

VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (XI): Then the World Speaks to Us

There are many ways of looking at the same thing. The look of a professional photographer is very different from that of an anxious glutton when contemplating the rich foods and colorful displays of a sumptuous banquet. Or to turn to a more ordinary situation, our way of looking when skimming newspaper headlines is quite different from how we contemplate a sunset. The differences between these ways of looking are due not only to momentary circumstances or what we are looking at. What distinguishes them is something deeper, connected with the way we relate to the world.

All of Saint Josemaría's preaching encourages us to be "contemplative souls, immersed in the concerns of the world."¹ To do so, we need to learn to look at reality in a new way: with a look that doesn't perceive only one aspect, the "useful fragment," of what is in front of us, and that doesn't seek simply to appropriate and possess something. The contemplative look is not selfish or possessive: it is transparent, serene, receptive, generous. And for someone who wants to live close to God, learning to see in this way is essential. Only by changing our way of looking at the world will we be able to discover the divine splendor in everything around us, and grasp the deepest truth about objects and events: for in God we *live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28).

When suggesting possible topics to bring up in the formation of young people, the founder of Opus Dei wrote: "External mortification – mainly sight; interior mortification – especially curiosity."² These two aspects, intimately connected to the contemplative life, are part of the virtue of temperance in moderating our desire to know, one of the most deeply rooted cravings in human nature. The word "temperance" in colloquial language may call to mind the idea of a limit. But as Joseph Pieper points out, the Latin word *temperare* (from which our word "temperance" comes) denotes the action of arranging "various parts into one unified and ordered whole."³ Someone who is "tempered" in their desire to know is not absorbed by the immediate, but always strives to go deeper. This leads to an open, attentive and silent attitude, which enables us to reach the heart of things. And then the world speaks to us.

The "curious" look

There is a way of looking, not yet moderated by temperance, that is like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower. It is the attitude of a person who looks at something the minimum time necessary to satisfy their curiosity and grasp what they want. Rather than striving to take in all the richness of reality, this look seeks the momentary pleasure of sensory perception or the fleeting enjoyment of new information about the world. It is what Saint John calls "concupiscence of the eyes" (cf. *1 Jn* 2:16) and Saint Thomas Aquinas, many centuries later, will call *curiositas*.⁴ For the latter, the polar opposite of *curiositas* would be *studiositas*, which consists in finding the right measure – as part, precisely, of

¹ Saint Josemaría, *Instruction for the Work of Saint Michael*, 8 December 1941, no. 70.

² Saint Josemaría, *Instruction for the Work of Saint Raphael*, 9 January 1935, no. 135.

³ Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, University of Notre Dame Press, p. 146. This work is available online in pdf format here: <https://archive.org/details/fourcardinalvirt012953mbp/page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 167 art.1 ad 2; art. 2 ad 1.

temperance – in our desire to know. *Studiositas* does not simply seek to establish a limit; rather it aims to remove the obstacles preventing us from knowing the world in depth, and doesn't skimp on the effort and fatigue that every learning process entails.

Giving in to this “concupiscence of the eyes” may seem like an attitude of slight importance, affecting only the periphery of our existence. What harm can it do me to go through the world with my eyes wide open, enjoying everything that is offered to me? However, let us listen to Jesus' words: *The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light (Mt 6:22)*. Since the eye illuminates our whole being, our way of looking also affects our heart. Intemperance in our way of looking, *almost without our realizing it*, over time takes deeper and deeper root in our being. It is easy to recognize this dispersion in how we sometimes use the social media or the internet; we may find ourselves scrolling from page to page, without even knowing what we are looking for. And behind that “wandering look,” perhaps a wandering restlessness of spirit is found, reflected in an unthinking flow of words, giddiness or an inner unease.

Hence a look that flits from flower to flower “can be the symptom of a true lack of roots; it may mean that a person has lost the ability to dwell peacefully in oneself.”⁵ Sensing our inner emptiness, we seek to flee outwards, towards the world of distractions, and paradoxically we abandon the only place where we will find the One who can quench our thirst. Saint Augustine describes his own experience: “You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all.”⁶

All this explains why, to attain with our look the heart of reality, we need to develop, while opening the door to our own inner world, a serene process of discernment: slowing down, reflecting, not giving in to haste. For example, before pressing “play” on an attractive video or series, we should consider whether this is really what we want to do. A temperate person knows how to do without those things that may harm the soul or simply prevent us from growing. He or she realizes that the “sacrifice is more apparent than real; for living this way, with a spirit of sacrifice, means freeing oneself from many kinds of slavery and savoring instead, in the depths of one's heart, the fullness of God's love.”⁷

“A change! You say you need a change!... opening your eyes wide so as to take in better the images of things or almost closing them because you are short-sighted,” Saint Josemaria writes, challenging the reader. “Close them altogether! Have interior life, and you will see, in undreamt-of color and relief, the wonders of a better world, of a new world: and you will draw close to God.”⁸ Naturally, the founder of Opus Dei isn't suggesting that we stop looking at or separate ourselves from a world that he himself tells us is a meeting place with God. Rather, he is telling us that this external look is actually linked to our internal world and, at the same time, helps to shape it, for better or for worse.

