

**“For God so loved the world ...” (Jn 3:16):
the love of God, the spirit of every authentic encounter.**

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A literal translation

- ¹ There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews,
² who came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him.'
³ Jesus answered: In all truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.
⁴ Nicodemus said, 'How can anyone who is already old be born? Is it possible to go back into the womb again and be born?'
⁵ Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit; ⁶ what is born of human nature is human; what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
⁷ Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above.
⁸ The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.
⁹ 'How is that possible?' asked Nicodemus.
¹⁰ Jesus replied, 'You are the Teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things!
¹¹ 'In all truth I tell you, we speak only about what we know and witness only to what we have seen and yet you people reject our evidence.
¹² If you do not believe me when I speak to you about earthly things, how will you believe me when I speak to you about heavenly things?
¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of man; ¹⁴ as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.
¹⁶ For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
¹⁷ For God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.
¹⁸ No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God's only Son.
¹⁹ And the judgment is this: though the light has come into the world people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.
²⁰ And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up; ²¹ but whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God.'
(See also Jn 7:50-52; 19:38-42).

Guidelines for commentary and contextualization

A man among the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews (cf. 3:1)

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, but ἄνθρωπος, a man, simply and above all a man. He is also a leader and a man who, at least initially, moves in darkness. As we analyze him, we can imagine him in his rise to power, with various kinds of maneuvering, or, more simply, a powerful, wealthy man to whom great authority was given.

Nicodemus was probably one of those who saw the signs performed by Jesus and had begun to believe, or at least to be amazed, fascinated, and interested in them and in the person of Jesus (cf. Jn 2:23). However, having faith and believing in Jesus are quite different from personal respect and admiration.

Dialoguing with Jesus: "How can an older person be born again? (John 3:2-4)

Nicodemus uses the first-person plural "we" (John 3:2) speaking for the Pharisees and the Jews. Nicodemus perceives to know (οἶδαμεν) Jesus' role through His actions. He sees Jesus as "a teacher that has come from God" through the Lord's actions.

Jesus' response seemingly shifts the focus on different topics from Himself ("You are a teacher that has come from God.") to the Kingdom and "recognizing through His actions" leading to "a new birth and/or from above." The unifying subject is knowledge (οἶδαμεν) and the understanding of God's Kingdom (ἰδεῖν) which is complex. The latter can be understood as the mysterious and wise governing of God who rules and acts throughout history culminating eschatologically with the coming of the Messianic King. He will act as God and establish His justice.

Now Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God is not just a matter of seeing obvious signs, miracles, but it requires a "new birth and/or from above." The Greek term (ἄνωθεν) can mean both "from above" and "anew". Evidently, the Evangelist plays upon this double meaning. Jesus points out that entering the Kingdom of God is not a matter of recognizing signs or daily agreements. While Nicodemus speaks of signs, as something visible, Jesus focuses on a new birth and life that are more important. Nicodemus is captivated by Jesus' invitation. He emphasizes the paradoxical and central part of the passage: "How can a man be born when he is old?" (v. 4)

A new birth (John 3:5-8)

In verse 5, Jesus concretely defines "seeing" and "entering the Kingdom of God" (vv. 3:5). These two concepts are intertwined and indicate the path of discernment (seeing) and participation (entering) in God's Kingdom through the revelation of Jesus.

A parallel is drawn between being born "from above" (v. 3:5) and "of water and the Spirit" (v. 5) and "of the spirit" (v. 8). The new birth comes from the "water and the Spirit" or we could say from the "water which is the Spirit" (vv. 5-8). According to Jesus, true discernment on God's role in history and becoming a part of it salvifically means being reborn under the influence of the Spirit, to be enlightened and guided by Him. Thus, man welcomes the revelation that Jesus brings.

We can remember the words of John the Baptist/witness who proclaims Jesus: "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29); but also, as the one who "baptizes," who "immerses" in the Spirit (John 1:33) The first chapter of this Gospel shows the meaning of Jesus' journey as well as a call to man to be a believer immersed in the Spirit that Jesus represents.

Nicodemus' responses show that he is having difficulty following Jesus to a more complex level. The expressions that come after show the tension between "earthly/easy," and

“heavenly/difficult” things. They prepare to go a further step in the revelatory journey of the mystery of elevation, which encompasses Jesus’s death and the gift of the Spirit (cf. John 7:39; 16:7; 19:30; 20:22). All of this gives new life to believers.

“You are the teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things?” (John 3:9)

Nicodemus is unable to grasp Jesus’ response and asks for further explanations (cf. v. 9). Jesus’ ironic question reveals the need for a competency that Nicodemus does not have (...you are a teacher, but you do not know...). Jesus puts him face to face with the difficulty fully accepting his testimony (cf. v. 11). This is the beginning of the journey presented by Jesus at a moment in the dialogue where new birth is discussed. (cf. vv. 10-13).

