

Being Submerged in the Water

At six in the afternoon of the following day, the first phase of the task of transferring the ALMA Marriage Encounter to Madrid was finished. Five of the various couples that had traveled from Chile took the TGV at the Chamartin train station to cross the Pyrenees. In spite of the accumulated weariness caused by the intensity experienced in the previous nights, we did not want to sleep but watched through the window as the nocturnal countryside sped by at great speed. We commented on the various armies, battles and events that had taken place here as we sat in the dining room of the train before closing our eyes for a few hours in the comfortable bunks and waking up in Paris.

Our first experience in the city where the Sacred Heart co-exists with the Moulin Rouge and particularly the subways, was not pleasant since having purchased a map we had to go up and down an interminable number of stairs and change trains carrying the heavy suitcases (which contained all the manuals, papers, adequate clothing, and a great number of documents necessary for the coordination of the first transfers of ALMA) in order to get from Gare d'Austerlitz to Montmartre to the small hotel where we had reservations.

We were very, very grateful to God, at least my wife and I were, as we had waited thirty years to realize our desire to visit the Louvre, to walk along the Champs Elysees, to see the obelisk in the Concord Plaza and the Eiffel Tower, to float down the Seine in a bateaux mouch, reviewing the land of the French Revolution and bringing to mind the writers of the Illustration, the manifestations of May 68 in the Latin sector, the cobblestone barricades in Saint Germain des Prés and the impressive Notre Dame where one can spend hours reviewing sacred history in the lintels engraved in stone and in the stained glass windows.

Our excitement continued as we had tickets on the Eurotrain and after a few short days continued on to Rome.

We left for the following day the visit to the Vatican Museum, the Sistine Chapel, the imposing Cathedral of St. Peter, a truly Italian pizza, and proving the superstition of throwing money into the Trevi Fountain. Upon arriving at the hotel, I asked about the catacombs and we arranged a tour by van. The rest of the delegation enthusiastically joined us.

We traveled down the Apian Way, paved with thousands of stones, where St. Paul was received by the Christians after suffering two years as a prisoner in the port of Cesarea (near Tel Aviv). When at last his appeal to Cesar was conceded, the ship was wrecked near the island of Malta, but they finally reached the mainland.

We recalled the multitude of Christians dead and crucified as living torches to illuminate Nero's palaces and thousands of holy families devoured by lions in the Roman Coliseum. Finally we descended by the long stairway to reach the galleries of the St. Calixto Catacombs. We were filled with emotion and our commitment and gratitude to God grew for the faithfulness of millions of unknown Christians who through great pain and at the cost of their own lives opened the way that the faith might arrive intact to our days.

In these catacombs they celebrated worship services, teaching and sharing communion in times of persecution. Engravings and drawings emphasize the rite of Christian initiation: baptism

This commandment is found from the initial pages of the gospel record. When Christ began His ministry at thirty years of age, the first thing He did was be baptized, and in the passing of some two thousand years there have been varied ways of realizing this ceremony.

As mentioned, in the first centuries the Christians had to meet in these subterranean cemeteries due to the danger implicit in openly acknowledging their faith in Jesus Christ. Many time people who took this step had to do so clandestinely, even risking the loss of their belongings, jobs and lives.

There are other occasions, as in our country today, when there was neither risk nor danger in doing so. In some cultures or social groups it implies overcoming shame and contempt since there are many who do not understand this sacred act or make fun of doing it openly.

The Apostle Paul himself experienced these reactions when he spoke explaining the essence of the good news of the Gospel in his masterly discourse in the Areopagus in Athens, the supreme court made up of skillful magistrates, cultured people from this symbolic city full of splendor, the cradle of philosophers, science, art and democracy, the lofty place of significant discussions and debates in the Macedonia dominated in those days by Rome.

The faithful historian tells us that such was the impact of his words that although some mocked, many were fascinated and came back to hear those new concepts they were learning for the first time in that culture.

Others, like the areopagan judge responsible for what happened in that forum, believed and upon profession of faith were baptized along with their entire family.

