

The Hidden Life at Nazareth [271]

Usual Preparation Prayer.

First Prelude: The composition of Place: The representation will be to see in imagination how our Lord went down with his parents and came to Nazareth; and was subject to them and how He advanced in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men (Lk 2:51-52). More specifically, it is to see the house of Nazareth in detail: the place where Jesus and Mary and Joseph dwell; where they gather together; where they work.

We want to knock reverently at the door of the home of the Word Incarnate, and ask Mary, our Mother, to allow me to step in and spend some time with Jesus, her Son and our Lord, with her, and with her beloved Spouse St Joseph.

Second Prelude: The petition: Here the petition will be is to ask for light to know intimately my Divine King Who has become a Man for me, and grace to love Him and follow Him in poverty, suffering, and humiliations.

At [271] Ignatius gives three very short points:

First Point

He was obedient to His parents.

Second Point

"Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace."

Third Point

He appears to have practiced the trade of a carpenter, as St. Mark seems to show in chapter six: "Is not this the carpenter?"

As with some of the other contemplations we have considered, Ignatius doesn't give a very detailed contemplation. He gives only the basic steps and then reminds us to follow the same model as we did before: to *see* the people, then to *hear* the people, then to *examine what they are doing*, each time gathering some fruit for my life.

During his visit to Nazareth, Saint Pope Paul VI said that "Nazareth is the school in which we begin to understand the life of Jesus. It is the school of the Gospel. Here we learn to observe, to listen, to meditate, and to penetrate the profound and mysterious meaning of that simple, humble, and lovely manifestation of the Son of God. And perhaps we learn almost imperceptibly to imitate Him. Here we learn the method by which we can come to understand Christ. Here everything speaks to us; everything has meaning." Fully 90% of Christ's life is spent hidden away in Nazareth, and it calls our attention that Ignatius asks us to meditate on this time spent.

We will consider three things: first, the interior life of that home, by which we mean Christ's conformity to the Father's will and the life of prayer, second, the life of love within the

Holy Family and in its dealings with its neighbors, and, lastly, thirdly, the life of hardship, with its poverty, its work, and its concealment. So, interior life, life of love, and the life of hardship.

The Interior Life: “This is none other than the house of God, and the door to Heaven” (Gn 28:17). In the sweet and holy house of Nazareth we breathe a divine atmosphere—an atmosphere of joy, of peace, of tranquility and order.

There is nothing in this holy house of Nazareth to strike the eyes accustomed to the marvels of the world—nothing of what the world calls great and heroic. All is interior. And really, true nobility is nobility of the soul. It is only the life of the heart that matters—what we are, not what we do. And we are what we love. The life of the Heart of Jesus, especially in Nazareth, is, then, the infallible criterion of true greatness and nobility—of life, in one word, for it is life and a greater life that He has come to give us: “I have come, that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

Paul VI says that here we learn “the lesson of silence: may there return to us an appreciation of this stupendous and indispensable spiritual condition, deafened as we are by so much tumult, so much noise, so many voices of our chaotic and frenzied modern life. O silence of Nazareth, teach us recollection, reflection, and eagerness to heed the good inspirations and words of true teachers; teach us the need and value of preparation, of study, of meditation, of interior life, of secret prayer seen by God alone.”

Christ’s conformity to His Father’s Will: Doing willingly the Will of His Father, in everything and at every moment—this is the life of the Divine Heart. At the first instant of His existence He cried out: “I delight to do your Will, O My God: Your law is within My heart.” And now: “I do always the things that please Him.” (Jn 8:29).

He lives in a secluded spot, in a lowly village, engaged in humble occupations. Fulton Sheen (*Life of Christ*) notes that “the term ‘Nazarene’ signified contempt. The little village was off the main roads at the foot of the mountains; nestling in a cup of hills, it was out of reach of the merchants of Greece, the legions of Rome, and the journeys of the sophisticated. It is not mentioned in ancient geographies. It deserved its name, for it was a ‘netzer,’ a sprout that grows on the stump of a tree.” But such is the Will of His Father. Christ loves it and far from desiring that it might be otherwise, He finds it infinitely lovely. And the humble duties of daily life, the humdrum tasks which Mary and Joseph enjoin on Him, the simple furniture His hands turn out, are as beautiful as the stars that came out of the hands of the Word that was in the beginning. They are the colors with which Christ paints things of eternal beauty, the instruments on which He plays a heavenly melody, and the words that form poems of unsurpassed excellence.

In Mary and Joseph He sees the representatives of His Divine Father—their will and their desires are the Will and the Desires of His Father. See how promptly and attentively He listens to their voice. How readily He complies with their commands. How perfectly and how lovingly He conforms His Will to theirs. “And He came to Nazareth, and was subject to them.” That is all that the Evangelist, inspired by God, has recorded for us of those long thirty years. Now, as later, Christ can say: “My food is to do the Will of Him that sent Me.” (Jn 4:34).

