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# **ST. JOSEMARÍA'S MESSAGE AND SOCIAL LEGACY**

**50 years after his journey  
through Latin America**



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50 Years After His Journey Through Latin America**

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## 1. Universal call to holiness, in the middle of the world, across all sectors of society

The message Saint Josemaría received from God on 2 October 1928 focused on the call to holiness in the midst of the world through professional work and the ordinary circumstances of a Christian's life. All Christians are called to holiness by virtue of baptism, and for the vast majority, this does not require “leaving their place” in life to pursue it. The world — ordinary life with its hallmark spheres of professional work, family, and societal duties — is the habitat in which each Christian identifies with Christ. Sanctifying ordinary life requires the aid of grace and a personal relationship with God. At the same time, spiritual life is necessarily grounded in and reflective of the normal circumstances of living in the world.

The Lord expects us to sanctify ourselves and carry out apostolic work within our families, workplaces, circles of friends, social initiatives, towns, cities, regions, and countries. Always with a universal, Catholic perspective that allows us to see with the eyes of faith how the influence we can have in our surroundings can extend to the ends of the earth. Yet we must begin with what is within our immediate reach. If we fail to take advantage of the opportunities present in our immediate circumstances, we risk falling into abstract visions that prevent true apostolic fruitfulness.

Let us take a literary example. In *Bleak House*, one of Charles Dickens's finest novels, there is a grotesque character: Mrs. Jellyby. This woman exemplifies those who obsess over helping others, especially those far removed from their daily reality, while neglecting those in need around them, often in their own homes, neighborhoods, or cities.

Mrs. Jellyby devotes all her waking hours to writing letters, replying to them, and organizing meetings to support a mission in Africa: Borrioboola-Gha. She is the mother of a large family, but her children live in disorder and squalor. Nobody takes care of them, and when they try to draw their mother's attention, she reproaches them for not caring about the great issues of the world. To Mrs. Jellyby, her children are selfish. Her husband is also a victim of her preoccupation with her African mission. He lives isolated, plagued by terrible financial woes, with no one paying attention to him. Mrs. Jellyby disregards her family's problems because her focus is entirely on the poor in Africa, who she believes have great material and spiritual needs. Her concern, however, is naïve; she spends her time knitting woolen coats that would be of little use in Africa's tropical heat.<sup>1</sup>

In reality, Mrs. Jellyby is the selfish one. Her zeal for Africa is an escape from dealing with the ordinary, daily problems and needs around

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Penguin Classics, London, 2003.

her: preparing meals, cleaning the house, maintaining order in a large family, caring for a sick child, consoling someone who is sad, encouraging a daughter facing emotional struggles, supporting her husband during financial crises, or improving relationships with their neighbors.

The Lord calls us to sanctify ordinary life, including all its social aspects, with a sound supernatural realism. We aim to transform the world, but this must begin with transforming our own hearts and the environment around us. This work of sanctification requires two key conditions: consistency in our actions with the faith we profess and adequate formation, enabling us to live by Gospel principles, which shed immense light on the paths toward achieving the common good of society. Let us proceed to examine these two conditions.

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## 2. Unity of life

In ordinary circumstances, we have likely observed — whether in our own lives or in the lives of our relatives, friends, or neighbors — contradictions between natural moral law or Christian doctrine and the behavior of many Catholics in social settings. Some disregard traffic laws, falsify tax declarations, spread unfounded slander, or treat those in more modest social positions with contempt. All these actions are obvious obstacles to pursuing the common good from a Christian perspective.

Many years ago, the Aragonese saint wrote: “Even among apparently responsible and upright Catholics, the error of thinking that they are obliged only to fulfil their family and religious duties is quite common. Often they hardly want to hear about civic duties. This is not a question of selfishness, but simply a lack of formation. No one has ever told them clearly that the virtue of piety (part of the cardinal virtue of justice) and their feeling of Christian solidarity are also exercised by their taking part in the life of society, and by their being aware of and helping to solve the problems that affect the whole community.”<sup>2</sup>

The call to holiness in the midst of the world has, as one of its most significant consequences, the embodiment of what Saint Josemaría referred to as “unity of life.” Those who behave incoherently with their faith could be described as individuals with a divided personality, or, using a term frequently mentioned in the Gospels, as people marked by duplicity and deceit.

Saint Josemaría concluded: “We have to imitate Jesus Christ, in order to make him known with our lives. We know that Christ became man in order to lead all men and women into the divine life, so that, by uniting ourselves to him, we might individually and socially live God’s life.”<sup>3</sup> Notice the emphasis on living the life of God *socially*.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter no. 3, 46a, in *The Collected Letters*, volume I, Scepter, London, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Letter no. 3, 29b, in *ibidem*.