“. . .and as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. . .” (John 3: 14-15)

From a revelatory point of view, now Jesus presents some difficult concepts to understand, those of heaven. The Book of Wisdom had proclaimed that the “things of heaven” (τὰ δὲ ἐν οὐρανοῖς) can only be revealed by the Spirit of God. (cf. Wis 9: 16-17). Now Jesus presents an obscure sign that will only be revealed at the end of the Gospel. Jesus alludes to an episode from Numbers 21: 8-9. In the desert while travelling, the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes; and they were healed by looking at a snake placed on a pole by Moses. Jesus makes a comparison between the lifted-up snake and the mysterious “Son of Man.” It is a difficult passage to comprehend. In John 12:34, the weary crowd again questions Jesus tired of His cryptic language: “So the crowd answered Him: ‘We have heard from the Law that Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?’” This shows that Jesus’ language and the “things of heaven” which He reveals, were truly difficult to understand for His contemporaries. And they are still difficult for us as well.

In short, the sign of the lifted-up snake indicates the passion and death of Jesus. This highlights the importance of faith with its discerning gaze that recognizes the work of God, focusing on the Crucified One, recognizing in Him the full manifestation of God. It is the road to salvation that challenges us to understand the mystery of God and in the final analysis becomes a scandal. The fulfillment of John 3: 14-15 takes place on the Cross with the commentary taken from Zechariah 12:10: “They will look on the one they have pierced.” (John 19: 37).

If Nicodemus and his followers “recognize” Jesus as a teacher through the signs of His miracles, it is quite another thing to stand before the ultimate sign, the lifting up of the Son of Man on the Cross, as the most complex step to enter God’s Kingdom. (vv.14-15). The believer sees the signs and through faith and love reaches the lifted-up Son. Thus, eternal life is obtained. (15b: “so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”).

“For God so loved the world. . .” (John 3: 16-21)

Verses 16-21 explore even more God’s plan to reveal the mystery of humanity’s history: the reality of evil and obstinacy before God. It is the dense mystery of darkness that obscures every reality as the mind clouds over righteousness and the heart hardens in choosing evil.

First of all, we can see that God’s plan for the world is based upon love. A love so great that God has given His only begotten Son (v. 16). In addition, the implications of Jesus’ presence means that God does not judge, but that He wants man’s salvation through Jesus. (v. 17).

Later, attention shifts to how the world accepts Jesus, especially those who have faith (v. 18: the one who believes). From the all-encompassing universal humanity, the discourse focuses on the particular of individual choice. Humanity is divided into those who have faith in the Only

Begotten and those who do not. Thus, those who have faith are not judged and the others who choose not to believe are already being judged (cf. v. 18). The second group prefers darkness to light continuing to live in evil keeping their wicked deeds hidden (cf. vv. 19-20).

Here there are references to a pericope and the night in which Nicodemus goes to Jesus. At night, in secrecy, an ambassador and a representative, seek Jesus. Where are the others, those whom Nicodemus represents? Why are they hiding? The Gospel alludes to an ambiguity of heart in the characters who are hidden and who will later emerge in opposition to Jesus. The Evangelist makes a harsh judgment: they hid because their deeds were evil. (vv. 20-21).

When considering the origin of evil, the gift of the Son and great faith bring man from darkness to light, from death to life. Being in the light or darkness depends upon individual choice. God has given His only Begotten Son to the world. Being a part of the Kingdom, being born again by the Spirit are personal choices.

Nicodemus' "steps"

The words heard by Jesus during the night will not leave Nicodemus indifferent. We can see this in two subsequent passages showing a man who acts openly. In John 7: 50-52, Nicodemus presents himself in the context of the Sanhedrin trying to make Jesus heard. In John 19: 38-42, Nicodemus is personally present at Jesus' burial providing a great quantity of balm, foreshadowing a royal burial. Despite this, Nicodemus is never called a disciple, not even "in secret," as Joseph of Arimathea is described (cf. 19:38).

The meaning of Holy Scripture in our lives.

A difficult dialogue: who do we feel closer to?

We have heard a difficult dialogue. We must ask ourselves: who do we feel closer to, Nicodemus or Jesus?

Nicodemus is the man who remains in nocturnal hiding. He emerges with courage to meet Jesus. His role is difficult to comprehend, and he must face a trying journey: his rebirth leading to entering God's Kingdom, his understanding of the things of the earth and those of heaven, his perception of Jesus' sacrifice. And who can really understand Jesus?

We may alternatively find ourselves closely in communion with Jesus who challenges and imposes a path to follow. This is a radical change filled with challenges and enigmas. Jesus' goal is to lead Nicodemus to grow and to comprehend uprooting the superficial way to consider rebirth and admission to God's Kingdom. Jesus wants us to recognize the profound meaning of the Cross representative of God's love for man.

Without a doubt, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus is a model for our daily relationships. This dialogue shows the depth of Nicodemus' soul and the mystery of human life, as well as the depth of Jesus' heart. It reveals God's plan for humanity. God so loved the world that He sacrificed His only Begotten Son. The Father and Jesus are united in the gift of love. Thus, this passage shows God's love for humanity, manifested in Jesus a truly limitless love.