We do well to meditate on this conformity, this obedience: in fact, when we think about it, “the only acts of Christ’s childhood which are recorded are acts of obedience – obedience to His Heavenly Father and to His earthly parents.”

Christ’s perfection and uninterrupted prayer: The life of Jesus in Nazareth is a life of perfect and uninterrupted prayer. To pray is to raise one’s mind to God, and to blend our hearts humbly and confidently with the Heart of our Creator and Father. Prayer is natural to Christ—every throb of his Heart is a prayer of the most perfect kind. His prayer is continuous. It is fervent and calm, not something artificial and constrained. It is humble. It is full of gratitude and confidence.

Look at them pouring out their souls to God in the fervent aspirations of the Psalter at dawn, at midday before and after their simple meal, and at evening. See with what devotion they attend Divine Service in the Synagogue, and join in the singing of the Psalms, or listen attentively to the Prophecies which, they know, have begun to be fulfilled. Truly this house is the Temple of God and the Gate of Heaven.

Second - The Life of Love

The Love of the Holy Family: The love of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is kind; it’s not fake or pretentious, judgmental or condescending. It is sympathetic. It is helpful. Let us look attentively on them and study with reverence their very feelings. Virtue will even now go out of them to heal our miseries.

Listen to their words—how sweet and kind. Look on their faces—how serene and smiling. Consider their conversation—how joyful and yet how heavenly. See how they help one another in the performance of their daily tasks. There is not the least trace of self-love in this holy house; each one lives and sacrifices himself for the others, and vies with the others in taking upon himself what is most humiliating and hard. “Christ did not please Himself”—His only pleasure is to do His Father’s Will and sacrifice Himself in the service of Mary and Joseph: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28).

Let us enter into their hearts and see, if we can, how sympathetically they feel for one another, how each one rejoices in the joys of the others and grieves in their sufferings. “Rejoice with them that rejoice; weep with them that weep.” (Rom 12:15). How tenderly is this feeling of common suffering conveyed in those words of Mary: “Behold your father and I have sought you sorrowing.”

Truly this is “the House of God and the Gate of Heaven,” where peace is supreme—the peace of the children of God who repose trustfully in the arms of their heavenly Father, and have but one object in life—to fulfill His Will and to love one another.

The Life of Love with their Neighbors: Happy those who can approach this holy house and experience the kindness, the helpfulness, the sympathy of the love of Jesus, Mary and Joseph!

See the sweet smile with which Mary welcomes the poor women of Nazareth that come

to her! How ready she is to please and to help them! What words of comfort and of encouragement come from her lips! How they leave the place happier, stronger, and brought nearer to God! Look on Joseph transacting business with the men of Nazareth. See his constant calm, his straightforwardness, his sense of the presence of God even in the most material actions of life!

But above all keep your eyes constantly on Jesus. How sweet and kind He is to all, even to those who are rude to Him, who refuse to pay what they owe Him. "He shall not content, nor cry out, neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets." (Mt 12:19). He passes along the streets of Nazareth doing good and healing those tormented by the devil, not by means of miracles, but by the sweet odor of His virtues. Already He conquers hearts by the meekness of His own Heart and the charm of His ways.

Third - The Life of Hardship

The Poverty of the Holy Family: "I am poor and in labors from my youth." (Ps 87:16). The life of the Holy Family in Nazareth is a life of hardships, of privations, of toil and of neglect on the part of men. It must be so. To be in want, to work hard, and to live unknown to men, if not actually despised by them, is the lot of most of us. Our Divine Teacher and Savior has, then, to show us how to make these painful circumstances and trials, the means of our salvation and sanctification. He has to gain for us the grace to embrace them lovingly for His love and in union with Him.

First of all, see how poorly the Holy Family lives. The house is that of a poor artisan. The furniture is what is strictly necessary, and even that is of the simplest kind. Their clothes, clean though they be, bear the marks of long years. Their fare is simple and often scanty. Sometimes Jesus goes to His Mother for bread and she has none to give Him.

They experience the bitter effects of poverty—the necessity to work for their daily bread, the knowledge that there is no more food in the cupboard, the need to sell the work of their hands, to deal with hard and cruel men, to beg and be sent away with harsh words, and, what is still worse to tender hearts, the inability to relieve the misery they see around them.

And yet no complaint crosses their lips. They are happy in their poverty, in the feeling that a Father watches over them, and in the knowledge that their trials are golden chains that bind them close to His loving Heart.

