

## The Scope of Knowledge and that of Faith

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### Interpreting John, Chapter 3

“Rabbi we know you are a teacher ....”

In this reading from St. John’s Gospel (chap.3) we have a lively dialogue between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus a member of the Jewish ruling council.

From the beginning the main idea is revealed to us, i.e. Jesus knows the truth and understood Nicodemus very well, whereas the latter misunderstood Jesus.

Nicodemus began with ‘*we know*’ and Jesus closed the dialogue proving the fact ‘*you don’t know*’. If Nicodemus believed that he had reached the truth, Jesus affirms ‘*I tell you the truth*’, showing that, in fact, to Nicodemus was mistaken.

It seems that this dialogue took place between two teachers, Nicodemus and Jesus, but finally, Jesus ended the conversation showing that this dialogue was between the one and only teacher, the Lord , and a miserable unbeliever. The beginning and the conclusion of this dialogue were diametrically opposite to each other.

Another unexpected aspect of the story draws our own attention. Each time Jesus tried to answer Nicodemus, He pushed the question beyond and developed a more complex approach instead of providing a solution to the questions. In fact, we notice that Jesus was not answering the questions but was talking about matters entirely different. We believe that Jesus conscientiously adopted this method in order to indicate the challenging differences between the two understandings, i.e. that of Jesus and of Nicodemus.

Before going further into matter, I would like to mention an equally important and remarkable idea which will help us to understand this dialogue better. What is exceptional about this text is

that it contains a lot of words and verbs about the mind (thinking).

This is Nicodemus, the teacher, who started by calling Jesus Rabbi (teacher), and continued by saying: *'we know'* and analyzed rationally and proved his opinion carrying on saying, for no one could. Exactly as every researcher does, he puts his opinion and justifies it immediately.

The text, as it is repeated above, has plenty of similar indications, and to clarify without defining, we can quote some words such as: Truth – how- and verbs such as: we know, ask, answer...As it is well shown throughout the whole dialogue.

Indeed it is clear that Jesus was thinking differently from Nicodemus. The knowledge of Jesus was the truth, *'I tell you the truth'*; whereas all the knowledge of Nicodemus did not lead him to the truth. The former knows a lot; the latter cannot reach the truth.

This dialogue draws our attention on the radical difference between knowledge and truth, or searching and finding, or labouring and harvesting, or science and reality, or between heavenly and earthly things. It is a fact that Jesus underlines when saying *'I have spoken to you of earthly things and you don't understand or believe, how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?'*. These words of Jesus would emphasize the profound difference between the two methods quoted above. And what is more: it seems that Jesus was disappointed because he couldn't find any common basis on which He can let Nicodemus understand Him.

It is indeed a very impressive fact! Could this devout man or this theologian really understand Jesus? Is it true that a very huge gap is separating Jesus from Nicodemus? Are there two ways of thinking, or rather, of living? If so, how must we finally think? And which way should we adopt? Let us go then step by step through this dialogue.

Firstly, Nicodemus came and discussed with Jesus, face to face, as one teacher to his venerable colleague, admitting that Jesus is really coming from God, a fact which he can find out by himself from the signs He has done.

The reply of Jesus regarding this kindly and gentle admission of Nicodemus was astonishing. He claims that He has what Nicodemus had lost. He tells nothing but the truth. There is, in fact, another way, which Nicodemus has never thought of. And now Jesus is revealing it. It is Baptism, the second birth. This way leads to be born in the Kingdom of God.

The way of Nicodemus the one we inherit by our natural birth. That is to say *'the mind'*, by contrast to the second birth which is granted when we are baptized.

Jesus mentioned to Nicodemus that he couldn't understand, since he remained analyzing the words of the lord literally, and subsequently he asked Jesus *'how can a man are born again, when, in his case, he is old?'*

To solve this difficulty Jesus goes further and mentions more clearly what He would say, referring to the baptismal font, *'unless a man is born of water and the spirit'*. This is the new and second birth which gives man quite a different approach and view. It is the one in which we go along with the Holy Spirit, not according to the will of the flesh, as St. Paul says *'we have the mind of Christ'*, a fact we can reach only by the Holy Spirit after our second birth. This approach enables us to see beyond earthly matters and things, the one we can understand by our physical power and mind.

In this way we listen, not only to what our bodily ears can hear from wherever around us, such as knowledges, events, theories and scientific revelations, but also to the word coming from the mouth of God. It is the way to live listening to the inspiration of *'what the spirit and the bride say'* (Revelation 21:17). This is the real stage of man who uses not only his rational capacities, but besides, his spiritual potentiels as well. The spiritual man who is born from water and spirit can understand the divine words.

Then Jesus compares the spiritual man with the rational one, using this picture: *'the wind blows wherever it comes from or where it is going'*. In fact, by our earthly knowledge and our bodily capacities, we can understand that the wind exists. But, because our sensitivity is less than the action of the wind, we can not grasp its movements, for its level of sensitivity is higher than our bodily senses.

*'So it is with everyone born of the spirit'*, says Jesus in conclusion. It is the spiritual birth where the man enters and live with and in the presence of God. In this way he is always cooperating with the spirit in joy, love, and fear of God, a fact that a rational or a fleshly man can never reach in any way.

Finally, when Nicodemus who is also rational believer, couldn't understand Jesus, Jesus complains and speaks reproaching saying *'I have spoken to you of earthly things'*, e.i the example of the wind, and you don't understand me and you don't believe. How will you believe if I speak of heavenly things, e.i. of spiritual matters?

Indeed it is impossible to understand Jesus well, without being born of the spirit, and living by

the spirit, who alone can provoke in us every good thought, and enable us to testify to those spiritual things and say: ‘*come, Lord Jesus*’ and make us worthy to hear the blessed and wonderful words of Jesus ‘“*Yes I’m coming soon*”. (Rev.21:17)

Amen.