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus unfolds subtly, moving from paradoxical questions, almost as a challenge, to misunderstanding that leads to prying into Nicodemus' soul. There is a double meaning of terms to deepen the sense of what Jesus intends to convey to go further into the mystery of God. Finally, in His speech, Jesus uses the language of the signs: the snake—to

indicate a distant mystery difficult to understand from the beginning, the mystery of the necessity of Jesus' passion showing God's love for the world.

In our lives, we have difficulty giving meaning to them, particularly giving meaning to suffering. We find ourselves following many people who experience the mystery of suffering. In fact, Nicodemus is above all a human being in his simplicity, as well as a member of the Pharisees, and a leader of the Jews. Thus, his being a simple human being takes precedence over his belonging. That is why he is autonomous.

*Fatalism or protagonism? Passivity or activity?
Fraternizing gracefully? Emerging from darkness or hiding?*

Nicodemus is a role model for us. We should ask ourselves if we are resigned to what happens to us or are we committed to follow God's plan? Nicodemus is the man of the twilight, the man who emerges from darkness. Are we, too, willing to step into the light risking by becoming involved and going beyond the boundaries which society imposes? If not, we live in shadows remaining the person of the twilight refusing to step into the light of day.

Such an attitude leads to our becoming immature believers, ultimately unreliable and unworthy of Jesus' trust.

On the other hand, as we encounter Jesus who is the Word, the Life, and the Light, we can meditate Jesus' strength in His mission as the Son of Man who gave His life for us. He did not judge or condemn, but He manifested God's love for all.

What proximity? What close relationship can we build?

We can use Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus to show us how to live our relationships. Jesus is a role model because His words are full of love of the Father. Jesus meets Nicodemus freely. He is questioned. He outlines the path to salvation showing the mystery of God.

Sometimes in our lives, it is difficult for us to get close to others in all aspects of life. There is physical closeness, but more importantly there is spiritual closeness based up true relationships. How can this be achieved? It is like experiencing a new rebirth as is emblematic in Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus.

True closeness can be attained by empathy, by being a good listener, by participating in the experiences of others. Authentic listening means understanding the emotions and deep inner feelings of others. It is sharing one's inner world in the light of the mystery of God just as Jesus Himself does. He demonstrates God's love for humanity through paradoxical language and enigmas.

It is necessary to overcome defense mechanisms that inhibit meeting the challenges that may arise. Sometimes, it may be valuable to recount our own suffering so that we can understand those around us who are suffering.

We have to avoid judgment, especially when seeing emotions, pain or suffering in others.

We must avoid minimizing the difficulties presented as if they were unimportant because comprehending another person's problems is important.

We must understand the saving power of love that the Lord has demonstrated even in difficult contexts.

Recognizing the signs and recognizing "the" sign

To recognize the signs and to recognize "the" sign: This passage reveals a radical difference between recognizing the signs that indicate Jesus as a teacher and the sign par excellence, which is the lifting up of Jesus with the gift of His life and the Spirit.

Multiple signs can indicate how to live our life of discipleship, but one sign par excellence signifies the truth, meaning to look with faith and to embrace the salvation brought by Jesus through the gift of Himself in His passion.

The salvific event par excellence is comprised of many small signs/attitudes that reveal our acceptance of Jesus' model. But is it primarily the centrality of self-giving that manifests the degree to which we belong to the Lord.

This leads us to reflect upon the quality of our lives.

Is there fragmentation or is there the essential?

Do you recognize such signs in your life?

What is the relationship between the many small signs/gestures and the sign/attitude par excellence, that is a total and salvific self-giving for the life of the world?

More simply:

The concept of being born from above is a dynamic element that highlights the necessity of a spiritual life on the one hand; and on the other, the possibility for men and women of all ages to create one. It can be linked to the universal call to holiness. Being willing to grow in grace leads to rebirth showing the path to become a disciple.

Am I open to receiving Grace and do I desire this rebirth from above?

Darkness/light, good/evil, a fundamental choice: Do I feel that I have definitely chosen the light in my relationship with God and with others?

Darkness/light can be linked to witnessing/confessing our faith. It is the difference between a Nicodemus who hides and one who, even in the minority, speaks and acts openly, giving witness through his actions.

Can I witness my faith through my actions at home and at work?

Do I hide out of fear? What does being a Christian mean to me?

"For God so loved the world. . . .":

Do I recognize this love of God and acknowledge Jesus as a gift in my life?

The signs:

What value do I give to Jesus' sacrifice? During my life, do I maintain my gaze on the Crucified One? What do I see in His face?

Jesus does not come to judge, but to save. This changes our relationship with Him and how we perceive our brothers and sisters.

Can I feel that salvation is also for me today?

If Jesus did not come to judge, but to save, can I refrain from judging my brothers and sisters?

Do I hope and pray for my brothers and sisters and play a role in their salvation?

Essential literature

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