

*Rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength* (Neh 8:10), these are the final words of the first reading on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time. As I was doing my *lectio*, I wrote them down on a little paper, and I put it on top of my desk. I have heard these words before, of course, but this time they resounded in a special way and I didn't want to forget them. Saint Paul has a similar expression, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Phil 4:4). It is this *in the Lord* that made me stop and think. It appears repeatedly in Paul's letter, and you can certainly feel how he lived in the Lord, who was his strength and the source of his joy.

Do I live *in the Lord*? We can understand our lives mainly as all we do from the time we wake up in the morning until we go to sleep. If we want to evaluate our lives, how we are doing, this is mostly what we think of spontaneously. But is this all that our lives are about? When you look at Saint Paul's life and that of so many other saints you can almost feel another level of existence, as if their lives had another layer. This allowed them not only to do all they did but made them somehow different, allotted with a freedom, a joy, a strength rather uncommon; an extra layer that surrounded them with a love and peace that was much more than a feeling or passing emotion.

Have you ever thought of how daring toddlers can be as long as they know that their caregivers are not too far away? They do incredible things considering their size and strength, and they don't easily give up when they fail or fall. The saints seem to have this kind confidence in common, which is not coming from being naïve but from the deep experience of the love of God our Father in Christ.

*You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"* (Rom 8:15), this is the deepest cry in our hearts, our deepest longing. We know it, but often only in our heads. It usually takes some interior space and silence to be able to hear this cry in our own heart. To hear it and to realize that this cry is pointing in a direction not to a dead end. It is leading us towards a Person, God himself, whose desire for us is even greater than our own. The saints heard the cry of the Spirit in the core of their being and they realized that nothing else would satisfy them and give meaning to their lives and the lives of others. They didn't want to settle for less. They learned by experience that our God does not disappoint when we are willing to risk everything to follow him, no matter where he leads us.

It is difficult for us to trust. We want to be independent, to be able to provide for ourselves. There are so many other voices telling us that we need this or that to be happy that we keep looking around for what we think might be missing. Somehow, we are convinced that once we find it everything will be just fine. We can live our vocational discernment in this key: once I find which is my vocation, or the right place to live it, the right community, the right person, the right... you name it. We believe that what is crucial is to find the right fit, then it will be easy to love and give ourselves. Life remains a plan, a goal or a problem to be solved and, depending on the stage of our discernment, we can feel anxious at times wondering how to make a bridge between the idea that our vocation is both a call and a choice. How to proceed?

I love these words from St Bernard, *When you see a soul leaving everything and clinging to the Word with all her will and desire, living for the Word, ruling her life by the Word, conceiving by the Word what she will bring forth by him, so that she can say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain," you know that the soul is the spouse and bride of the Word.'*

I think Bernard is able to express in this quote the core of spousal love we can experience in our relationship with Christ. Jesus is not some kind of perfect imaginary husband onto whom we can project all the qualities we would like to find in a man. Jesus Christ is the Church's Bridegroom. In union with the Church, consecrated women, but also men, experience the particular and intense union with Christ that comes about when we consecrate all our being to him: our wills and our minds, our bodies and our souls.

In the Cistercian tradition, there are two prevailing images to depict our relationship with God as monks and nuns: spousal and filial love. It is important to bear these two images in mind as we discern our vocation. A religious sister experiences and grows in her love for Christ, spouse of the Church and of her soul, as she identifies with Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, and walks in his footsteps. The trust in the providential love of the Father that we see in the life of Christ and of the saints is the good soil where an undivided love for Christ can grow and express itself in religious consecration. If God takes care of me as a good Father then I am free to entrust myself totally to him and follow Christ carrying my daily cross. I am free both to rejoice and to suffer with those who laugh and cry, I am free to love and serve without clinging to others, free to bear so many unexpected fruits for the Kingdom. Little by little rejoicing in the Lord has become my strength.

How can you apply this to your own discernment? Each vocation is a miracle of grace. God's ways are always new and creative, but I think we can still trace some common elements. Most people began to discern if God might be calling them to religious life because either they feel a strong or unquenchable desire for more—this cry in our hearts we have been talking about—or because they feel particularly attracted to some important element of religious life like prayer, service to the poor, a life of simplicity or the sense of belonging to Christ in a special and exclusive way. In some way this works very much like human love: the other person has qualities that attract you, and you desire his company because you think he can respond to the cry you have in your heart for love and communion. In this process our imagination plays a big role because we usually tend to project ourselves towards the future, thinking how things can be for us if we continue in the relationship. Imagination is good but it has its risks. The main one is that we can project onto the other person qualities or other attributes that the person doesn't have. In this case, instead of having a relationship with a real person, we have it with the imaginary "prince charming" that we have created. You can easily foresee how, if you continue on this path, the relationship is determined to fail in one way or another.

When we discern religious life we can do something similar and we usually imagine ourselves living in the monastery and how our relationship with Jesus would be in this setting. The Holy Spirit can speak to your heart through motions of consolation and desolation when you pray in this way, using your imagination and putting everything in God's hands. But as in the previous example there are risks: first, you can have a false image of how the life in a religious community might be for you but even more complex is to foresee what your relationship with God, the foundation of your life as a consecrated person will be like! God's love is unfathomable, it goes beyond any concepts and categories... So, what then?

Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life*. If we truly want to relate to him and let him lead us to the place and vocation where we can bear more fruit for the coming of his Kingdom, we need to stop relating to him and the way towards he is pointing in terms of "being the right fit or not". We need to stop, as much as we can, from trying to control and calculate. You might be thinking: well, that's easier said than done. I know, I have been there. But we also need to believe that his grace is already at work within us. When I spend time in prayer and listen to the Spirit present in my soul, I hear this cry, *Abba, Father*. Sometimes it is pure joy, sometimes it hurts, because it stretches me beyond my limits and comfort zone. I have learned to

stay with this cry and realize that this is the voice of Jesus Christ within me directing me to the Father and in him uniting me to all my sisters and brothers, all humanity. I don't need to understand how this works. I don't need to picture the Lord in any way because I know that our relationship is beyond what words and concepts can express. When I stay there in prayer, then the way appears clear before me. It does not mean that I know what is going to happen or that all my difficulties are gone, but I know in my head but also in my heart that Jesus became human so that I can walk towards the Father just as he did. For me, this means being a Cistercian nun, a good sister to my sisters and an intercessor for the whole world. What does this mean to you?

If you want to find Jesus' way for you, make silence to listen to the cry of his Spirit in your heart. Don't ask him many questions but ask him to teach you to love the Father and your neighbor as he did. You will never regret your next step. *Abba, Father!*

Sr Maria Gonzalo

Our Lady of the Angels Monastery