

# **An Encounter With The Living Jesus Christ**

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Dear Friends,

I should like to share a unique experience with you: how I met Christ in prison, where I spent more than thirteen years, nine of which in solitary confinement, without ever having been tried or sentenced, all alone, without a friend in the world, without ever seeing my family, constantly under the eyes of two guards. At times I experienced despair; I could no longer pray. Without a special grace, I would have gone out of my mind.

## **I**

My non-Christian fellow prisoners often asked me: "Who is this Jesus? Why do you love him to the point of being willing to sacrifice your life for him here in prison?" My jailers asked me: "Does Jesus really exist? What is he like? Have you ever met him?"

I had gotten to know Jesus in Scripture and in other books, at the university and in prayer, but in the utter deprivation of prison, all the outer trappings fell away, and I met Jesus in the total transparency of the Gospel.

My dear friends, I am sharing a very personal secret with you: I met the living Jesus; he fascinated me. I followed him - because I love the defects of Jesus. I could name at least ten of them, but since time is short, I shall tell you about only five of these defects of Jesus.

### **First Defect: Jesus does not have a good memory** (Luke 23:42-43)

During his agony on the cross, Jesus heard the voice of the thief at his right side: Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. If it had been me, I would have answered him: "I won't forget you, but you must pay for your crimes by spending some 20 years in purgatory". On the contrary, said: Today you will be with me in Paradise. Jesus just forgot all about his sins. As for Mary Magdalene, Jesus never questioned her about her scandalous past life. He simply said to her: Your sins have been forgiven you because you loved so much. When the father sees his prodigal son coming home, he runs to meet him, embraces him and does not even give him time to pronounce the little speech he had prepared. He calls his servants and says: Kill the fatted calf to feast my son. My dead son has returned to life... Jesus doesn't have a memory like mine. Not only does he forgive, he forgets everything.

### **Second Defect: Jesus is not good in mathematics** (Luke 15:4-7)

If Jesus took a math examination, he would surely fail it. A shepherd had one hundred sheep; one of them strayed. Without thinking, the shepherd went in search of it, leaving

the other ninety-nine sheep. When he found the lost sheep, he put it on his shoulders. For Jesus, 1 equals 99, perhaps even more! Who can accept this? When it comes to saving a lost sheep, nothing can stop Jesus: risk, fatigue, danger ... Think also of Jesus' merciful gestures when he sits at Jacob's well in order to seek out the Samaritan woman or when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house! What simplicity; what love for sinners.

### **Third Defect: Jesus does not know anything about logic** (Luke 14:8-10)

One night, a woman who had ten drachmas lost one of them. So she lit a lamp to search for it. When she found it, she invited her neighbors in and told them: Rejoice with me, because I found the drachma which I had lost. It is truly illogical to spend the night searching for one drachma and then to have a feast in the middle of the night to celebrate having found it. What is more, in inviting her friends to celebrate with her, she spent more than a drachma. Even ten drachmae would not cover the cost of the feast. Here we can truly say with Pascal: The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. It would have been more logical for the woman to go to bed and to search for the drachma in the daylight. But for Jesus, the search for a lost one has priority. He cannot lose a minute. Jesus revealed the secret of his heart. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

### **Fourth Defect: Jesus is an adventurer**

A person in charge of publicity for a company or a politician seeking election prepares a very precise program with many promises. Jesus promises only trials and persecutions to those who follow him. He warns them that the Son has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). In sending his disciples out on a mission, he tells them to take nothing for the journey: no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money and not to have two tunics (Luke 9:13). He also tells them that they will be blessed when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven... (Matthew 5:11-12).

In this state of absolute poverty, where did Jesus send his disciples? How far were they to go? They were to bring salvation, even to the very end of the earth (Acts 13:47). Have you ever heard of such an adventurer and his word: I am with you every day, even to the end of the world. We are truly disciples of Jesus when we follow him even to the end of the world. We are members of his association of adventurers, without address, without a telephone number, without a fax or website.

### **Fifth Defect: Jesus knows nothing about finances and economy**

The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard... After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard... About the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing and he said to them 'why do you stand here idle?' They said to him 'Because no one has hired us'. He said to them 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages,

beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder... But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' (Matthew 20:1-13)

If Jesus were named steward of a community or manager of an enterprise, those institutions would go bankrupt, because he would pay the same salary to the one who started working in the morning and to the one who began in the afternoon! Would he have made a mistake? Did he calculate incorrectly? No, he would do it on purpose: Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you.. do you begrudge my generosity? (Matthew 20:14-15)

You wonder why Jesus has these defects? Because He is love (1 John 4:16). Authentic love does not reason, does not calculate, does not measure, does not put up barriers, does not lay down conditions, does not set up boundaries and does not remember offences committed.