What persuaded this lawyer to ignore the scorn and taunts of his peers? The certainty of proving the work of the carpenter of Nazareth in his own mind and heart, having received forgiveness of sins, transgressions and shortcomings as well as a new life received by faith that included present peace and eternal life. You can read the complete speech that touched this Athenian family in Acts chapter seventeen.

There is only one door to heaven. You may be baptized Catholic, Presbyterian, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Coptic, or any other of the Christian persuasions, but that is not the determining factor. There is only one condition to entering heaven and that is to experience the new birth that the Scriptures clearly establish.

You must be born again

You must be born into the spiritual life. When Nicodemus heard from the lips of the Master this requirement, he was confused and asked:

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"²

Beyond all the diverse manners Christians express worship, at times similar and routine, at others emotional, effusive or quiet, according to the different customs and cultures of the one expressing his faith, worship and prayer. God opens the door of eternal life to us when we accept Christ by faith into our heart. He writes our name in the Civil Registry of Heaven which is called the Lamb's Book or the Book of Life. We then have the assurance of permanent communion with the Lord for all time and eternity.

Baptism is an external act, the external symbol of that internal reality that took place in the heart of a person when, in a moment of his earthly walk, he became conscious of his transgressions, was confronted by the Word of God, understood the difference between good and evil, and having looked into the Word as into a mirror, has recognized his faults and accepted the Lord in order to begin that new life. Baptism then expresses this new birth.

In the catacombs they dressed in white robes as a symbol of purity, holiness, and transparency, indicating not that they were perfect but that the Lord had cleansed and forgiven their past sins.

There are people who may have sinned greatly; others may say they are a good man or woman, never having killed anyone. Nevertheless, the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Every man born into this world needs a Redeemer. He may be a murderer, an adulterer, a transgressor, an abuser, whatever may have been his past, God forgives him when he repents, when he presents himself before God and accepts the grace and forgiveness that Jesus Christ purchased for him outside Jerusalem when he was crucified and shed his blood for each and every one of us.

Before presenting those who are going to take this step and hearing their testimonies, I would like to read and comment on a precious Psalm written some three thousand years ago. Psalm 40 was written by King David when he reigned around the year 1000 BC, clearly reflecting how the grace of God changes lives and transforms hearts.

I invite you to pay attention and concentrate as you read or listen to the Word of God:

*¹ I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.*

*² He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.*

*³ He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.*

⁴ *Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.*

⁵ *Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done.
The things you planned for us no one can recount to you;
were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare.*

⁶ *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, **but my ears you have pierce**;
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.*

⁷ *Then I said, "Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll.*

⁸ *I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."*

⁹ *I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD.*

¹⁰ *I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation.
I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly.*

This beautiful Psalm continues, but I want to leave in your mind these ten verses and comment on some of the concepts found in them.

Doubtless King David was living in a desperate situation, feeling limited and full of anguish. Poetically the Psalm illustrates how God rescued him from the dungeon, from the cistern, from the deep well. When people live in depression or prolonged afflictions, or when the circumstances of life bring them into extreme situations, perhaps through economic problems, bankruptcy, uncertainties at work, or illnesses that come upon them and catch them unawares, which can happen any time, profound adverse circumstances - suddenly the person looks at his life and recognizes that he is in a deep hole, which graphically illustrates what he is living.

What are the characteristics of a well or a cistern? First, there is no light: it is totally dark. Besides it is deep: there is no exit without a rope, without someone from outside lowering a ladder. How many people, children and adults, have we seen in the press or on television, who have been rescued by firemen from a hole into which they have fallen and cannot escape by their own means.

We find David in those circumstances. He tells us that the floor of the pit was not dry but was of slimy mud. He did not even have firm ground to stand on. There was swampy water that made it difficult to stand or try to jump out. Probably, in spite of the adverse circumstances, he made various attempts to get out. Perhaps he tried scaling the walls, taking hold of the ridges, of the irregularities of the waterwheel but would slip back time after time without being able to reach his objective.