⁵ Cf. Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 149.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 27, 38.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 84.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 283.

The “self-interested” look

A look not molded by temperance can also inadvertently be guided by a possessive self-interest, like an animal searching for its prey. *Remember that a greedy eye is a bad thing (Sir 31:13)*, Sacred Scripture warns. Like the look that wanders from flower to flower, this “predatory” look often reveals a way of relating to the world that is deeply rooted in the person. It reflects the attitude of someone who sees everything through the prism of their own self-interest, and hence values the world in relation to the immediate benefit it brings them. It is as though the heart has remained stuck, observing everything from a single point of view.

Intemperance is destructive because it makes it hard for someone to calmly perceive objects and people in all their rich nuances. This, in turn, affects one’s decisions, since not having true knowledge of the world around us is an obstacle to deciding correctly. The glutton, for example, is trapped in the search for pleasures of the palate; in the sight of a banquet, this person is unable to perceive all the creativity and beauty being offered. They won’t even be able to truly enjoy the pleasure of eating rich and attractive foods, nor enriching conversation with others.

This self-interested look also influences one’s relationships with others. A person who hasn’t attained a free and generous way of looking tends to see people from the point of view of their own benefit, the favor they can ask for. Their first reaction is not to look others in the eye and strive to see how they truly are, what their needs are, what can be done for them, the uniqueness and charm of their personality. This blindness of spirit, this inability to see the divine imprint on those around us, is the result of a deformed way of looking, warped by intemperance. “Our hearts can become attached to true or false treasures; they can find genuine rest or they can simply slumber, becoming lazy and lethargic,” Pope Francis said in his message for World Youth Day in 2015. “How powerful is this ability to love and to be loved! Do not let this precious treasure be debased, destroyed or spoiled. That is what happens when we start to use our neighbors for our own selfish ends.”⁹

Some fruits of temperance

A person with a temperate way of looking sees the world with new eyes and discovers unexpected marvels. Moderation frees us; it purifies our heart and enables us to establish a serene relationship with people and things. It fosters the growth of an attitude of sincere interest, and isn’t carried away by appearances or hasty superficial judgments. The first fruit of temperance, then, is “tranquility of spirit,” which flows from the inner order of the heart.¹⁰ The detached and clean look is focused on true treasures, those that afford authentic rest. One way to grow in this is trying to look at the world from the point of view of others who perceive rich and varied nuances in reality, as happens with artists and poets. Who of us doesn’t remember a conversation with someone who, with their thoughtful opinion on a work of art, revealed to us new colors and nuances in the world?

⁹ Francis, Message, 31 January 2015.

¹⁰ Cf. Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 206, alluding to Saint Thomas.

Another fruit of temperance is the ability to concentrate on the projects we have set for ourselves. Not looking at the cell phone without a good reason or not wasting time on the internet when we should be working or studying may seem like small trifles in the overall picture of our life. But these small renunciations may in fact be decisive for focusing on and achieving, with all the faculties of our soul, what we are aiming at. Saying “no” to what disperses our mind in thousands of little ways is, at the same time, saying “yes” to what really matters. This effort also strengthens our inner world and, over time, helps unmask superficial things as a waste of our time and freedom. “Life then takes on again shades and tones which intemperance had tended to blur. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes.”¹¹

A detached, serene and transparent look enables us above all to discover the true beauty of everything around us. The virtue of temperance enables us to enjoy more – not less – in life, both spiritual goods and sensible ones. A free relationship with the world – free from the anxious search for pleasure and self-affirmation – leads us to perceive the truth of things and people; it allows us to discover beauty also when it is discreetly hidden in the objects around us. “It has been said, not without reason, that only someone with a clean heart is capable of truly laughing. Likewise only those who contemplate the world with a clean look can truly perceive its beauty.”¹² The temperate person reaches deeper into the truth of the created world: it speaks to them of God. That is why whoever embarks on this adventure will be able, over time, to exclaim with Saint Josemaría: “Dear Lord, I find beauty and charm in everything I see.”¹³

¹¹ *Friends of God*, no. 84.

¹² Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 249.

¹³ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 415.