### 3. Formation in the social doctrine of the Church

We have just seen how Saint Josemaría pointed out that ignorance is one of the factors explaining the lack of social commitment among Catholics. Alongside unity of life, another implication of the call to holiness in social relationships is a solid understanding of the Church's social doctrine. Let us listen to the saint in his own words: "I will tell you, in this regard, what is my great desire. I would like to see children's catechisms spell out clearly those basic points where we cannot yield when we act one way or another in public life. And at the same time I would also want them to affirm our obligation to act and not abstain, to lend our own collaboration in serving the common good with loyalty and with personal freedom. This is a great desire of mine, because I see that in this way Catholics would learn these truths from their childhood and would know how to practise them later as adults."<sup>4</sup> Thanks be to God, this is already a reality in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

Pope Francis echoes the same concern. In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, he laments the confusion many Christians exhibit on social matters, such as supporting insular nationalism, xenophobia, or disdain for those who are different. The remedy is formation: "Faith, and the humanism it inspires, must maintain a critical sense in the face of these tendencies, and prompt an immediate response whenever they rear their head. For this reason, it is important that catechesis and preaching speak more directly and clearly about the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters."<sup>5</sup>

Anyone wishing to imbue the structures of earthly life with the spirit of Christ must necessarily receive proper formation to stay on the right path. The Gospel casts a bright light on understanding God's plan for the organization of society, family, economy, and culture. Pope Benedict XVI frequently spoke of "non-negotiable principles" that coherent Christians must defend to align this world as closely as possible to the divine plan. Yet, while some principles are non-negotiable, there are also many things that are negotiable—subject to dialogue, consensus-building, and deliberation. Distinguishing matters fundamentally tied to faith from those open to opinion is essential to building a society increasingly aligned with God's designs. And to discern correctly, proper formation is indispensable.

Saint Josemaría did not expect every citizen to be a professional in politics or social sciences, but he hoped that all would have "a minimum of knowledge of specific issues that are important for the common good of

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<sup>4</sup> Letter no. 3, 45b, in *ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 3-X-2020, no. 86.

one's own society in its particular historical circumstances. Likewise, we can demand a minimum of understanding of the knowledge of technical workings of public administration – of its real, limited possibilities – and of civil government, because without such an understanding it is impossible either to have calm and constructive criticism or to propose sensible options.”<sup>6</sup>

In Italy, there is a popular saying: *Piove. Governo ladro!* (“It’s raining; blame the government!”) Easy criticism, gratuitous complaints, and excessive demands — which are so common in political life, public opinion, and on social media — do nothing to foster the search for the common good. Following Saint Josemaría’s advice to form ourselves well and seek to understand the world around us with empathy would create an environment of peace, justice, and mutual understanding, which would truly contribute to the social good of the community.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter no. 3, 46c, in *The Collected Letters*, volume I, cit.



## 4. Sense of responsibility

The Gospel contains numerous calls from the Lord to his disciples, urging them to take responsibility for the world. Christians are called to be salt and light, leaven in the dough. The parable of the talents, in which Jesus asks us to use our abilities for the service of others, is one of the most frequently commented upon in the tradition of the Church. It is a wake-up call against passivity and indolence. Found in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew, it sits alongside the description of the Last Judgment, during which the Lord will hold us to account for how we cared for and took responsibility for our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is another wake-up call, emphasizing our responsibility toward everyone. Pope Francis explains: “The parable eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside. The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. At the same time, it warns us about the attitude of those who think only of themselves and fail to shoulder the inevitable responsibilities of life as it is.”<sup>7</sup>

Unity of life and formation in doctrine — always rooted in an authentic spiritual life — strengthen our sense of social responsibility. We must set aside passivity and comfort, shouldering the needs, injustices, and sufferings of our world. As Saint Josemaría said: “Your love for all people should lead you to face temporal problems courageously, following your conscience. Do not fear sacrifice or heavy burdens. No human event should leave you indifferent; on the contrary, all must serve as opportunities to do good to souls and bring them closer to God.”<sup>8</sup>

The clearest expression of social responsibility lies in fulfilling our duties of state: working well, with as much excellence as we can, to render the service that justice requires our fellow citizens to expect of us; creating a family atmosphere where children can cultivate the virtues, becoming responsible citizens; and respecting valid laws and legal systems to ensure ordered and peaceful coexistence. This is where God awaits us, and this is how we can effectively contribute to the common good. Msgr. Fernando Ocariz emphasizes the transformative power of work: “Sanctified work is always a lever for the transformation of the world, and the usual means by which the changes that dignify people’s lives are brought about, so that

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, 15-X-1948, no. 28.

charity and justice truly permeate all relationships. The work thus accomplished will be able to contribute to purifying the structures of sin, making them into structures within which integral human development is really possible.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> F. Ocáriz, “Enlarging the Heart,” Conference, 22 January 2023.

## 5. Love for freedom, pluralism

The common good entails creating circumstances that allow each person to achieve fulfillment in their personal life and their relationships with others. To this end, it is necessary to guarantee broad areas of freedom. This is not the moment to delve into all aspects of freedom; we will simply point out that the fullness of human life is Love – with a capital L, which we identify with God – and that without freedom, we cannot love.

