

TIME IS A TREASURE

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When I am talking to you, when all of us gather to converse with God our Lord, I simply voice aloud my personal prayer. I remind you of this often, for you too have to make an effort to feed that prayer within your own souls. Sometimes, for some reason, the topic of our prayer might not, at first glance, seem very appropriate for a dialogue of love. Yet dialogue of love is what our conversation with God should always be. Today's topic is such a one: our use of time. I said at first glance, because everything that happens to us, everything that goes on around us, should find its way into the time we set aside for meditation.

I have to talk to you about time, about this time that flies. I am not going to repeat that well-known phrase about one year more being one year less... Neither am I going to suggest to you that you ask what others think of the passage of time. Were you to do so, you would probably hear something like "O divine treasure of youth that slips away, never to come back..." I do not exclude, though, the possibility of hearing other thoughts of a more supernatural nature.

It is not my purpose either to stress specifically the point that life is short, with a note of nostalgia. Christians should be incited to make better use of the time they have in this brief journey through life. They should in no way fear our Lord, and even less consider death as a disastrous end. It has been said in a thousand ways, more or less poetically, that, with the grace and mercy of God, a year that ends is another step that takes us nearer to heaven, our definitive home.

In spite of this reality, I understand very well that exclamation of St. Paul when he writes to the Corinthians, "time is short" (1 Cor 7:29). How briefly does our passage through this earth last! These words, for an authentic Christian, ring as a

reproach in the depths of the heart for having lacked generosity. They are also a constant invitation to be more loyal. Time is really very short for loving, for giving, for atoning. It would be an injustice therefore to waste it or to let this treasure lie irresponsibly fallow. We cannot spoil the particular age of the world's history entrusted to each one of us by God.

Let us open St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25: "The kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise" (Mt 25: 1-2). The evangelist relates how the wise virgins had made good use of their time. They had prudently provided themselves with the necessary amount of oil, and they were ready when they were told that it was time. "Behold the bridegroom, come out to meet him!" (Mt 25:6). They then trimmed their lamps and joyfully went out to welcome him.

That day will come. It will be the last day, but it does not frighten us. Trusting firmly in the grace of God, we are ready from now on to be generous and strong, caring for details, and to keep that appointment with the Lord, taking burning lamps with us. For the great feast of heaven awaits us. "My dearly beloved brethren, it is we who are present at the wedding of the Word. We who already have faith in the Church, who are fed on sacred Scripture, who rejoice because the Church is united to God. Consider then, I pray

you, if you have come to the wedding with the nuptial garment: examine your thoughts attentively" (1). I assure you, and I assure myself, that this nuptial garment will be woven from love for God, which we will have known how to gather from the most trivial tasks. For people who are in love are precisely those who know how to take care of details, even in apparently unimportant things.

But let us follow the thread of the parable. What do the foolish virgins do? From then on, they are bent on preparing a welcome for the Lord. They go to buy oil. But they have been late in making up their minds. And while they were gone, "the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us" (Mt 25: 10-11). It is not that they remained inactive: they tried something... But they had to listen to the voice that answers them harshly: "I do not know you" (Mt 25:12). They either did not know how or did not want to prepare things as they should have done, and they forgot to take the necessary precaution of buying oil in due time. They were not generous enough in fulfilling the little entrusted to them. They had indeed many hours to spare, but they wasted time.

Let us think courageously about our life. Why is it that we do not seem to find a few minutes sometimes to finish lovingly the work we have to do and which is the means of our sanctification? Why do we have the tendency to rush through our prayers or the holy sacrifice of the Mass? Why can we not be calm and serene when fulfilling our duties of state and yet waste so much time with no sense of hurry when following the whims of our fancy? You might answer: these things are trifles. Yes, indeed they are. But those trifles are the oil, the fuel that keeps our flame alive and our light shining.

From the first hour

"The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard" (Mt 20:1). You know how the story goes: the man returns several times to the marketplace to hire workers. Some were called at dawn, others very near dusk.

They all received a silver piece: "the wages that had been promised, that is to say, my image and likeness. The image of the king is engraved on the denarius" (2). Such is the mercy of God that he calls each one according to his personal circumstances, because "he wants all men to be saved" (Tim 2:4). But we have been born and have been brought up in the faith; we have received the clear calling of the Lord. We cannot deny it. Therefore when you feel you must answer the call, even if it is at the last hour,

how can you linger in the marketplace, basking in the sun — as so many of those workers did, because they had too much time on their hands?

