

Rocca di Papa, 5 February 1979

Jesus in Those Who Suffer (Part I)*The Last Judgement*

I think it is appropriate to read now, in its entirety, the passage describing the most awe-inspiring and momentous event that all of us will one day have to experience: “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and clothed you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Mt 25:31-46).”

Jesus in the needy, in the writings of the Fathers

Here we see the importance of the human being, the importance of our neighbours in need. We are the ones who need them in order to possess eternal life; and if we do not care for them, we cannot escape hell.

John Chrysostom tried to open the eyes about this truth, because at a certain moment he makes one tremble and rejoice, to open the eyes of the Christians of his day, and which then, as now, Christians often forget and he says: “... But we... do not even feed [the poor person] when he is hungry.... And yet if you saw Christ himself, everyone of you would strip himself of all his possessions. But even now it is he [Christ] who presents himself, for he himself has said, ‘It is I.’ Why then do you not strip yourself of everything?” says Chrysostom. “For even now you hear him say, ‘you do it to me.’ ... In fact, if he were not the one to receive what you give, he would not grant you the kingdom. If you were not rejecting [Christ] himself, when you despise him in any person, he would not send you to hell. But it is precisely because you are despising him, that the blame is so great.”¹ The blame is so great, not because you despise the human being, but because you despise precisely him [Christ], because he is seen in the human being.

¹ John Chrysostom, "In Mt. hom." 88, 3, "Commento al Vangelo di S. Matteo", II, Rome 1966, p. 357-358.

Thinking this over carefully, it seems that of all God has commanded us to do, one thing alone is of value: love for the suffering and for those in need. It is “as if,” in the words of Leo the Great, “those on the right had no other virtue, and those on the left no other sin.”²

In reading the Fathers of the Church, I found fiery words that reinforce this truth. The unexcelled master on the subject is the enlightened and forceful John Chrysostom.

Reading a passage of his comment on the Gospel of Matthew, which is that passage that we read on the final judgment made our, my heart jump for joy, because there is something that resembles the Ideal. Yes, because it seems to me that the Lord has always directed us to focus our attention first of all on our neighbour whom we see, in order to love God concretely, whom we do not see - just as John tells us (see 1 Jn 4:20). Then everything else becomes worthwhile, including the liturgy. The Ideal didn't start with the liturgy, it started with our neighbour, with loving our neighbour, then we also understood the value of the liturgy and every form of worship. Also the liturgy and every form of worship acquires value later. In fact the Gospel says: “So if... your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother” (Mt 5:23-24). Then it is also written: “Above all, hold unfailing your love for one another” (1 Pt 4:8).

Here, then, are the eloquent words of John Chrysostom, listen: “What does Christ gain if his table [and his altar] is covered with cups of gold, while he himself is dying of hunger in those who are poor? First fill him in his hunger, and then, if there is money left over, decorate also his altar. Will you offer him a golden chalice and not give him a glass of cold water? What good will that do him? You obtain clothes woven with gold for the altar, but you do not offer him the clothes he needs.... Tell me: if you were to see a man without sufficient food, would you leave him in his hunger and set about covering the table with silver? Do you think he would thank you, or would he not instead become indignant?

And if you were to see someone dressed in rags, and not bother to give him something to wear; but instead, you began to erect gilded columns, saying that you were doing it in his honour, don't you think he would consider that you were mocking him, and that what you were doing was an insult of the worst kind? Then think the same way with regard to Christ when he is going about as a wanderer or a stranger in need of a roof to shelter him.... I say this not to prohibit you from honouring him with such gifts, but to exhort you to help the poor as well as give gifts, or rather, to help the poor before giving gifts.

God has never blamed anyone for not having given expensive gifts to adorn his temples; but as regards not helping the poor, he threatens us with hell. Therefore, while adorning his house, do not overlook your neighbour who is in distress, for he/she is more precious a temple than the other [church building].

Unbelieving kings, tyrants and thieves – this is good - these treasures of yours [in the churches] can be despoiled by unbelieving kings, tyrants, and thieves, but what you have done for your neighbour who is hungry or a stranger or naked, not even the devil can take from you because it will be laid up in a safe place.”³

And Cyprian was of the same mind: “With your patrimony... feed Christ.... Lay up your treasures where no thief will dig them up and no treacherous robber will break in. Acquire possessions for yourself, but in heaven, where your fruits will last for all eternity, free from every contact with the world's injustice, and where no rust will consume them, where no hail can strike them down, where the sun will not burn them nor the rain ruin them. For you are offending God himself if you believe that he has given you wealth so that you could make use of it without concern for salvation.”⁴

² Leo the Great, "Serm.", 10, 2 (PL 54, 165).

³ John Chrysostom, "In Mt. hom." 50, 4, "Commento al Vangelo di S. Matteo", II, Rome 1966, p. 323-324.

⁴ Cyprian, "L'abito delle vergini", 11 (PL 4,461-462).

Love for the poor becomes a source of great peace and hope when we realize that, since Jesus considers as done to him whatever we do for those in need, he becomes indebted to us and we become his creditors.

Ambrose affirms this: “Lend the Lord your money through the hands of the poor. The Lord is held liable; he records whatever the needy receive. The gospel is your guarantee.... Why do you hesitate to give?... For you, the poor person is the Lord of heaven and the Creator of this world. Are you still trying to think how you can find a richer guarantor?”⁵

“Gifts given to the poor put God under obligation, for it is written, ‘Whoever gives to the poor lends to the Lord’ (Prov 19:17).”⁶

And the recompense we will receive from Jesus will be great: “Listen to what you will receive in possessions from him to whom you have made your loan: ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit....’ the kingdom! “... Desire this, work to obtain this, let this be the purpose of your lending.”⁷

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⁵ Ambrose, "Tobia", (PL 14,818-819).

⁶ Ambrose, "Lettere", 21, 33 (PL 16, 1060).

⁷ Augustine, "In S1." 36,3,6, in "Opere di S. Agostino. Esposizioni sui salmi", vol. 25, Città Nuova, Rome 1967, p. 819 e 821 (PL 36, 388).