In many contemporary societies, freedom is being eroded in worrying ways. Imposing what is supposedly “correct” from a perspective closed to the spirit is a restriction of freedom; many people fall into a spiral of fear and silence to avoid being left out, as has happened with the so-called “cancel culture” currently being denounced by rectors of prominent universities throughout the United States. In some places, dictatorships of one kind or another, infused with totalitarian ideologies, are imposed, preventing the expression of thoughts that do not align with the official doctrine, under penalty of imprisonment. Even more grave are attempts to deny citizens their religious freedom, systematically persecuting those who do not adhere to the single official creed of a fundamentalist society. I do not refer only to religious fundamentalism: secularism also errs on the side of totalitarianism when it prevents public manifestations of religious faith.

Saint Josemaría loved clean air and clear water. Where freedom is denied, the social environment becomes dark, and the water that should flow freely to quench citizens’ thirst becomes stagnant and foul. For this reason, one of the most outstanding characteristics of his teachings – and not only in the social dimension – was his love for freedom. He energetically affirmed that there is a realm within the human person that is utterly free, into which only the individual and God can enter, and this must always be respected: the intimacy of consciences. His unwavering respect for the intimate sanctuary of consciences led him to defend freedom in matters of religion. He maintained genuine friendships with people of all creeds or none and was willing to give his life to defend the freedom of their consciences. He engaged in a filial struggle with the Holy See so that cooperators in Opus Dei could include non-Catholics and even non-Christians. He rejoiced in the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*. Paraphrasing that magisterial declaration, he stated: “I defend with all my strength the freedom of consciences, which means that no one can licitly prevent a man from worshipping God. The legitimate hunger for truth must be respected. Man has a grave obligation to seek God, to know him and worship him, but no one on earth is permitted to impose on his neighbour the practice of a faith he lacks; just as no one can claim the right to harm those who have received the faith from God.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Friends of God*, no. 32.

Along with religious freedom, Saint Josemaría also defended the freedom of all Christians to hold opinions in matters that God has left to man's free will. He fostered an open, vibrant atmosphere in which everyone could express themselves simply as they were, respecting each other's views. He detested tyranny, "as being opposed to human dignity,"<sup>11</sup> and showed great respect for pluralism in debatable matters, whether they pertained to politics, society, economics, culture, or sports — in short, to the vast realm of non-dogmatic issues. In *Furrow*, he writes: "How sad it is to have a Caesarist mentality, and not to understand the freedom other citizens enjoy in the things God has left to the free choice of men."<sup>12</sup>

In an article published in the Madrid newspaper ABC on 2 November 1969, Saint Josemaría expressed himself as follows: "When God created us he ran the risk and adventure of our freedom. He wanted history to be real, made of genuine decisions, not a fiction or a game. Each individual has to experience his or her personal autonomy, with the hazard, experimentation and uncertainty that it involves. Let's not forget that although God has given us the security of our faith, he hasn't revealed to us the meaning of all human events. Together with things that Christians find clear and certain, there are very many others which are open to opinion, i.e. a certain degree of knowledge of what may be true or right, with no absolute certainty. In such cases, it's possible that I'm mistaken, but even if I am right, other people may be right too. An object that looks concave to me looks convex to people seeing it from a different standpoint."<sup>13</sup>

Responsibility brings with it the moral obligation to engage in the life of society, leaving an evangelical imprint while always respecting the free temporal choices of others. "Interpret, then, my words as what they are," he preached in the famous homily on the campus of the University of Navarra: "a call to exercise your rights every day, and not merely in time of emergency. A call to fulfil honourably your commitments as citizens, in all fields — in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job — accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence which corresponds to each one of you. A Christian 'lay outlook' of this sort will enable you to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism. To put it in a positive way, it will help you to live in peace with all your fellow citizens, and to promote this understanding and harmony in all spheres of social life."<sup>14</sup>

Freedom in matters of opinion is an essential part of his secular and lay spirit. He abhorred the "one party" mindset and defended Christians'

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<sup>11</sup> *Conversations*, no. 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Furrow*, no. 313.

<sup>13</sup> "Las riquezas de la fe," ABC, 2-XI-1969 ("The Riches of the Faith," in English, published on opusdei.org).

