

VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (VIII): The Battle of Our Formation

Although its moment of splendor was already well in the past, Athens was still a cultural landmark in Saint Paul's time. Saint Luke tells us that the people there, with restless minds, *spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new* (Acts 17:21). Hence it is surprising to see their skeptical rejection of the only true newness worthy of the name: that of the death and resurrection of Christ, who saves us from sin (cf. Acts 17:32). Saint Paul must have been deeply struck by this "failure" at the very heart of classical culture. And it led him to reflect deeply, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, on the content of authentic Christian newness.

Authentic newness

In his letters to the Christians in Corinth, written soon after his encounter with the Athenians, Saint Paul presents two great keys for entering into the Christian message. First, the mystery of Christ's Cross, impossible to grasp with human logic alone (cf. *1 Cor* 1:20-25); and then, its specific implications for our daily life. The Cross entails a new way of being in the world (cf. *1 Cor* 5:7-8). *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come* (*2 Cor* 5:17).

The light Saint Josemaría received on 2 October 1928 is closely connected with this same newness: his vision of Christians as "bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed."¹ His experience of the authentic Christian newness, our new life in Jesus, made him see that some so-called "novelties" stirring up society and the Church during those years were in reality nothing more than "musty and periwigged 'Voltaireisms' and discredited liberalism of the nineteenth century."² These "novelties" will always keep appearing and disappearing throughout history. In contrast to the Christian newness, they are simply the rebirth of "all the errors which have occurred in the course of the centuries,"³ and thus are actually very old.

A big part of our mission as ordinary Christians involves allowing the authentic newness of Christ to imbue every corner of our own life, without being led astray by what merely has the appearance of being new. Hence it is essential to welcome it first in our own lives, to let it grow with patience and determination, so that it can give shape to our mentality and attitudes. Only then can we help ensure "that many do not remain in darkness, but walk instead along paths that lead to eternal life."⁴

¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 1.

² Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 849.

³ Saint Josemaría, *Supernatural Aim of the Church*, no. 2.

⁴ *The Forge*, no. 1.

First comes the sower

Several of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God make it clear that its presence among us is a free gift. For example, in the parable of the sower (cf. *Mt* 13:3), the starting point is the work of the person who willingly scatters the seed. Without this prior effort there would be no fruit. Whether the soil is good, fair or bad is certainly also important, but it is secondary.

Faith reveals to us that we are children of God: heirs of the world (cf. *Ps* 2:8), called to assist our Father God in trying to ensure that all creation becomes the gift He wants it to be for us (cf. *Rom* 8:20-23). Animated by the same faith that sustained the mission of the first Christians, we strive to discover how all the paths of the earth can lead to God. For we are convinced that "the world is not evil, because it has come from God's hands, because it is his creation, because 'Yahweh looked upon it and saw that it was good' (cf. *Gen* 1:7 ff)." ⁵

When we truly grasp that we are God's children and heirs, that we are apostles, we realize we have to become the seed that is scattered to the four winds. We are enthused, above all, to see that God is striving to sow his seed over and over again to enliven a world that longs to bear fruit. Hence "we can understand all the marvel of our divine vocation. The hand of Christ has snatched us from a wheat field; the sower squeezes the handful of wheat in his wounded palm. The Blood of Christ bathes the seed, soaking it. Then the Lord tosses the wheat to the winds, so that in dying it becomes life and in sinking into the ground it multiplies itself." ⁶

Working the land, improving the seed

However, it is not enough simply to scatter the seed. The seed also needs to have the strength and "intelligence" to take root. Moreover, the land will need to be fertilized; we will need to work it and prepare it as well as possible (cf. *Lk* 13:6-9).

If we want the fruit to be so abundant that, as Jesus says, even the birds of the air can take shelter there (cf. *Mt* 13:31-32), an essential part of our collaboration will be to prepare, in the measure of our possibilities, good seed. First of all, we ourselves need to be convinced of the faith's intimate relationship with the truth. We need to have the vital conviction that faith is not simply "a lofty sentiment which brings consolation and cheer, yet remains prey to the vagaries of our spirit and the changing seasons, incapable of sustaining a steady journey through life." ⁷ Rather "we need knowledge, we need truth, because without these we cannot stand firm, we cannot move forward. Faith without truth does not save, it does not provide a sure footing." ⁸

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 114.

⁶ Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 3.

⁷ Francis, Enc. *Lumen fidei*, no. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The thirst for truth allows us to welcome faith in our intellect, to discover its rational grounding. Then our intellect is opened up to much broader horizons. Reality in all its richness becomes both more comprehensible and deeper for us. Hence if we want to be sowers of the authentic newness of Christ, we cannot fail to reflect on our faith, striving to enlighten every corner of our life with it, including our professional work. When we diligently try to reflect on our experiences in the light of faith, which is not simply having recourse to some ready-made answers, we will gradually acquire a good habit, a virtue – perhaps one of the most important ones. Only when our intellect is illumined by the light of faith will we be able “to detect the divine splendors that shine through the commonest everyday realities.”⁹

For this to become a reality in our life, we need to be truly humble. We need to be docile to the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through daily events and the people around us (cf. *Jn* 14:26). In striving to bring Christ’s light to the world, our true strength can come only from God. As Saint John Paul II said, “humility is creative submission to the force of truth and love. Humility is the rejection of appearances and superficiality; it is the expression of the depth of the human spirit; it is the condition for man’s greatness.”¹⁰

The “battle” of Saint Josemaría

Thus we can understand Saint Josemaría’s effort to ensure that right from the beginning Opus Dei offered a deep philosophical and theological formation, which in turn would impact each one’s professional setting. In his quest to find the right solution for achieving this, he spoke about a real “battle.”¹¹ This forceful language underscores the arduous nature of the effort to acquire a solid formation, and therefore the need to make a real commitment, always in accord with each one’s personal circumstances. Saint Thomas Aquinas spoke about the virtue of “studiousness,” which entails “a determined effort to seek out the truth of things.”¹² That is, it requires the permanent attitude of cultivating a healthy curiosity to know our world in depth and striving to overcome the obstacles that prevent us from doing so. In any case, the important thing is never to lose sight of the greatness of the goal inspiring our efforts: to make Christ’s message our own in order to be able to sow it in the world around us.