Work: "In the sweat of your face will you eat your bread." (Gen 2:19). Labor, manual labor above all, which, since the Fall has been a punishment, is turned by Jesus into a means of expiation. All work hard in the house of Nazareth.

We have contemplated the spiritual activities of the Holy Family—the continued elevation of the Heart of Jesus, of Mary, of Joseph. Let us see now their external activity also. Let us follow our Blessed Mother as she goes about her work from early morning till late at night. She is busy, either in cleaning the house, or in preparing the meals for Jesus and Joseph, or in mending their poor clothes, yet always finding time to help others poorer and needier than herself.

Let us enter the workshop of Joseph. It is early morning and we already hear the sound of the hammer. It is hot midday: big drops of sweat stare on the Saint's forehead, but he continues to work. It is night, but the light within tells us that the Saint is still at work.

Jesus is no less active. Let us see Him, first of all, helping His Mother to go through the humble tasks of a poor housewife. There He is carrying water and firewood, lighting the fire, laying the table, washing the plates. Then, let us look at Him at work with St Joseph. The hands of Him Who has created the universe handle the hammer, the plane, the saw.

Fr. Walter Ciszek really makes us think of the value of that work. "There is a tremendous truth contained in the realization that when God became a man, he became a workingman. Not a king, not a chieftain, not a warrior or a statesman or a great leader of nations, as some thought the Messiah would be. The Gospels show us Christ the teacher, the healer, the wonder-worker, but these activities of his public life were the work of three short years. For all the rest of the time of his life on earth, God was a village carpenter and the son of a carpenter. He did not fashion benches or tables or beds . . . by means of miracles, but by hammer and saw. . . . He worked long hours to help his father, and then became the support of his widowed mother, by the rough work of a hill country craftsman. Nothing he worked on, as far as we know, ever set any fashions or became a collector's item. He worked in a shop every day, week in and week out, for some twenty years. . . . There was nothing spectacular about it, there was much of the routine about it, perhaps much that was boring. There is little we can say about the jobs we do or have done that could not be said of the work God Himself did when He became a man. Yet, he did not think it demeaning, beneath his dignity, dehumanizing. . . . Once again God worked, and on the seventh day He rested. . . . He worked day in and day out for some twenty years to set us an example, to show us that these routine chores, too, are not beneath man's dignity or even God's dignity, that simple household tasks and the repetitive work of the wage earner are not necessary evils but noble and redemptive works worthy of God Himself. To eat one's bread in the sweat of one's brow is to do nothing more or less than Christ Himself did. And He did it for a reason. He did it for years on end, He did it for more than three-quarters of His life on earth, to convince us that God has not asked of us anything more tedious, more tiring, more routine and humdrum, more unspectacular than God Himself has done. He did it to make it plain that the plainest and dullest of jobs is – or at any rate can be, if viewed properly in respect to God and to eternity – a sharing in the divine work of creation and redemption, a daily opportunity to cooperate with God."

This is really the house of work—of painful and unceasing work. If we want to be in the company of Jesus, Mary and Joseph we must work like them. We must work seriously; we must work constantly; we must declare war on any kind of idleness. How can we possibly remain idle in the presence of these holy Persons who know no rest? The house of Nazareth is not for idle people. But woe to us if we do not seek constantly to live there!

Hiddenness: "Love to be unknown and to be accounted as nothing." This is the last lesson which the Holy Family teaches us, and it is the most difficult of all. We can endure every trial if only it brings our little self into prominence. On the other hand, nothing is harder than self-concealment, and nothing embitters one so much as neglect.

And yet this is the lot of the Holy Family. There is no one on earth, and there never will be anyone that comes near their high dignity. God Almighty looks down on them with infinite complacency. The Angels come down from Heaven to sing the Divine Praises around this blessed abode; and yet their concealment and the neglect which they suffer could not be greater. Their relations are all poor, and so are their acquaintances. Even these seem to make very little account of the Holy Family. Later on they will be offended with Jesus and will say: "Whence has this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's Son? Is not His mother called Mary?" "Is not this the carpenter, the Son of Mary?" "His very cousins will, for long, refuse to believe in Him." "For neither did His brethren believe in Him." Not only is the splendor and the glory of the world completely absent from this place—even sanctity seems to hide itself. We hear but one voice: "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart." (Mt 11:29).

"This is my house for ever and ever: here will I dwell, for I have chosen it." (Ps 131:14). Here shall I often come to look upon Jesus and Mary and Joseph, and learn from them the lessons of life.

Colloquy: We can make a colloquy with Jesus, asking Him to constantly live in His Heart and make His conformity with His Father's will, His prayer, and His zeal ours. Ask Him to fill your heart with His love, and to allow you to copy in your life the poverty of the Holy Family. Ask that you might work with Him seriously and constantly—and with Him love to be unknown and accounted as nothing.