<sup>14</sup> *Conversations*, no. 117.

freedom of opinion and responsibility for decisions in their professional and social activities: “There are no dogmas in temporal matters. It is contrary to human dignity to try and lay down absolute truths in things that are necessary matters of opinion, on which people will have different viewpoints depending on their interests, cultural preferences and personal experience. Trying to impose dogmas in temporal affairs leads one inevitably to do violence to other people’s consciences, to fail to respect one’s neighbor.”<sup>15</sup>

It should be added that, in Saint Josemaría’s thought, this awareness of Christians’ freedom in temporal matters was inseparably linked to the obligation to form one’s conscience and to the affirmation of the right and duty of the Church’s hierarchy to pronounce moral judgments on temporal realities when demanded by faith and Christian morality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “The Riches of the Faith,” ABC 2-XI-1969.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Rodríguez Luño, “La formazione della coscienza in materia sociale e politica secondo gli insegnamenti del beato Josemaría Escrivá,” in *Romana*, January-June 1991, pg. 162-181.

## 6. Capacity for dialogue

The social pluralism Saint Josemaría advocated for naturally leads to the establishment of a “culture of dialogue” in society. Dialogue was the focus of Saint Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*. The founder of Opus Dei encouraged others not to engage in disputes but to exchange views charitably, with respect for those who hold differing opinions. Dialogue requires humility; we are not the owners of truth and must, therefore, be willing to learn from others. It also demands charity; never mistreating someone, even when we are confident they are mistaken. Furthermore, it necessitates understanding; putting ourselves in others' circumstances. Dialogue requires us to practice many Christian virtues, making the society we live in more humane.

Genuine dialogue means being faithful to our own identity. While the vast majority of issues are debatable, there exists a core of truths — both of faith and of natural order — that a person with a well-formed conscience cannot compromise. This is what Saint Josemaría referred to as “holy intransigence,” or what Pope Benedict XVI would later describe as “non-negotiable principles.” A point in *Furrow* quoted earlier ends with this statement: “Only in faith and morals is there an indisputable standard: that of our Mother the Church.”<sup>17</sup> Defending these indispensable points with composure is not fundamentalism but consistency with our human and Christian conscience.

In a letter addressed to his followers on 21 January 1966, Saint Josemaría elaborated on the dialogue that every Christian must engage in to make society more humane and, consequently, more Christian. We will reproduce some excerpts from this letter, which I believe deserves to be more widely known and, above all, applied in today's tense public debates, be they political, cultural, or religious.

As always, the model is the life of Jesus, who engaged in constant dialogue with all kinds of people: “With the ever-new light of charity, with generous love for God and neighbour, we shall renew our desire to understand and forgive everyone. Seeing the Master's example, we don't regard ourselves as anyone's enemy.”<sup>18</sup> Our attitude must be that of sowers of peace and joy in the world, loving and defending the freedom of souls. The Lord Himself gained and respects that freedom.

Saint Josemaría understood the mission of Opus Dei — which can be applied to all Christians — as “spread[ing] throughout the world the message of love and peace that our Lord left us, [inviting] all men and women to respect the rights of the person.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Furrow*, no. 275.

<sup>18</sup> Letter no. 4, 3a, en *The Collected Letters*, volume I, cit.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 3c.

The founder depicted a grim picture of the times he lived in, and they were times remarkably similar to our own: much is said about peace, but peace is glaringly absent; democracy and equality are lauded, yet closed, impenetrable castes persist; people demand understanding without practicing it, even among Christians. “These are times when fanatical and intolerant people, blind and deaf to the viewpoints of others, defend themselves by labelling their victims as violent and aggressive. In short, God has called us at a time when many talk about unity, but it is hard to imagine a period of greater dissension, not only among people in general, but even among Catholics.”<sup>20</sup>

Saint Josemaría addressed a central theme for Christians engaging in public life: fidelity to doctrine (what he termed “holy intransigence”) and openness and respect for all people, including those in error (“holy tolerance”). He clarified: “You need, however, to teach many people how to act this way, because it is not hard to find those who confuse intransigence with bullheadedness, and tolerance with abdicating rights or compromising on the truth.”<sup>21</sup>

Christians cannot compromise on matters of faith. The deposit of Revelation does not belong to us. If the changes to doctrine sought by some were to occur — however well-intentioned, aiming for consensus — a vague and sentimental form of religion would emerge, one that would cease to be salt and light. The Christian must defend the Church’s teachings on faith and morals “with your example, with your words, with your writings: with all the honest means at your disposal.”<sup>22</sup>

Fidelity to the truth should not lead us to the desire to annihilate the one who is mistaken, or to be carried away by anger, or to fall into fanaticism. We are not looking to become a “hammer of heretics.” We must distinguish between the error and the person who is mistaken. But even within the error itself, we should rescue the part of truth that it contains. “Bad ideas are not usually completely bad. They ordinarily have some aspect of good, because otherwise nobody would follow them. There is always some spark of truth, and this is what makes them attractive, but that part of the truth is not theirs: it derives from Christ and from the Church. And so, these good ideas (which are mixed with error) should be seen as coming from Christians who possess the fullness of truth; it should not be that we Christians go after these ideas.”<sup>23</sup>