This is a real and dramatic image of the anguish that we as human being often experience. In these circumstances David shares what he did and the attitude he assumed:

I waited patiently for the LORD

A more literal translation of the Hebrew is “with hope I waited for the Lord”. He waited with hope, with patience, not falling from his faith in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of anguish, in the midst of the darkness, with the water up to his neck, full of distress, without a future, nearing death; with hope he waited for the Lord up to the end.

How much I want you who are here now listening to or reading this reflection and who are living a similar situation, not to lose patience. I am writing this late at night and want to bear witness, to encourage you to appropriate this Psalm, to take hold of the promise and to wait with expectancy. Claim His peace and wait because the Lord is not going to leave you in the pit if you seek Him. It says *I waited patiently for the LORD*. He had faith, confidence that He would rescue him and God inclined his ear to his prayer.

What a tremendous image: The God, who created the heavens and the earth and the entire universe, stoops down, makes this gesture of humility, this precious gesture showing attention, as when one has to accommodate his body, incline his ear, and bend over to listen to the plea of a child. God is God of gods, King of kings, Lord of Lords, and he bends down to listen attentively to a person in distress and hear his cry, his petition, paying special attention to the troubled heart and in those circumstances of patiently waiting for the Lord, He heard the cry from David’s soul and rescued him from the pit of his desperation.

Recognizing that God extended his hand and lifted him out of the slimy mud, that is salvation, that is the precious act of conversion when a person passes from the darkness to the glorious light, when the blindfold is taken from our human eyes and we are permitted by faith to unravel spiritual mysteries and understand the Scriptures, the reality of the invisible kingdom. After having been saved and given life in the midst of death, the Psalmist adds:

He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand

Walking in a swamp is very different from putting your feet on a firm rock where one can find support and be able to advance. That is what it is like when a person turns to Christ, when anyone, in any condition, culture or race, surrenders to the Lord and waits for Him. The Lord puts him on a firm path and straightens out his way as is stated here. God’s ways are not our ways, God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and divine values are not the transitory values of society that pass away and disappear. They are values that endure forever. Undoubtedly this implies a change of conduct, of habits, of life style, of the way we think, in order to live in this world according to heavenly dictates.

Upon regaining his footing, the songwriter takes his harp and composes these verses as a testimony:

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God

Recently we all sang together. How beautiful it is when the grateful soul breaks forth in song expressing that gratitude in words

Those of us who can speak, who are not mute, let us sing to the Lord while we have a voice to do so. The person who is mute can sing in his heart as the blind person who cannot see but can sing with his soul, while we who have a voice can sing a new song of praise to the Lord, sing with joy, not as we have sung before when we did not understand the words, but with a heart that knows and understands.

Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD. People will hear their testimony and say that something is happening with Christians, the changes are evident.

A little while ago one who is going to be baptized today commented, I saw the change in my daughter; in my husband, in my sister - their new language. Knowing them so closely and for such a long time, I see profound changes for the good (because people can change for the worse), such interesting changes, so rapid, so unexpected, that it made me investigate what they had.

Some of the family members who are now believers have come to know what their son is involved in, the church they are participating in. It seems to me correct that they have come to investigate. Not a few have come out of curiosity or to support their family and have found Christ here. It is to be hoped that this day you also, my beloved reader, will have an encounter with the resurrected Christ, the Christ of the Scriptures, that Lord that makes no exception of persons, who reveals himself beyond the different families and expressions of Christian worship that exist in the world – that King who also loves you and is waiting for a signal from you to lift you out of the pit of desperation, put a new song on your lips and straighten your path.

⁴ *Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.*
⁵ *Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done.
The things you planned for us no one can recount to you;*

The holy text says that it is impossible to recount God's thoughts but they are thoughts for the good of His children, such as we human beings are, and especially those whom He has adopted, those who have accepted Him and received Him into their heart, innumerable as the sand on the sea shore.