We cannot have time to spare, not even a second — and I am not exaggerating. There is plenty of work to be done. The world is huge, and there are millions of souls who have not yet heard the doctrine of Christ in all its clarity and fullness. I am addressing each one of you personally. If you have time to spare, just think a little. It might be that you are steeped in lukewarmness or that, supernaturally speaking, you are a cripple. You are not moving, you are at a standstill, you are barren. You are not developing all the good that you could communicate to those around you, among your friends at work or in your family.

Perhaps you might say: And why should I make an effort? It is not I who answer you, but St. Paul: "For us Christ's love is a compelling motive" (2 Cor 5:14). A lifetime is too short to grow in charity. From the very beginnings of Opus Dei I have encouraged generous souls to convert their desires into deeds by unceasingly repeating that proclamation of Christ. "In this they will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another" (Jn 12:35). Charity should "give us away," because it should be the motivation of all we do.

He, who is purity personified, does not tell us that his disciples will be known by the purity of their lives. He, who so lived temperance that he had nowhere to lay his head (cf Mt 8:20), and who retired for so many days without eating (cf Mt 4:2), did not tell the apostles: you will be known as my chosen ones because you are not gluttonous or given to drink.

The clean life of Christ was — as it has been and always will be — a slap in the face of the society of his time, which was, as now, so often rotten. His temperance also stung those who spent their lives in banquets, wherein they would induce vomiting so they could continue to eat, thus fulfilling to the letter the words of Paul: they have converted their stomachs into a god (cf Phil 3:9).

Our Lord's humility was another blow for those who spent their lives looking entirely after themselves. Since I have lived in Rome, I have often commented — and perhaps you have heard me say — that underneath the arches, now in ruins, marched the conquering emperors, along with their victorious generals, vain, haughty, filled with pride. And when they passed under those monuments, perhaps they lowered their heads for fear of hitting the great archway with their majestic brows. However the humble Christ did not proclaim: you will be known as my disciples for your modesty and humility.

I would like to help you realize that, some twenty centuries later, the novelty of the New Commandment is still as striking as ever. It is as it were a letter of

introduction of one who is truly a son of God. Throughout my priestly life I have very often preached on how this commandment continues unfortunately to be new for so many, because they have never, or hardly ever, made an effort to practise it. It is a sad story, but that is how it is. The Messiah's assertion stands out very clearly: by this you will be known, *that you love one another*. That is why I feel the need to remind people constantly about these words of the Lord. St. Paul adds: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Think of the amount of time you have wasted, perhaps with the false excuse that you could easily afford it... And yet there are so many brothers and friends of yours who are overworked! Help them gently, kindly, with a smile on your lips, in such a way that it will be practically impossible for them to notice what you are doing for them. Thus, they will not even be able to express their gratitude, for the delicate refinement of your charity will have made your help pass undetected.

The poor virgins who go about with empty lamps would protest that they had not had a moment to spare. The workers at the marketplace can afford to waste most of the day, because they do not feel bound to render any services, even though they were sought by the Lord constantly, urgently, from the first hour. Let us make sure that we accept the work offered to us and endure out of love — which will then no longer be a question of endurance — "the burden of the day and of the heat" (Mt 20:4).

To render unto God

Let us now consider the parable of the man who "going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property" (Mt 25:14). He gave a different amount to each one to administer in his absence. I think it is very appropriate that we consider what the man who received but one talent did with it. He acted in a way that in my part of the world is likened to a "cheating cuckoo." He pondered with his little brain and then "went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money" (Mt 25:18).

What will his business be from then on, if he has given up the tools of his trade? Irresponsibly, he had decided to choose the easy way out of giving back only what he had received. He will spend his time killing minutes, hours, days, months and years — a whole lifetime! Others are busy trading, with a noble concern to render more than they had received. They realize fruits are expected of them. After all, were not the instructions clear? "Trade till I come" (Lk 19:13). You are left in charge of the business to make a profit, until the owner comes back. But he who received one talent does not act accordingly. He makes his very existence superfluous.

What a shame it is to have as one's occupation in life that of killing time, time which is a God-given treasure! There is no possible excuse that could justify such omissions. "Let no one say: I only have one talent, I can gain nothing. You can also act in a meritorious way with only one talent" (3). How sad it would be not to make the most, a real profit, out of the few or many gifts that God has entrusted to man so that he might dedicatedly serve other souls and the whole of society!

