

Whether We Eat, Whether We Drink
'The Present Moment'
Card. Van Thuan – Testimony of Hope

Through a strange alienation, man in this world lives in the past, in his memories, or in expectation of the future, while he seeks to avoid the present moment, or exercises his spirit in inventing ways to "kill time." This kind of person does not live in the here and now, but in a fantasy of which he is unaware...the past and the future, in their abstract dislocation, are non-existent, and have no access to eternity; eternity only touches the present moment and only gives itself to someone who is totally present in that moment. It is only in these instants that one may reach and live in the image of the eternal present.-P. Evdokimov, Le Eta della Vita Spirituale

The way to Holiness

After my arrest in August of 1975, I was taken during the night from Saigon to Nha Trang. I made that 450-kilometer journey between two policemen. Thus, I began the life of a prisoner; I no longer had a schedule. I experienced the truth of the Vietnamese proverb that says, "One day in prison is worth a thousand autumns in freedom." In prison, everyone waits for freedom every day, every minute of every day.

During those days and months, my mind was racked with many confused feelings: sadness, fear, tension... the great distance that lay between my people and me broke my heart. In the darkness of this terrible night, in the middle of an ocean of anguish, I slowly woke up. "I have to face reality," I told myself. "I am in prison. If I wait for the opportune moment to do something really great, how many times will such occasions actually present themselves? Only one thing comes with certainty: death. I have to take advantage of the occasions that present themselves every day. I have to accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way."

I was convinced during the long nights in prison that living the present moment is the most simple and most secure way to holiness. From this conviction a prayer was born:

Jesus, I will not wait; I will live the present moment and fill it with love. A straight line is made of millions of little points, one united with the other. My life, too, is made of millions of seconds and minutes united one with the other. If I arrange every single point perfectly, the line will be straight. If I live every minute perfectly my life will be holy. The road of hope is paved with little steps of hope. The life of hope is made of brief minutes of hope. As you, Jesus, always did what pleased your Father, every minute I want to say: Jesus, I love you, and my life is always a "new and eternal covenant" with you. Every minute I want to sing with the whole Church: Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...

Duties and gifts

In the Gospel, Jesus always exhorts us to live in the present moment. He has us ask our Father for our bread, but just for "today's," and reminds us that there are enough worries for "every day" (cf. Mt 6:34)

Jesus challenges us each second, and at the same time, he gives us everything. To the thief on the cross who said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus responded, “today you will be with me in paradise” (cf. Lk 23:42-43). In this word “today” lives all the forgiveness and love of Jesus.

St. Paul stresses to the maximum this identification with Jesus in every moment, to the point of creating a new and much more expressive terminology:

- “confixus cruci,” I have been crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20);
- “consepulti,” we have been buried with him (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12);
- “conmortui sumus,” “convivemus,” to die together and to live together (2Tim 2:8; 2 Cor 7:3)
- “consurrexistis,” to rise with him (Col 3:1).

The apostle speaks of Jesus’ union with us as an unfailing reality, a life that is unbroken, which engages our whole being and awaits our response. Christ has died and has come back to life to be lord of both the living and the dead. Because of this, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8-9). “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31)

In the fourth Gospel, this Christological dimension opens to us the Trinitarian dimension: “So that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me” (Jn 17:22-23).

In the present: the heart of God

All of the saints and great witnesses agree on the importance of living the present moment well. They lived united to Jesus in each moment of their lives according to an ideal that they incarnated in their very being. For Ignatius of Loyola it was, “Ad maiorem Dei gloriam,” to the greater glory of God; for Elizabeth of the Trinity, “In laudem gloriae,” to praise his glory; for John Bosco, “Da mihi animas,” give me souls; for Mother Teresa, “misericordia,” mercy; for Raul Follereau, “Jesus in the lepers”; and for Jean Vanier it is, “Jesus in the mentally handicapped.” Personifying their ideals in the present moment, the saints realized these ideals in their very essence.