I love these defects of Jesus, and 1 John 4:16 has become a key for me.. It is not enough to love God with all my heart, I must also act accordingly and sum everything up in one simple, dynamic concept. One rainy day in my prison cell, all of a sudden something like a bolt of lightning flooded my mind: Jesus is "my God and My All", Deus meus et omnia. We love everyone and all things in Jesus. This is the best discernment (1Cor 12:10).

## II

The philosopher Pascal once said: "When one discovers Christ, one also understands man." When I met Jesus, I also met him in my enemies.

One rainy day, in the mountains of Vinh Phu, I was sent to chop wood. I asked the guard:

"Will you do me a favor?"

"What? What do you want me to do?"

"I would like to cut a piece of wood in the form of a cross."

"Don't you know that religious symbols are severely prohibited?"

"I know, but we are friends and I promise to hide it."

"It would be extremely dangerous for both of us."

"Close you eyes: I will do it now and I will be very cautious."

He went away and left me alone. I cut the cross, and I kept it hidden in a piece of soap until my liberation. With a metal covering, this piece of wood has become my pectoral cross..

In another prison, I asked my guard - who had already become my friend - for a piece of electric wire. He was surprised.

"At the police academy, I learned that when a prisoner wants some electric wire, it means he wants to commit suicide'. I explained to him that Catholic priests do not commit suicide.

"But what are you going to do with electric wire?"

"I would like to make a small chain so that I can wear my cross."

"How can you make a chain with electric wire? That's impossible!"

"If you bring me two little pincers, I will show you."

"It is too dangerous!"

"But we are friends!"

He hesitated, then he said, "I will answer in three days." After three days, he said to me, "It is hard to refuse you anything. I thought to myself - this evening I will bring two small pincers; from seven o'clock to eleven we have to finish the work. I will let the other guard go and see 'Hanoi by Night'. If he were to see us, he would make a report dangerous for both of us." We cut the electric wire into pieces the size of matches; we linked them up... and the chain was finished before eleven.

I wear this cross and this chain every day, not because they are reminders of prison, but because they indicate my profound conviction, a constant reference point for me: only Christian love can change hearts, neither weapons, nor threats nor the media can do so.

### **My Dream for the Church**

In this period of globalization, which brings with it so many hopes and so many anxieties, and strengthened by the joy of having met the living Christ, I can now reply to your interesting and important question: How does the Church in the 21st century help us to live out this joy and this hope?

In a land built on the dreams of so many who arrived on its shores, let me tell you about a dream I had for the Church. The vision of Pope Paul VI of "a suffering land, which is at one and the same time both dramatic and magnificent" leaves me with no peace. And so I dream of great hope.

I dream of a Church that is a **Holy Door**, open, welcoming all, full of compassion and understanding of the pains and sufferings of humanity, a Church that has no other thought than of comforting a suffering people.

I dream of a Church that is **Word**, that holds up the Book of the Gospel to the four corners of the earth in a gesture of announcing, of submission to the Word of God, as a promise of the Eternal Alliance.

I dream of a Church that is **Bread, Eucharist**, which lets itself be consumed by all so that the entire world may have life in abundance.

I dream of a Church that burns with passion for that **unity** which Jesus wills (cf. John 17), and for which John Paul II, who opened the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, knelt at its threshold and prayed before moving forward with an Orthodox Bishop and the Archbishop of Canterbury, together with representatives of many other churches.

I dream of a Church that is on the way, **the People of God** who, behind the Pope carrying the cross, enters the Temple of God, and praying and singing, goes to meet the Risen Christ, our only hope, and to meet Mary together with all the saints.

I dream of a Church that bears in its heart **the Fire of the Holy Spirit**. Where the Spirit is, there is freedom, there is sincere dialogue with the world and especially with young people, with the poor and marginalized, there is discernment in reading the signs of our times. The social teaching of the Church, an instrument of evangelization, will guide us in making this discernment in the midst of the immense social changes taking place today..

I dream of a Church that is **a witness of hope and love**, and expresses it by concrete acts, as when we see the Holy Father embracing everyone without distinction.

Yes, I dream of a Church where we shall all have encountered Christ in the love of the Father and in the communion of the Spirit and shall live together in union and humility. What joy, what hope this dream gives me, because it can be a reality if we encounter one another without distinction in Christ whose love knows no bounds.

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