Holy tolerance leads us to live with everyone, to dialogue with everyone. “In short, we should be engaged in a continuous dialogue with our companions, our friends, with everybody we meet. This is holy tolerance. We could certainly just call it tolerance, but I think that tolerance by itself does not go far enough, because it is not simply a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 4c.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 6d.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 8c.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, 11a.

matter of tolerating as a lesser or inevitable evil the fact that people think differently from us or are mistaken.”<sup>24</sup>

If this open attitude is lacking, we would do a disservice to the truth, just like those whose lives are “a perpetual crusade, a constant defence of the faith, but sometimes they are blinded, and forgetting that their good desires should be governed by charity and prudence, they become fanatics. In spite of their good intentions, the great service they seek to render to the truth becomes distorted and they end up doing more harm than good, defending perhaps their own opinion, their self-esteem, or their narrow-mindedness. Like the knight of La Mancha, they see giants where there are only windmills. They become quarrelsome, irritable, full of bitter zeal, rough-mannered. They can never find anything good but see everything as bleak; they fear people's legitimate freedom, and are unable to smile.”<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to this attitude, a Christian’s conduct in public debate should be characterized by charity, which has, among other features, thoughtfulness in dealing with others, good manners, love for others’ freedom, cordiality, and sympathy. On the other hand, we cannot limit ourselves to merely speaking or setting a good example: “You also have to listen and be ready to engage in open, cordial dialogue with the souls you wish to attract to God.”<sup>26</sup>

Saint Josemaría encouraged understanding everyone, walking arm in arm with all, working together with people who may be on a different ideological wavelength. If we want to bring these people closer to the truth, we need to strengthen our doctrinal formation and bathe everything in the charity of Christ. “Who are we against? Nobody. I cannot love the devil, but as for all those who are not the devil, no matter how bad they are or appear to be, I wish them well. I don't feel, nor have I ever felt, that I am against anyone. I reject ideas against Christ's teaching or morals, but at the same time I have the duty to welcome, with Christ's charity, anyone who holds such views.”<sup>27</sup>

Saint Josemaría made a pastoral visit to some countries in South America in the year 1974. In Argentina, there was a tense atmosphere, national disunity, and fratricidal violence. His words resonated in the hearts of thousands of Argentinians who were suffering this situation and can easily apply to many circumstances of the present: “May you sow peace and joy everywhere; may you never speak an unpleasant word to anyone; may you know how to walk arm in arm with those who do not

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 12a.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 12d-12e.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 13e.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 24d.



think like you. Never mistreat each other; be brothers and sisters to all creatures, sowers of peace and joy.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Notes from a family gathering, 15-VI-1974 (General Archive of the Prelature, henceforth AGP (Archivo General de la Prelatura), library, PO4, vol. II, 482).

## 7. Spirit of service; to govern is to serve

The word “service” is not particularly popular. In contrast, the word “power” is usually presented as something eminently desirable. This may highlight the fact that we live in a secularized world that has forgotten that to reign is to serve. In any case, that has always been the Christian view of authority. Whoever occupies a position of responsibility in society (rulers, university professors, parents, etc.) must be aware that they are there to serve their subjects, students, and family members. Too often, we see the opposite: those who exercise power believe that they have the ability to serve themselves. They view power as a personal property for their own benefit. Hence, widespread phenomena such as political and economic corruption, arbitrariness, and desires to perpetuate oneself in power arise. History and literature — think of so many kings in Shakespeare’s works, like Macbeth or Richard III — have amply demonstrated this. Thankfully, there are also numerous examples of people who wield power with moral authority, gentleness, respect, and a spirit of service: they honor the name “ministers,” a word that comes from the Latin *ministrare*, meaning “to serve.”

When he speaks about sanctifying society, St. Josemaría frequently mentions a spirit of service. Every honest human task has as its intrinsic aim the service to others. A doctor serves as much as a housewife, a street sweeper as much as a researcher or a bank employee. Service is not something additional to human work. “Let us [...] think slowly about what is at the heart of our professional work. I will tell you that we have only one intention: to serve. In today’s world, the importance of the social mission of all the professions is clearly seen: even charity, even teaching have become social.”<sup>29</sup>

Escrivá referred to the supernatural desire to serve God and souls, which should reign in the hearts of all Christians, and which also has a human dimension: “you are not trying to do anything other than attain Christian perfection in the world uprightly, with your fully free and responsible action in all spheres fields of civil society. Unselfish service, which does not debase, but educates; it dilates the heart, making it Roman in the best sense of the word, in such a way that it leads us to further the honour and welfare of every country, so that there will be fewer people who are poor, fewer who are ignorant, and fewer without faith, fewer despairing, fewer wars, less insecurity, more charity and more peace.”<sup>30</sup>

The spirit of service necessarily leads one to think of others, to live within the Christian anthropological framework described in no. 24 of *Gaudium et spes*: the human person is realized in the sincere gift of self. We exercise this self-giving in the web of social relationships. “My

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<sup>29</sup> Letter no. 3, 26b.