St. Paul of the Cross writes:

Happy the soul who reposes in the bosom of God, without thinking of the future, but managing to live moment by moment in him, without any other preoccupation than doing well his will in every event.

St. Therese of the child Jesus also affirms this:

My life is but an instant, a passing hour. My life is but a day that escapes and flies away. O my god! You know that to love you on this earth, I only have today!

And a great spiritual figure of our time says:

One who knows the way of holiness turns and returns passionately to the asceticism that it requires: to live in God in the present moment of life. In this way, one is completely detached

from all that is not God, and is immersed in God wherever he is. So then, our life is no longer “to exist,” but completely “to be,” because god, he who is, is in it.

Discerning the voice of God

Discerning the voice of god among the many inner voices so as to accomplish his will in the present moment is an ongoing exercise that the saints undertook willingly. With continual exercise, discernment becomes always easier because the voice of god within us grows louder and stronger. But at times it is not easy. Still, if we believe in God’s love, then we can do what we believe to be God’s will with security, trusting that if it is not, he will set us back on the right way. “Now we know that God works in every way for the good with those who love him and are called in accordance with his plan,” Paul reminds the Romans (8:28).

Origen leaves us this beautiful advice:

We do not need to look in a place for the sanctuary, but in deeds, in life, and in customs. If these are according to God, if they conform to the commandments of God, it matters little whether you are at home or in the public square... what am I saying, “in the public square”? It does not even matter if you find yourself in the the-ater-if you are serving the Word of God, you are in the sanctuary, have no doubt.

And Raissa Maritain writes: “Beneath obscure appearances of the duties of every moment hides the divine will: these are like sacraments of the present moment.”

How to fill us peach moment with love

When under house arrest in the village of Cay Vong, I was under police surveillance day and night, and this thought became obsessive: “My people! My people that I love so much; a flock without a shepherd! How can I contact my people at a time when they have most need of their pastor? The Catholic bookstores have been confiscated, the schools closed, the religious dispersed. Some have gone to work in the rice camps and others find themselves in the ‘region of the new economy’ in the midst of the general population, in the villages. This separation is a shock that destroys my heart.”

I told myself, “I will not wait. I want to live the present moment, filling it with love, but how?”

One night a light came to me; “Francis, it is very simple. Do as St. Paul did when he was in prison. Write letters to the different communities.”

The following morning while it was still dark, I signaled the Quang, a seven-year old boy who returned from mass at 5:00 a.m. I said to him: “Tell your mother to buy old calendars for me.” That night, once more in the dark, Quang brought me the calendars. Every single day in October and November of 1975, I wrote messages to my people from prison. Each morning Quang came to take the papers and bring them home so that his brothers and sisters could recopy the messages. That is how the book, the Road of Hope, came to be written and has since been published in eleven languages.

When I was finally released from prison in 1989, I received a letter from Mother Teresa. It contained these words: “It is not the number of our works that are important, but the intensity of the love that we put into every action.”

The moment that will be the last

To live each moment intensely is also the secret of knowing how to live our last moment well.

Paul VI wrote in his "thoughts on Death":

I will no longer look back, but do willingly, simply, humbly, and bravely the duties that come from the circumstances in which I find myself, as your will. To do it joyfully-whatever you want of me right now, even if it is beyond my strength, even if it asks my life. Finally, at this last hour.

Every word, every gesture, every telephone call, every decision we make should be the most beautiful one of our life, giving our love and our smile to everyone, without losing a second.

Let every moment of our life be the first moment, the last moment, the only moment.

I would like to conclude this meditation with a prayer of St. Faustina Kowalska:

If I look at the future, I am full of fear, but why go forward into the future? Only the present moment is dear to me, because perhaps the future will not lodge in my soul.

The past is not within my power to change, correct, or add something. Neither the wise nor the prophets were able to do this. I trust therefore to God that which regards my past. O present moment, you belong to me completely; I desire to use you as much as it is within my power....

Therefore, trusting in your mercy, I go forward in life as a child, and every day I offer to you my heart enflamed with love for your greater glory.