St Teresa of Avila who regarded prayer as, 'nothing else but an intimate sharing between friends.'

Teresa of Avila liked to fill her mind with scenes of Christ. 'It did me great good,' she says, 'to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone.' She says she had many simple thoughts like these. For many years, before going to bed, she liked to reflect on the scene in the garden of Gethsemane where, in her thoughts, she could remain alone with Christ. She often began her prayers by opening a book and using it to help her to be aware of God's presence. Or, she says she used flowers of the field, water, or other parts of creation. These images helped her to become aware of the presence of Christ and then with that awareness she could enter into conversation or simply remain quiet with her Friend.



About Mary

‘And anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and show myself to him.’

Jn 14:21

The brief life of Sister Emma Ferrero gives an insight into Mary’s gifts. Emma lost her mother as a child. When she was fifteen her father took her out of school and began bringing her to parties and other forms of entertainment. When she was eighteen the family suffered real financial difficulties and so her father asked Don Bosco if she could be accepted in Mornese to train as a teacher along with her two sisters. Don Bosco agreed.

Emma was very attractive but not an easy person. She had a bad temper; at times she believed herself to be the most unfortunate person under the sun. She didn’t want to confide in anyone or have anything to do with prayer or the sacraments. Her main concern was caring for her clothing, putting on make-up and curling her hair. She was allowed to stay in her own room where she would spend hours looking through her trunk and entertaining herself with jewellery and ornaments. She also kept up a secret correspondence with a young man. Eventually the Sisters asked for Emma to be sent

away. She seemed a hopeless case.

Mother Mazzarello however insisted that Emma had great qualities within her and would one day change for the better. She seized every opportunity to say a good word to her and to surround her with loving kindness.

One day, Emma elected to go to confession, something she had not done in ages. A short while later, after communion, she went to Mary and said, ‘Mother, would you accept me to become a Sister.’ It was actually the first time that Emma had used the name Mother. Deeply moved, Mary agreed. Emma then went to her room. She brought out the trunk on which she had wasted so many hours, put it out in the yard, and then, in the presence of the Sisters and the girls who were at recreation, she made a pile of letters, flowers and trinkets and set fire to them. Turning to Mother Mazzarello she said, ‘Now I can say that I am all yours.’

Emma became a Sister but after only two years of religious life, she suffered a series of haemorrhages and eight days later she died: in peace.

Mary was renowned for having keen intuition in discerning if a young girl was called to the religious life or not. No one remembers her as ever being mistaken. She didn’t stop at the exterior of the girls, at their pretty faces or social position or type of dress. Rather she penetrated to their inner selves where Christ dwells. ‘She used to urge us to see God in everything,’ wrote one of the other Sisters. All those who had anything to do with Mary were convinced that she could read hearts. ‘Once she told me what I was thinking, removing the difficulties I was experiencing without me telling her anything,’ reports Mother Sorbonne. ‘I heard from many others,’ she adds, ‘that the same thing happened to them.’

Mary’s gifts were nourished by meditation. She especially loved to meditate on the passion of Christ, the sorrows of Mary and the love of Jesus in the Eucharist. She made sure that the meditations went on throughout the day. As a teenager she committed to spending Holy Week with Jesus, continually reflecting on his passion and death, undisturbed by anything else.

Mary Speaks



‘What examples of great virtue we can learn from the presence of Jesus in the Crib! Meditate on this and you will see what fruit you will gain from it: the fruit will be greater if you meditate with humility.’

‘Seeing the snow covering our countryside, and silence reigning everywhere, they give a clearer idea of the Divine Child lying in a manger, abandoned by everyone, shivering in the cold.’

(Mary is speaking to Fr Costamagna about his sermons on hell.)
‘This isn’t what moves me to fight sin or to love Jesus more. It is the thought of His passion and death.’

‘We must plant beautiful flowers in our hearts.’



Questions

**Do I seek to be aware of God’s presence in my life?
How do I nourish my friendship with Christ?**

GOD’S WORD

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ Mt 5:8

Now that very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but their eyes were prevented from recognising him. . . .

When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; but they pressed him to stay with them saying, ‘It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.’ So he went in with them. Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’

Lk 24: 13-16, 28-32.

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