<sup>30</sup> Letter no. 8, 1b, in *The Collected Letters*, volume II, Scepter, London, 2023.

children, each of us acts in a personal and responsible way. We must try to set a good example for every person and for society as a whole, because Christians cannot be individualists who forget about the needs of others. Nor can Christians live selfishly and turn their backs on the world; they are essentially social, responsible members of Christ's Mystical Body.”<sup>31</sup>

According to his vision, if a spirit of service prevails in society, the world will be transformed, even though we will always have our human limitations. “Our apostolic work will contribute to peace, to the collaboration of people with each other, to justice, to avoiding war, to avoiding isolation, to avoiding both national and personal selfishness. It will do so because everyone will realize that they are part of the whole great human family, which is directed by God’s will towards perfection.”<sup>32</sup> St. Josemaría can teach us a great deal about broadening horizons: even if our task in society seems minimal or unimportant in human eyes, we can change the world from wherever we are.

If all social realms constitute an opportunity to contribute to the common good, to serve, it is clear that some of them are strategic. St. Josemaría specifically points to public service, political activity. “In all fields where men and women work, I insist, you also have to be present with the wonderful spirit of service of the followers of Jesus Christ, who *came not to be served but to serve* (Mt 20:28). It would be a very grave error to abandon imprudently the public life of nations, where you will act as the ordinary citizens that you are and with personal freedom and personal responsibility.”<sup>33</sup> And he insists: “Our loyal and disinterested presence in public life offers immense possibilities to do good and to serve. Catholics cannot [...] abandon this field and leave politics in the hands of people who do not know or observe God’s law or who are clearly hostile to his holy Church.”<sup>34</sup>

Following a long tradition of political philosophy and social doctrine, whose most eminent representatives are Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas, Escrivá offers a definition of political activity: “Politics, in the noble sense of the word, is fundamentally a service aimed at achieving the common good of the earthly City. But this good extends to a very wide sphere, and consequently it is in the political arena that the most important laws are debated and passed: those affecting marriage, the family, education, private property, and the dignity (the rights and duties) of the human person.”<sup>35</sup>

In classical political philosophy texts, it is common to find sections dedicated to the virtues of the ruler. In many of St. Josemaría’s writings, he gives a series of guidelines for good governance aimed at the common

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<sup>31</sup> Letter no. 3, *The Collected Letters*, volume I, cit, 37d.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 38a.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 40e.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 41a.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 42a.

good. These include knowing how to delegate responsibilities without concentrating power in one person (cf. *Furrow*, no. 972); surrounding oneself with knowledgeable and morally upright people, not mediocre ones seeking personal advancement (cf. *Furrow*, no. 968); making decisions by listening to collaborators to avoid one-sided views (cf. *Furrow*, no. 392); never judging or speaking lightly about people or issues that the ruler is unfamiliar with (cf. *Furrow*, no. 397); being convinced that those who govern do not know everything and must learn from others (cf. *Furrow*, no. 388).

In a letter dated 1959, addressed to the members of Opus Dei, he gave a series of instructions that were not based on his personal political ideas, but on the Church's social doctrine: "Should you have to take part in the work of government, do all you can to promulgate just laws that the citizens can fulfil. To do the contrary is an abuse of power and an assault on people's freedom. Besides, it deforms their consciences, because in such cases they have a perfect right not to comply with those laws which are laws in name only."<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, he taught that it is not enough to issue good laws; we need to involve all citizens in the common good, especially the most vulnerable: "Respect the freedom of all citizens, and bear in mind that all the members of the community should participate in the common good. Give everyone the opportunity to raise their standard of living, without pushing down some people in order to lift up the rest. Offer the humbler folk open horizons for their future: job security and proper pay, access to equal education. Besides being what is right and just, this will bring light to their lives, change their attitudes and help them to search for God and the higher realities."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Letter 29, no. 52, on opusdei.org.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

## 8. Compassion and action

One of the most prominent characteristics of contemporary culture is a rejection of all forms of discrimination. From a Christian perspective, this is a very positive trend, although, sadly, we can see that some groups of people are still frequently discriminated against, especially the weak or those with different abilities. These groups also include those who believe in objective truths, those who think that life has meaning, or those who dare to publicly profess their faith. It is not uncommon for such individuals — I imagine that many of the readers of this book fall into this category — to be labeled as fundamentalists, incapable of dialoguing with those who think differently, or a threat to democracy.