When a Christian kills time on this earth he places himself in danger of *killing heaven* for himself — where through selfishness he secludes himself from others, hides and does not care. He who loves God not only renders unto God whatever he has, what he is, for the service of Christ; he gives himself. He does not seek fulfillment in health or name or career.

Many think and say: this is *mine, mine, mine...* What an ignoble attitude! St. Jerome comments: "Truly those words of Scripture, 'to seek excuses for sins' (Ps 140:4), are fulfilled by the people who add, to their sin of pride, that of laziness and negligence" (4).

It is pride that constantly tempts us to affix to things *my, mine, mine*. It is a vice that transforms man into a sterile creature and nullifies any desires of working for God by deceiving him into wasting time. Be sure you are effective; trample on your selfishness. Let not your life be for yourself, but for God, for the good of all men, for the love of the Lord. Dig that talent up again! Make it be productive and you will taste the joy of knowing that in this supernatural business it does not matter if the results in this world are not wonders that men can admire. The essential thing is to renounce all that we are and all that we have, to strive to make our talent yield, and constantly to exert ourselves in order to produce good fruit.

God gives us perhaps another year to serve him. Do not think in five or in two more years. Concentrate on the year that has just begun. Give it, do not bury it! This is what our resolution has to be.

Cultivating the vineyard

"There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went abroad" (Mt 21:33). I would like you to meditate with me on what this parable teaches, from the point of view we are interested in now. Tradition has seen in this story a figure of the destiny of God's chosen people, and has mainly pointed out how we human beings respond with infidelity and ingratitude to so much love on God's part.

In particular I want to fix my attention on that phrase "and went abroad." I come immediately to

the conclusion that we Christians must not abandon the vineyard in which God has placed us. We have to invest all our strength in that work, inside the

hedge, busy at the winepress. And when the day's work is over, we rest in the tower. If we were to allow ourselves to be dragged away by our own comfort, it would be as if we answered back to Christ: Listen, my years are mine, not for you. I do not want to commit myself to looking after your vineyard.

Along with the gift of life, the Lord has given us senses, faculties, untold graces, and we have no right to forget that each one of us is a worker among many others in this property where we have been placed to collaborate in the task of providing food for others. This is our place, within these boundaries. Here we have to spend ourselves daily with him, helping him in his redemptive work (cf Col 1:24).

Allow me to insist. Let not your time be for yourself, but for God. It might well be that, thanks to God's mercy, this selfishness has not entered into your soul for the moment. But I say these things to you in the event you might at some time feel that your heart wavers, that your belief in Christ is weakened. I would ask you then — it is God who asks you — to be faithful in your intent, to conquer your pride, to control your imagination. You must guard yourself against the rashness which makes you go away and leave. You must not abandon the ranks.

Those workers in the marketplace had all day to spare. The one who hid his talent wanted to kill time. The one who should have looked after the vineyard went somewhere else. They all shirk responsibility when faced with shouldering the great task the Master has commended to every Christian: to consider ourselves and to act as his instruments, to co-redeem with him; to spend our whole life in the joyful sacrifice of giving ourselves for the good of souls.

The barren fig tree

St. Matthew also tells us that Jesus felt hungry on his way back from Bethany (cf Mt 21:18). I am always deeply moved by Christ, especially when I see that he is true man, perfect man as well as perfect God. He came wrapped in flesh to teach us to make use of even our own needs and natural personal weakness, so that we can offer ourselves completely, as we are, to the Father, who gladly accepts our holocaust.

He was hungry. The Maker of the universe, the Lord of all things, suffers from hunger. I thank you, o Lord, for the divine inspiration which moved the sacred author to leave your distinctive initials on this passage — one more detail that makes me love you

more and encourages me to desire ardently the contemplation of your blessed humanity. *Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo* (5): perfect God and perfect man, with flesh and bones, just like you and me.

Jesus had worked hard the night before, and he felt hungry and he set out on another trip. This need led him to the fig tree, which, from afar, promised fruit hidden among its many leaves. St. Mark tells us that "it was not the season for figs" (Mk 11:13). But our Lord comes to pick them, knowing full well that he would not find them. When the tree proves to be barren in spite of the apparent fertility of its luxuriant foliage, he commands: "May no one ever eat fruit of you again" (Mk 11:14).

