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RECEIVE, O LORD, ALL MY LIBERTY

Surrendering Your Heart to the Divine Mercy

The year was 1957 and the month was August—the dead of winter in Argentina. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the young seminarian who would become Pope Francis, lay on a hospital bed. He was in agony, and he thought he was going to die.[1]

Jorge was in his second year at the Buenos Aires diocesan seminary, trying to discern whether to continue studying for the diocesan priesthood or to enter a religious order, when he fell ill with pneumonia. The doctors were tortuously slow to diagnose him; for three days, he was at death's door. At one point, delirious with fever, he reached up from his sickbed to embrace his mother, pleading, "Tell me, what's happening to me!"[2]

Finally, the doctors determined it was necessary to remove three pulmonary cysts and a small part of Jorge's right lung. They waited until his condition stabilized and then performed the operation.

After the procedure came more pain. For days, a saline solution was pumped into the stricken seminarian's body to clean out the affected tissue, draining out through a tube in his chest. It felt to Jorge as though salt were being poured into his wounds.

Family and friends stopped by his bedside during the ordeal, but their efforts to cheer him fell flat. Witnessing his agony, they offered trite sayings such as, "This will pass," or, "Won't it be nice when you're back home?"[3]

Perhaps Bergoglio had the trauma of that hospitalization in mind when, years later, he reflected upon our reluctance to encounter the "suffering flesh" of our neighbor: "Many do not draw near at all; they keep a distance, like the Levite and the priest in the parable [of the good Samaritan]. Others draw close by intellectualizing the pain or taking refuge in platitudes ('life's like that'). Still others focus their vision narrowly and see only what they want to see. . . . Many are the ways we avoid drawing near to flesh in pain."[4]

When, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio told his biographers the story of his youthful illness, he included a fond remembrance of a special visitor to his sickbed—the only one who gave him something more than platitudes. It was Sr. Dolores Tortolo, a Mercy nun who had been dear to him ever since she prepared him for First Communion. "She told me something that truly

struck me and made me feel at peace: 'You are imitating Christ.'"[5]

That changed everything. It changed the way Jorge experienced the trauma of his illness. It changed the way he understood the meaning of the pain that had brought him almost to the point of death. And it seems to me that, most of all, when he realized his sufferings united him with the crucified Christ, it changed his understanding of the meaning of memory. From then on, whenever he reflected upon the events of his life, both the joys and the sufferings, he believed that his history was "infused with the loving gaze of God."[6] That is why today, as pope, he is able to say, "I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life."[7]

A "PRAYER FULL OF MEMORY"

Soon after leaving the hospital, Jorge made the decision to enter the Society of Jesus, beginning his novitiate (the first stage of the order's formation) on March 11, 1958. He had gotten to know members of the Jesuits while attending the diocesan seminary, which they operated, and was drawn to the society's missionary spirit, community, and discipline.[8] But it was not until he became a Jesuit himself that he learned how the society's spirituality would enable him to deepen his imitation of Christ, for it was then, as a first-year novice,[9] that he made his first "Long Retreat."

The Long Retreat is the thirty-day silent retreat during which the Jesuit novice is led through the

Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.[10] Through reflecting upon the mysteries of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the retreatant is moved to deepen his union with God in Christ, discern his divinely appointed mission in life, and place himself fully in the divine service.[11]

Bergoglio's experience of the Spiritual Exercises—both during his Long Retreat and during the periodic retreats he would make over the ensuing years—profoundly affected his understanding of prayer. In his first major interview as pope, he told fellow Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro, "Prayer for me is always a prayer full of memory, of recollection, even the memory of my own history. . . . For me it is the memory of which St. Ignatius speaks in the First Week of the exercises in the encounter with the merciful Christ crucified. And I ask myself: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What should I do for Christ?' It is the memory of which Ignatius speaks in the [*Contemplatio ad amorem*] when he asks us to recall the gifts we have received."[12]

The examples of Ignatian prayer that Francis cites are effectively the bookends of the Spiritual Exercises: the encounter with Christ crucified is part of the first exercise, while the *Contemplatio ad amorem*—"Contemplation to Attain the Love of God"—is the last. Together they form the spiritual framework within which the retreatant opens his mind and heart to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since these two meditations are so important to Francis's understanding of prayer, it is worth taking a closer look at each one.