Recently, a document from the Holy See reaffirmed the dignity of every person: “Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights.”<sup>38</sup>

To clarify potential misunderstandings about the term dignity, the document explains that four dimensions of dignity can be distinguished: ontological dignity, moral dignity, social dignity, and existential dignity. The first dimension is the most important. *Ontological dignity* “belongs to the person as such simply because he or she exists and is willed, created, and loved by God. Ontological dignity is indelible and remains valid beyond any circumstances in which the person may find themselves.”<sup>39</sup> *Moral dignity* refers to the exercise of human freedom. Often, we misuse freedom, and in such cases, we behave in a way that is unworthy of the human person, not in accordance with our dignity. “History illustrates how individuals — when exercising their freedom against the law of love revealed by the Gospel — can commit inestimably profound acts of evil against others. Those who act this way seem to have lost any trace of humanity and dignity. This is where the present distinction can help us discern between the moral dignity that *de facto* can be ‘lost’ and the ontological dignity that can never be annulled. And it is precisely because of this latter point that we must work with all our might so that all those who have done evil may repent and convert.”<sup>40</sup>

*Social dignity* refers to the conditions in which a person lives. We can say that there are “undignified manners of life” because their social circumstances do not respect the ontological dignity that every person enjoys. Speaking of an “undignified” manner of life “does not imply a

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<sup>38</sup> Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Dignitas Infinita,” on human dignity, no. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

judgment on those individuals but highlights how the situation in which they are forced to live contradicts their inalienable dignity.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, *existential dignity*: “While some people may appear to lack nothing essential for life, for various reasons, they may still struggle to live with peace, joy, and hope. In other situations, the presence of serious illnesses, violent family environments, pathological addictions, and other hardships may drive people to experience their life conditions as ‘undignified’ vis-à-vis their perception of that ontological dignity that can never be obscured. These distinctions remind us of the inalienable value of the ontological dignity that is rooted in the very being of the human person in all circumstances.”<sup>42</sup>

St. John Paul II, from a personalist perspective, emphasized that “The person is a being for whom the only suitable dimension is love.”<sup>43</sup> Pope Francis adds: “Love, then, is more than just a series of benevolent actions. Those actions have their source in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who they *are*, moves us to seek the best for their lives. Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.”<sup>44</sup>

St. Josemaría, following the crucified Christ’s example, said that every Christian should open their arms wide to embrace all souls. He considered that every person had infinite value, because “we are worth all the blood of Christ.” Using the terminology from the document we just mentioned, we can affirm without error that, both in his life and in his teaching, he lived out with all its consequences respect for the dignity of the human person in all four of its dimensions: *ontological dignity*, which led him to defend life from the moment of conception until natural death, in a constant apostolate in a cultural context where an anti-life mentality was already very developed; *moral dignity*, which led him to draw close to sinners in order to bring them closer to the sources of grace, going to the very gates of hell; *social dignity*, which moved him to awaken the consciences of all people of good will to promote the development of all, especially the poor, so they might reach a standard of living commensurate with the dignity of being children of God; and finally, *existential dignity*, reflected in his constant concern for accompanying the lonely, consoling the sick, preaching peace for families, and so on.

Saint Josemaría’s personal attitude was complemented by his desire to instill in his spiritual children (and in all the people who encountered his preaching) the responsibility of collaborating in finding

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, no. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>43</sup> St. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Knopf, New York, 1995, chapter 30.

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 94.

solutions to social problems. If the first step is *compassion* toward the weak, poor, and discriminated against, the next step must be *action*: no Christian or person of good will cannot remain passive in the face of social injustices. His love for Christ, whom he saw in the poor, pushed him to find ways to remedy the situations of poverty and misery faced by so many people all over the world. He believed that if spiritual life was authentic, it necessarily had to lead to closeness with the suffering. Otherwise, one would fall into a subjective religiosity, far from the spirit of Christ.<sup>45</sup> “We do not love justice,” he preached in a homily on St. Joseph, “if we do not wish to see it fulfilled in the lives of others. In the same way, it is wrong to shut oneself up in comfortable religiosity, forgetting the needs of others. The man who wishes to be just in God’s eyes also tries to establish the reign of justice among men. And not only for the good of God’s name, but because to be a Christian means to work at fulfilling all the noble yearnings of men. Paraphrasing a well-known text of St John, we can say that the man who says he acts justly toward God, but does not do so with other men, is a liar: and there is no truth in him.”<sup>46</sup>

While respecting the legitimate pluralism that exists in the search for technical solutions to social crises, he never failed to remind everyone that a central part of the Gospel is the predilection for the poor and the sick, who ought to enjoy the same rights as other people. In the middle of the last century, he said unambiguously: “In these confusing times, one does not know what is right, center, or left, politically or socially. But if by *left* you mean securing the well-being of the poor, so that everyone can have the right to live with a minimum of comfort, to work, to be well cared for if they fall ill, to enjoy leisure, to have and raise children, to grow old and be looked after, then I am further left than anyone. Naturally, within the doctrine of the Church’s social teaching, and without compromises with Marxism or atheistic materialism, or with any kind of class struggle, which is unchristian, because we cannot make compromises on these matters.”<sup>47</sup>

For Saint Josemaría, there are unavoidable demands of justice, and we must seek all appropriate means to ensure they are respected. At the same time, in his social vision, informed by the love of Christ, he judged that mere justice is insufficient. “Be convinced that justice alone is never enough to solve the great problems of mankind. When justice alone is done, don’t be surprised if people are hurt. The dignity of man, who is a son of God, requires much more. Charity must penetrate and accompany justice because it sweetens and deifies everything: ‘God is love.’ [...] There is a long road to travel from the demands of strict justice to the abundance of charity. And there are not many who persevere to the end. Some are content to go as far as the threshold: they leave aside justice and

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<sup>45</sup> Cfr. M. Schlag, entry *Promoción y desarrollo*, in the *Diccionario...*, cit., 1026.

