

***How are we to cultivate love for Jesus?  
From the Holy One of God – Raniero Cantalamesa***

I have done my best to answer the question: ‘What does loving Jesus Christ mean?’ but I am very conscious that what I have said falls far short of what might have been said and that only the saints could say. A liturgical hymn often recited on feastdays of Jesus, runs:

No tongue of mortal can express,  
no letters write its blessedness:  
alone who hath thee in his heart  
knows, love of Jesus! what thou art.<sup>19</sup>

Ours can be no more than a collection of crumbs fallen from the table of the masters (cf Mt 1:27), that is to say, an anthology of the experience of the great lovers of Jesus. To them it is, who have made the experiment, that we should have recourse if we wan to learn the art of loving Jesus Christ. To St Paul, for instance, who wished to be released from the body in order ‘to be with Christ’ (cf Phil 1:23), or to St Ignatius of Antioch who wrote on the eve of martyrdom: ‘It is a beautiful thing to set in the world for the Lord’s sake and to rise again with him. . . All I desire is to find Jesus Christ. . . I seek him who died for me, I desire him who rose again for me!’<sup>20</sup>

But is it possible to love Jesus, now the Word of God can no longer be seen, touched and contemplated with our fleshly eyes? St Leo the Great said that ‘all visible properties of our Lord Jesus Christ, on his ascension, passed into the sacraments of the church.’<sup>21</sup> It is therefore through the sacraments and especially through the Eucharist that our love for Christ is nourished, since the ineffable union with him takes place in these. It is possible to love Jesus Christ, for the reason that we have illustrated in the previous chapter: because he is a living and ‘existent’ person. He is not, that is to say, merely an historical figure or a philosophical concept, but a ‘you’, a ‘friend’, who can hence be loved wit the love-of-friendship.

There is an infinite number of methods for cultivating this friendship with Jesus and we each have our own preferred means, our own gift, our own way. It may be in his word that we experience him living and conversing with us; it may be in prayer. Yet in every case the Spirit’s unction is needful, for only the Holy Spirit knows who Jesus is and can inspire us with love for Jesus.

I should like to draw attention to one method which has always been dear to Tradition, especially to that of the Orthodox Church: *the memory of Jesus*. He entrusted himself, as it were, to the disciples’ *memory* when he said: ‘Do this in memory of me’ (LK 22:19). Memory is the door of the heart. ‘Since a sorrow full of grace’, writes Cabasilas again, ‘is born from love for Christ, and love from the thoughts that have Christ and his love for the human race as their object, it is very useful to keep such thoughts in the memory, revolving them in the soul and never taking respite from this activity. . . Thinking about Christ is the proper activity for baptized souls.’<sup>22</sup> St Paul had already made the connection between loving Christ and remembering him: ‘Love for Christ

overwhelms us at the thought that one has died for all' (2 Cor 5:14). When we for our part reflect and in our minds weigh up (*krinantes*) this deed, i.e., that he died for our sake, for all of us, we are as it were constrained to love Jesus in return. The thought or remembrance of him 'kindles' love.

In this sense, we may say that to love Jesus Christ we need to rediscover and cultivate a taste for the inner life and contemplation. The Apostle establishes this correspondence: in so far as 'we are strengthened in the inner man', Christ dwells in our hearts by faith; then, rooted and grounded in love, we come to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and to know 'the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge' (cf Eph 3: 14-19). So we must begin by strengthening the inner self, which for a believer means believing more, hoping more, praying more, letting ourselves be guided more by the Spirit. 'Christ in us, the hope of glory' (cf Col 1:27): this is the perfect definition of Christian inner life.

The greatest good fortune, or grace, that can befall young people—especially if called to the priesthood or in whatever manner to proclaim Christ to their fellows— is to make him their life's grand ideal, the 'hero' with whom they are in love and whom they want to make known to everyone. To be in love with Christ makes other members of God's people fall in love with him too. There is no finer vocation than this. To set Jesus as a seal upon one's heart. In the Song of Songs, it is in fact the bride, according to the traditional interpretation, the soul, who says to the bridegroom: 'Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm' (Son 8:6). But the bridegroom, Christ, has already granted this request of his own accord; he has indeed set us as a seal upon his heart and upon his hands. A seal bloody and indelible. But the invitation is reciprocal. The bride too must set Christ as a seal on her heart. And that is why Christ now says to Church and individual soul: 'Set me as a seal upon your heart!' A seal, not there to prevent us from loving other people and other things—wife, husband, children, friends, souls and other good things—but to prevent us from loving them without him, outside him or instead of him.

If the Church in her deepest being is Christ's 'bride' (cf Eph 5:25f; Rev 19:7), what in particular is expected of a bride if not that she should love her husband? Does anything avail, if this is lacking? For loving Christ is 'the proper activity for baptized souls', the proper vocation of the Church.

If a young person feeling a radical call to follow Christ were to ask my advice along these lines: What ought I to do to persevere in my vocation and so one day be an enthusiastic and convinced proclaimer of Christ? I think I should instantly reply: Fall in love with Jesus, with him try to establish a relationship of intimate, humble friendship, then go serenely forward to meet the future. The world will try to beguile you by all sorts of means but it will not succeed, since 'he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 Jn 4:4).

After Peter had replied: 'Lord, you know that I love you' Jesus said to him: 'Feed my sheep.' For we cannot feed Christ's sheep and we cannot proclaim Jesus Christ to them, unless we love Jesus Christ. WE need, as I said at the beginning, in certain respects to become poets in order to hymn the 'Hero', and only love can really make us like that.

Would to heaven that when our lives and our 'humble service in the house of the Hero' come to an end, we too may repeat, as our testament, the poet's words:

This little pipe of cane  
I have carried up-hill and down-dale,  
and through it I have breathed  
melodies eternally new.<sup>23</sup>

The melody eternally new that we ought to carry up-hill and down-dale to the ends of the earth is that sweetest of all names for us: Jesus.

#### NOTES

- 1 St Thomas Aquinas, S.Th., I, IIae, Q. 28, A. I.
- 2 St John of the Cross, *Sentences*, n. 57.
- 3 Dante, *Inferno*, V, 103.