

13. "That they be one as we are one"

The so-called "priestly prayer" of Jesus in chapter seventeen of John mirrors the foot-washing of chapter thirteen. For in both chapters Jesus reveals his desire for unity among his disciples. Washing each other's feet, like the intense prayer of Jesus to the Father, tends to make the unity of communion grow among the disciples, that which eternally exists in the Most Holy Trinity. Thus Jesus expresses to the Father his last and highest desire regarding us: "That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

The Son's mission culminates in his asking the Father for his disciples to be able to be one like God in the Trinity, because only this unity of the disciples permits the Son's mission to be completed for the salvation of the world. The world can believe in the Son of God if the unity of those who believe in Him enables it to recognize that Jesus is truly sent from God the Father. The disciples' unity is, deep down, the one true miracle that can stir up faith in the world.

Jesus is aware that, in order for his mission of Salvation and Redemption truly to be completed, he must ask his Father for nothing other than the unity of his disciples. He does not ask for them to perform miracles, or to know how to speak convincingly to the pagans, etc. He only asks for unity, for the disciples to be one as God is one in three Persons. That is, he asks for the disciples to be one in communion. Unity among different persons is possible only in communion, in a union of relation, in being *united* one *with* the other.

John especially emphasizes this solemn prayer of Jesus to the Father. Chapter seventeen begins with the words: "Thus spoke Jesus and, lifting his eyes to heaven, said: Father..." (Jn 17:1). Jesus has just finished the discourses of the Last Supper. St. John wants as it were to detach what Christ just said in these sublime discourses from what he goes on to say after having lifted his eyes to heaven. It is as if he had begun a new act of speaking, a new word. Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word of God who became flesh to speak to man. But he always remains the Word that John, in the Prologue of his Gospel, describes as "with God," or "addressed to God," and God himself: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1).

At the end of the discourses of the Last Supper, the Word addresses himself to the Father, speaks to the Father, as he does in the beginning, eternally. The word that follows, then, is a word that Jesus pronounces in his eternal relation with the Father, looking to the Father and knowing that he is himself looked at by Him. But he pronounces this word in the presence of the disciples, and thus it becomes a direct communication of the mystery of God to man.

At the end of this prayer, John will start chapter eighteen, which begins to recount the Passion of Christ, with the words: "After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered" (Jn 18:1).

It is as if John wanted to conclude the particular Word that the Word of God pronounced in his prayer to the Father. He had started with: "Lifting his eyes to heaven, he said," (17:1) and now he closes with: "After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out"

(18:1). The priestly prayer, then, is a particular manifestation of the Word of God, a special revelation of God, a particular Trinitarian theophany.

Let us also notice, though, that, unlike the Synoptics, John does not recount the prayer and agony of Jesus in Gethsemane. It is as if in the very moment that Jesus and his disciples enter the garden Judas had arrived with his cohort and the guards to arrest Jesus (cf. Jn 18:3ff.). This shows us that, for John, the priestly prayer in the Upper Room contains the prayer of Gethsemane, or perhaps coincides with it. In both prayers, in fact, Jesus asks for that to come about for which the will of the Father and the will of the Son are united, coincide, in mutual love and in love for all human beings.

In the same chapter eighteen of St. John, Jesus asks the soldiers, “Whom do you seek?” and they respond, “Jesus of Nazareth.” And when Jesus says, “I am,” as God said to Moses on Sinai, all “stepped back and fell to the ground,” as if overwhelmed by the divine Presence that Jesus incarnates (cf. 18:4–6). We can certainly think that the power of the “I am” spoken by Jesus is, so to say, loaded with the mystery that was revealed to the disciples while He, a little earlier in the Upper Room, was praying to the Father.

We can ask ourselves, then, what God revealed to us in this culminating prayer of Jesus’ life recounted in John 17.

In this prayer Jesus expresses three great intentions, which then turn out to be united and connected to each other: he asks for his own glorification (Jn 17:1–8); he asks for fidelity toward and protection of the apostles and disciples whom he leaves in the world to continue his mission (17:9–19); he asks for the gift of unity in love for all disciples present and future, as the Father and He are united in the Spirit, so that the world may believe in Christ, sent from the Father (17:20–26).

Deep down, Jesus asks the Father for everything for the sake of which he accepts suffering to the point of death on the Cross; he asks for the fulfillment of that for which the Father sent him into the world. For this reason, all of Jesus’ requests culminate in the third request, asking the Father that the disciples be one as the Father and Son are one. In this consists the glory of the Son, too: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17:22). For the glory of God is love, is the light of infinite love that God is, that God exchanges in the communion of the Three Divine Persons.

Jesus burns with the desire that all men share in this glory of love, in this *claritas* (the term with which the Greek term *doxa*, glory, is rendered in Latin), which is love, this *claritas* which is *caritas*.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (Jn 17:24).

This is the only point in the Gospel when Jesus says, “I want” addressing himself to the Father. Jesus knows that this desire corresponds with the Father’s will, coincides with what the Father wants, with that on account of which the Father sent him into the world. It is the last desire, full of love for us, of the Son who is already “condemned to death” for our salvation. Jesus freely accepts, to the most extreme consequences, that all the disciples coincide with Him in his relationship of love with the Father, that is, that they become sons in the Son, that we be “there where the Son is” in the communion of the Trinity.