<sup>46</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 52.

<sup>47</sup> Instruction, V-1935/14-IX-1950, note 146.

limit their actions to a bit of welfare work, which they define as charitable [...]. Charity, which is like a generous overflowing of justice, demands first of all the fulfilment of one's duty. The way to start is to be just; the next step is to do what is most equitable...; but in order to love, great refinement is required, and much thoughtfulness, and respect, and kindness in rich measure. In other words, it involves following the Apostle's advice: 'carry one another's burdens, and thus you will fulfil the law of Christ.' Then indeed we shall be living charity fully and carrying out the commandment of Jesus."<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his life, the founder of Opus Dei encouraged countless initiatives to serve people in need: vocational training institutes, medical dispensaries, agricultural schools, training centers for domestic workers, etc. But he did not have an "assistance" mentality: he saw the need to equip the vulnerable with tools to build their own lives, respecting their dignity. This meant providing them with human and professional training, without neglecting spiritual formation, because, as both then and now — to use Pope Francis' critique — "the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care."<sup>49</sup> St. Josemaría said: "Do not forget, my dear children, that the saddest poverty is spiritual poverty, being deprived of Christ's doctrine and not partaking in his life."<sup>50</sup>

He also promoted universities and business schools focused on fostering social responsibility and the spirit of service, to make that high-level education available for the common good. He sought to refine the social sensitivity of wealthy or highly educated individuals, not based on principles of political or economic philosophy, but on a mindset attuned to the feelings of the Heart of Christ: "A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart. While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind. Otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus; it will be a fraud, a deception of God and man."<sup>51</sup>

We cannot settle for resolving personal and family problems. They are a priority, but they must serve as the platform to launch ourselves "into the deep" to seek all men, to carry Christ's message to each and person. As St. Paul writes, "The charity of Christ urges us on" (2 Cor 5:14). And love implies self-giving, going beyond oneself, a sincere gift of self. In other words, it leads us to complicate our lives. In Venezuela, at one of the many gatherings he held with all kinds of people, in response to a question about teaching children to have healthy relationships with

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<sup>48</sup> *Friends of God*, nos. 172-173.

<sup>49</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 200.

<sup>50</sup> Letter 29, no. 52.

<sup>51</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 167



material goods, St. Josemaría said: “I would take them on a short walk... through those neighborhoods around the great city of Caracas. I would put my hand in front of their eyes, and then remove it so that they could see the shacks, one on top of the other. That’s the answer! Let them know that they must use their money well; that they must know how to manage it, so that everyone may, in some way, share in the goods of the earth. Because it is very easy to say that you are good if you have never been in need. A friend of mine, a very wealthy man, once told me, ‘I don’t know if I am good, because my wife has never been sick, I’ve never found myself with no job and no money; I’ve never had to see my children weak with hunger while out of work and money; I have never found myself in the street, lying down with no shelter... I don’t know if I am an honest man: what would I have done, if all that had happened to me?’ Look, we must try to prevent anyone from facing those situations. We have to help people have the capacity to ensure a minimum wellbeing through their work, to be serene before old age or sickness, to educate their children, and so many other necessary things. None of this should leave us indifferent. Each of us, from our own place, must work to promote charity and justice.”<sup>52</sup>

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Any Christian who, in accordance with the Gospel and a solid formation in social doctrine, seeks to influence the community, with social responsibility, respect for others’ freedom, an ability to dialogue, a spirit of service, and active compassion for the poor, will generate positive change. Like the concentric circles of ripples around a stone thrown into water, his influence will reach the farthest ends of the earth. If there are many Christians like this, there will be reasons to hope for a better world, with more love, understanding, peace, and forgiveness. Let us not fall into utopian dreams, because the presence of evil will always remain until the end of time. But it is our responsibility to make our contribution to make social coexistence more Christian, and, consequently, more human.

A few weeks ago, I saw on the shelves of a bookstore in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, a book titled *Le pire n’est pas encore arrivé* (“The worst is yet to come”). As a title, it is not very encouraging. With the certainties that faith gives us, we can affirm that, if we remain faithful to our vocation as Christian citizens in the world, the best is yet to come. Everything depends at once on God and our free and responsible response to divine grace.

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<sup>52</sup> Notes from a family gathering, 9-II-1975 (AGP, Library, PO4, 1975, vol. III, 83-84).