This is tough! "May you bear no fruit for evermore." How must the disciples have felt, especially if they considered that it was the Wisdom of God that had spoken? Jesus curses the fig tree because he had only found leaves of apparent fruitfulness. Thus we learn that there is no excuse for being unproductive. Perhaps one might say: "I have insufficient knowledge..." That is no excuse. Or perhaps one might add: "I am ill, I have no great talent; conditions are not favorable, my surroundings..." These are not excuses either. Wretched is the man who adorns himself with the foliage of a false apostolate, who shows an ostentatious growth of an apparently fruitful life, without sincerely attempting to produce fruit. It seems as if he makes good use of his time. He moves around. He organizes things, invents new ways of doing things... But he comes up with his hands empty. Deeds bereft of supernatural life will nurture no one.

Let us ask the Lord to make us into souls ready to work with fruitful heroism. On earth there are many people who offer others only large, splendid, lustrous leaves. Foliage and nothing more. Meanwhile people are looking to us, hoping to satisfy their hunger for God. We must not forget that we can count on all the necessary means: sufficient doctrine and the grace of God, in spite of our wretchedness.

I am reminding you again about how little time we have: "time is short" (1 Cor 7:29), life is brief. I am also reminding you once more of the fact that with the available means we need only good will to take advantage of the occasions offered by God. When our Lord came to this world, "the acceptable time, the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2) commenced for us and for all mankind. May our Father God never have to cast upon us the reproach he expressed by the voice of Jeremiah: "The stork in the air has known her time: the turtledove and the swallow and the thrush have observed the time of their coming: but my people have not known the judgment of the Lord" (Jer 8:7).

There are no inopportune or bad times: all days

are good for serving God. Bad days arise only when men spoil them with their lack of faith, with their laziness or sloth, which inclines them to avoid working with God and for God. "At all times I will bless the Lord" (Ps 33:2). Time is a treasure that flies, that comes and goes, that slips through our hands like water through the mountain rocks. Yesterday has passed, today is passing by, tomorrow will soon be another yesterday. Life is of very short duration. But so much can be done in such a short while for the love of God!

No excuse will be any good to us. The Lord has been generous with us; he has instructed us patiently; he has explained his precepts to us in parables; and he has insisted unceasingly. He could ask us, as he did Philip: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me?" (Jn 14:9). The time has come now to work hard, filling all the moments of the day, bearing willingly and joyfully "the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt 20:12).

About our Father's business

I think the following passage from the second chapter of St. Luke's Gospel will help us to finish well what we have been reflecting on. Christ is a child. His Mother and St. Joseph suffer because, while returning from Jerusalem, they do not find him among their relatives and friends. How they rejoice when they catch a glimpse of him from afar, teaching the doctors of Israel! But notice the apparently hard words with which the boy Jesus answers them: "Why did you look for me?" (Lk 2:49).

Was it not reasonable that they should look for him? Souls who know what it is to lose Christ and to find him are able to understand this. "Why did you look for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (Lk 2:49). Did you not know that I must dedicate all my time to my Father in heaven?

The fruit of our prayer today must be this: we must be convinced that our journey on earth – at

all times, whatever the circumstances – is for God, that it is a treasure of glory, a likeness of heaven. We must be convinced that we have in our hands something marvellous which we must administer with a supernatural sense, facing God and men. But it is not necessary to change our condition in life. Coming and going in the middle of the world, we can sanctify our profession or job, our home life and social relations, in fact, all those things that seem to be only worldly activities.

When at the age of twenty-six I perceived in all their depth the consequences of serving the Lord in Opus Dei, I asked with all my heart to be given eighty years of maturity. I asked God, with the childlike simplicity of a beginner, to make me many years older, in order to make the most of the time, to know how to use well every minute in his service. The Lord knows how to grant these riches. Perhaps the time will come when you and I will be able to say, "I have understood more than the elders, because I have fulfilled your commandments" (Ps 118:100). Youth must not be identified with thoughtlessness, as gray hair does not necessarily mean that one is prudent and wise.

Together let us seek the help of the Mother of Christ. Our mother, you who have seen Jesus grow and make good use of the time he spent among men: teach me to spend my days in the service of the Church and of souls. My good mother, teach me how to hear in the intimacy of my heart the gentle reproach, whenever necessary, that my time is not mine, because it belongs to our Father who is in heaven.

References

- (1) St. Gregory the Great, *In Matth. hom.*, 38, 11.
- (2) St. Jerome, *Commentarius in Matthaei librum*, 4, 3.
- (3) St. John Chrysostom, *In Matth. hom.*, 78, 3.
- (4) *Op. cit.*, 4, 4.
- (5) Athanasian Creed.