THE "ENCOUNTER WITH THE MERCIFUL CHRIST CRUCIFIED"

"Imagine Christ our Lord present before you on the Cross."[13]

Those words from the first meditation in the Spiritual Exercises mark the first of many times in that regimen of prayer that Ignatius invites retreatants to picture themselves face-to-face with Jesus. One could even say that the entire program of the exercises is designed to enable participants to encounter Christ directly, in the present moment. Why then does Francis, in discussing the "encounter with the merciful Christ crucified," speak of that meditation as though it were a matter of calling to mind something that is past? Why does he call it a "prayer full of memory"?

The answer, I believe, has to do with another point Francis makes in Spadaro's interview: "God is first; God is always first and makes the first move."[14]

Francis has elsewhere put the point across by using a Spanish word that turns "first" into a verb: *primerea*. To *primerea* someone is to beat him to the prize; it is a playful term normally used to describe someone who is a bit of a rascal. When Francis uses the term to speak of encountering Christ, he is making a statement akin to the observation in C. S. Lewis's Narnia books that Aslan—the character who represents God—is not a tame lion. "God awaits us to surprise us," Francis says.[15] "Letting oneself be led by Jesus leads to the surprises of Jesus."[16] In a similar way, just as Lewis wrote that his conversion

left him "surprised by joy," so too Francis speaks of how God surprises us with his grace: "Grace [is] always *primerea*, grace always comes first, then comes all the rest."[17]

Behind the pope's insight is the message of 1 John 4:19: "We love because he first loved us."[18] God created us for union with him, and he sustains us in being so that we might seek and find him. Our encounter with him gives us the eyes to see how he has already been present throughout our lives. Another Francis, the poet Francis Thompson, portrayed this phenomenon in "The Hound of Heaven." Surrendering to Jesus' love after years of fleeing him, Thompson marvels, "Is my gloom, after all, / Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?"[19]

At the same time, it is important to note that Francis emphasizes that his "prayer full of memory" consists of more than just his own remembrance of God: "Above all, I also know that the Lord remembers me. I can forget about him, but I know that he never, ever forgets me."[20]

MEMORY AND THE MASS

Our remembrance of God and his remembrance of us meet in the supreme "prayer full of memory," the one that unites all our individual prayers into a single offering: the holy sacrifice of the Mass.[21] Pope Paul VI employed the word "re-present" to describe how, as Christ's power operates through the actions of the priest, the past breaks through into the present. The Lord, he said, "re-presents the sacrifice of the Cross and applies its salvific power at the moment when he becomes sacramentally

present—through the words of consecration—as the spiritual food of the faithful, under the appearances of bread and wine."[22]

Pope Francis has the same thought in mind when he says, "The Eucharistic Celebration is much more than simple banquet: it is exactly the memorial of Jesus' Paschal Sacrifice, the mystery at the center of salvation."[23] He emphasizes that the word "memorial," when applied to the Mass, "does not simply mean a remembrance, a mere memory": "It means that every time we celebrate this Sacrament we participate in the mystery of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. The Eucharist is the summit of God's saving action: the Lord Jesus, by becoming bread broken for us, pours upon us all of his mercy and his love, so as to renew our hearts, our lives and our way of relating with him and with the brethren."[24]

Over time, as we continue to bring our own, God-given capacity for memory into the memorial of Jesus' saving action, it changes us. We find that, even as we give God our memory, he is giving us his. When we have occasion to revisit images of the past that were once streaked with shadow, we are surprised to find that even the darkest patches begin to bear hints of the bright hues of the Easter sunrise. We may still feel lonely at times, but we can never again truly be alone, for we belong to Christ as members of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Francis says, "Precisely in the darkness, it is Christ that conquers and lights the fire of love."[25] Those words have particular meaning for me, for they encapsulate

how I experience healing of my own memories in and through the prayers of the Mass.

Although I was not drawn to the Catholic Church until my late thirties,[26] many of my childhood memories center upon a house of worship—the Jewish temple my parents attended. It was there, before my parents split up, that we prayed as a family; it was there that my father remarried; and it was there that I witnessed my sister become recognized as a bat mitzvah when, at the age of thirteen, she read from the Torah for the first time. And it was there, when I was five years old, that I had one of my earliest experiences of evil, when the temple's janitor molested me.[27]

When I consider the fallout that the abuse caused in my young life—including the shame of being disbelieved by the rabbi after I reported what happened—I wonder how my Jewish faith was able to stand firm. Yet, it did, at least for a time, and even grew stronger.