Scripture says that all of us are born natural sons. We are all children of God in the generic sense. We are God's creatures, created in the image and likeness of God, but there is an experience in life, a moment when we surrender our lives to the Lord, and He gives us salvation. Then He adopts us as His children and we become part of the universal family of God. We can then understand the thoughts, the principles, and the truths of His Word. I would like to emphasize what is expressed in this verse:

but my ears you have pierced

This verse has a double reference. The most obvious is to think of the case when someone is deaf and their ears are opened. Symbolically one can be deaf to the things of God. By the grace of the Lord I have been permitted to present, to teach and preach the gospel and the

Word for several years now, and I have been able to distinguish many deaf persons. What does a spiritually deaf person do? He is simply bored, he yawns, he stops reading the Scripture, and he doesn't pay attention to the development of the thought, the teachings, and the rational or theological arguments given in an exegesis or an explanation of a Scriptural portion.

The prophet says their ears are heavy: they are not interested in the Word and so they go to sleep, they turn the page, they close the book. It is like a deaf person who can be present at a lecture of one, two or three hours and since they don't know what is being said, they sleep, they don't listen, they don't understand.

Spiritual deafness is a reality and here the Psalmist says that God has pierced (opened) his ears. When God really opens your ears everything that has to do with the Word of God becomes tremendously interesting – all its instruction, the entire text, every portion of Scripture contributes to nurture our spirit, to feed our soul, and is therefore noteworthy in building up our life.

That is the obvious explanation, the first explanation, but there is another beautiful symbolic meaning. In Old Testament times the Israeli people celebrated a year of jubilee. As a result of economic situations, agricultural blessings or difficulties, or just greater diligence, some people became rich while others became poor. Hence some were able to increase their lands and buy slaves. But every seven years there was a special year of Jubilee and after a cycle of seven sets of seven years, the 50th year was celebrated by returning the lands to their original owners in order to maintain the equality, avoid large estates and prevent social inequalities. We are not going to spend time now on that but will explain this concept of voluntarily accepting slavery the seventh year. The best text to read is Exodus 21 where this teaching appears along with the historic record of what happened.

¹ *"These are the laws you are to set before them:*

² *"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.*

One could buy a servant but the seventh year he was set free.

³ *If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.*

⁴ *If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.*

⁵ *"But if the servant declares,*

'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,'

⁶ *then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.*

It also symbolizes the reality that the human being continues to experience today, the possibility of choosing. To choose between doing what he wants with his life or, for love of the Lord, for love of his wife, for love of his children, to deny himself, to continue with the Owner and deny himself individual pleasures and delights. In that case his ears are opened.

With an awl the ears were perforated. That bit of iron with a sharp tip, that tool with a wooden handle that shoemakers and artisans used to make holes in leather, was used to make a hole in the ear and an earring was then put in it as a symbol of perpetual slavery.

For love of the Lord, for love of the family, I will follow the steps of Christ. I recognize I will have an owner; my life does not belong to me but to the Lord. That is what redemption means. He rescued us, He bought us. He acquired us in the marketplace and brought us into his service. He set us free from slavery to sin and made us into servants of righteousness.

Thus baptism also symbolizes this supreme act when we say to the Lord: in the first place we are yours; we consecrate our lives to you; we don't belong to ourselves, we are your children and will do what you want for our future. That is the only thing that gives us fullness, joy and happiness as it opens our eyes bringing wisdom, obedience to the Word, and signaling that God is our Authority and we will follow Him all our lives until He call us into His presence.

Naturally, that implies adjusting our way of life according to His will.

If you have not yet recognized Christ as Lord, do so right now. I beg you in love to give your life to Christ because it is the best thing that can happen, the most significant thing that a human being can experience, knowing Christ as Lord of his life. It does not mean that from now on there will be no suffering, no pain, but that your perspective and the way you live your life will be different.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

How wonderful it is that the Word dwells in our heart, that it encourages us. With reason it has been translated into two thousand languages and dialects.

Millions of people, innumerable as the stars of the heavens, have recognized Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives.

This is your opportunity. Don't let it go by.

Rev. Francisco Javier Rivera

Translation: Joan Meger