The image of a battle can also lead us to consider the importance of having a strategy. How are we to achieve such a high aim when we lack the time and serenity needed to ponder in depth the great questions in life? For some, this strategy may involve making good use of the means of formation they are already participating in, striving to get more out of them. For others, the advice from a classical author that Saint Josemaría used in one of his books can be helpful: *non multa sed*

⁹ *Conversations*, no. 119.

¹⁰ Saint John Paul II, *Angelus*, 4 March 1979.

¹¹ Cf. M. Montero, “The Formation of the First Women of Opus Dei (1945-1950),” *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 14, 2020, p. 110.

¹² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 166, a. 2 ad 3.

*multum*¹³—not committing our efforts to many things, but putting a lot of effort into only one, or a few. This may involve asking for advice regarding a suitable plan of readings that leads us deeper into a specific topic. Moreover (with the order that is essential in any intellectual activity), we can also take advantage of the countless resources that the internet offers today. The image of the glove that adapts to one’s hand, which the founder of Opus Dei used when speaking about the plan of life, can also be applied to our personal plan of formation, aimed at deepening our knowledge of the faith.

Two pieces of advice for acquiring a broad vision

Since the light of faith enables us to grasp the deepest meaning of what happens around us, we Christians need to see ourselves as protagonists, and never mere spectators, in the great cultural and intellectual debates going on in society today. We should have a healthy nonconformist attitude, realizing that we are “called to contribute, with initiative and spontaneity, to improving the world and the culture of our times, so that people open themselves to God’s plans for mankind.”¹⁴

To make this a reality, Saint Josemaría left us two pieces of advice. The first involves having a broad vision, unsatisfied with small goals: “Since you want to acquire a catholic or universal mentality, here are some characteristics you should aim at: a breadth of vision and a vigorous endeavor to study more deeply the things that are permanently alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy; a proper and healthy desire, which should never be frivolous, to present anew the standard teachings of traditional thought in philosophy and the interpretation of history; a careful attention to trends in science and contemporary thought; and a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living.”¹⁵

The eagerness to deepen in our understanding of the created world, which requires reading and study, makes us realize that we are part of a tradition that precedes us and that allows us to see beyond the present. “We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. We can see more, and farther than they, not because of our physical qualities, but because we are raised up by their great height.”¹⁶ With this legacy, we can assimilate in a positive way the new achievements and concerns of our times, and learn to discern, with a constructive spirit and the help of others, between true and false progress. Thus we forge step by step a personal and reasoned vision of the great issues. We cultivate a truly universal, “catholic” mentality.

Faced with the challenge to help open up all human sectors to God’s plans, Benedict XVI attached great importance to what he called “creative minorities.” Normally it is they “who

¹³ *The Way*, no. 333.

¹⁴ Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

¹⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 428.

¹⁶ Bernard of Chartres, quoted by John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, composed in 1159.

determine the future.” Therefore “the Catholic Church must understand that she is a creative minority who has a heritage of values that are not things of the past, but a very lively and relevant reality. The Church must modernize; she must be present in the public debate, in our struggle for a true concept of freedom and peace.”¹⁷

Finding people capable of sharing in this eagerness for formation and deep analysis of all created realities, and then walking together with them to undertake initiatives of all sorts, is one of the most fruitful experiences of the vocation of Christians in the middle of the world. The history of the first faithful of the Work is a confirmation for us of this fruitfulness.¹⁸ In this endeavor, each of us is called to find our own role and way of contributing in our specific personal circumstances.

The second advice of Saint Josemaría in this regard refers to the plurality of solutions. The light of faith enables one to find, in almost everything, more than one solution, more than one way forward. Different ways of acting, thinking and solving problems can be legitimately inspired by the same faith, and therefore should be respected.¹⁹ Hence faith leads us to cultivate our capacity for listening, for collaborating with others and dialoguing with them, with a healthy desire to learn and enrich ourselves with other points of view.

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Sacred Scripture tells us that “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (*Lk* 2:19). Everything that happened around her, and especially what had to do with her Son, resonated in her inner world. By considering once and again the beauty of our faith and the greatness of our mission, we find our hearts enkindled with the desire to form ourselves ever better and to find specific ways to do so. It will also lead us to propose initiatives, seeking the collaboration of others who can help make present the perennial newness of Christ in the “new areopagi” of today’s culture. And it will help us, if necessary, to shake off any hint of “sterile pessimism,”²⁰ realizing, as Saint Josemaría often said, that “the world is waiting for us.”²¹

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, Meeting with journalists, 26 September 2009.

¹⁸ Cf. J. L. González Gullón, *DYA. La Academia y Residencia en la historia del Opus Dei (1933-1939)*, Rialp, Madrid 2016; and M. Montero, *Historia de ediciones Rialp*, Rialp, Madrid 2020.

¹⁹ Cf. *Conversations*, no. 117.

²⁰ Cf. Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 84-86.

²¹ *Furrow*, no. 290.