I remember how I loved approaching the dinner table on Friday evening, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, to help my mother light the Shabbat candles and say the blessing that set off the holy day from the rest of the week. We would then sing the blessings over the *challah*—a special bread—and the Kiddush cup, which was filled with sweet wine.

And I remember how, after dinner, I looked forward to the Shabbat temple service. From the time I learned how to read, I was following along with the liturgy, eager to discover what was the weekly *parsha* (the reading from the Five Books of Moses) and *haftarah* (the reading

from the Prophets). Only later, after my home situation degenerated and I endured new incidents of abuse, did I drift away from devotion.

So, when I think back to the temple of my childhood hometown, I remember the pain, but I also remember the beauty. The Kiddush blessing was part of the temple service as well as the home ritual, and at my temple the children were invited to come up to join the cantor in singing it. With childlike enthusiasm, I sang in Hebrew the prayer praising God's remembrance of us, a remembrance suffused with love: *"V'shabat kad'sho b'ahavah uv'ratzon hin'chilanu zikaron l'ma'aseih v'rei'sheet, . . . zeikher litzi'at Mitz'rayim."* ("You have lovingly and willingly given us your holy Shabbat as an inheritance, in memory of creation . . . [and] in memory of the exodus from Egypt.")[28]

Another recollection from the Shabbat service that stands out is reciting the *Kedushah*, which began, "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai Tz'vaot.*" The Hebrew words are from Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Hosts."

What especially appealed to my young mind was that the *Kedushah* was more than just a vocal prayer; it engaged the whole body. Not only was it prayed standing, but also, at each "*Kadosh*," worshipers would raise their heels to stand on the balls of their feet—lifting themselves toward heaven in union with the angels' song of praise.

Such was the angelic nature of my childhood faith—until I lost my taste for the things of heaven. As I entered

adolescence, my prayers became perfunctory. The evils I had endured led me to doubt God's goodness. I became attracted to the idea of living without religion and its rules. Although the memory of my previous devotion prevented me from denying God completely, I came to believe that if God did exist, he did not love me. And so it was that, from my midteens until I received the light of Christian faith, I lived in a state of agnosticism—or, truth be told, practical atheism.

When I first began attending Mass, I often found myself feeling grief over things I could not change. I would hear the priest say at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, "Lift up your hearts," and would feel sad about the times in the past when I failed to lift up my heart to God. It was as though, in the back of my mind, the darkness of my former agnosticism remained. I would not have dared to address God with my doubt, but if I had, it would have come out like this: *If you really loved me, you wouldn't have allowed me to drift so far from you for so many years*.

But over time, as I began to enter more deeply into the prayers of the Mass, something changed in me. Divine grace led me to think less about my past failures and more about the Divine Mercy. Instead of recalling the times I doubted, I started to recall the earlier times—the years of my childhood when I felt certain of God's love.

I don't remember exactly when it happened, but there came a time when, praying the Sanctus—"Holy, Holy, Holy . . ."—I realized that, during my childhood, the Lord had given me the grace of joining in the

angels' song of prayer when I had prayed the *Kedushah*. Although I did not know as a child what I know now—that the angels exclaim their adoration as they stand before the thrice-holy Trinity (Rv 8:2)—I loved God then as I understood him, and he accepted that love.

Likewise, there came a time when, hearing the priest consecrate the Precious Blood—"Do this in memory of me"—and watching him raise the chalice, I thought back to my childhood joy at joining in the Kiddush. My heart was lifted up to the Lord then as it is now. It is true that I had less to give, because I could not return Jesus' own love back to him as I can now that he lives in me through my Baptism. Yet, I gave God all I had—my "widow's mite" (Mk 12:41–44)—and he accepted it then as he does now.

Finally, there came a time, during the Eucharistic Prayer at a daily Mass, when I looked at the altar—taking in the two candles, the bread, and the wine—and thought back to the Shabbat dinners of my childhood.

In my mind, I contrasted my memory of the Shabbat candles, which were always placed side by side, with the arrangement before me at Mass, where the candles were situated at opposite ends of the altar. As the priest—acting sacramentally in the person of Christ—stood between the candles and consecrated the bread and wine, it suddenly seemed to me that what I was seeing was a lifting of the veil.

It was as though the Shabbat candles on my family's dinner table had parted like a curtain to reveal the true liturgical action that had been happening all along