

notebook
Christian Life

GO AND DO LIKEWISE

Love, justice, and dialogue
in today's world

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LOVE, JUSTICE, AND DIALOGUE IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Introduction

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... and your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22:37–39). With these words, Jesus sums up the whole of the moral life. And when asked who, exactly, counts as a neighbour, he answers with the parable of the Samaritan who stops to help a wounded stranger by the roadside, and closes with a charge to “go, and do likewise.”

This relational dimension of the human person is already there in Genesis, where Adam stands for all of humanity, and our bonds with God, with one another, and with the earth itself are woven into what it means to be human. As the Body of Christ, the Church calls us to take an active hand in shaping the life we share — caring for creation, working for the common good, and seeing in every person a brother or sister within one family. It is from this soil that the social doctrine of the Church grows.

This longing for justice, solidarity, and charity is one Christians share with a great many others, and we are called to be “actively, freely, and responsibly present in public life” (St. Josemaría, *Letter 3*, no. 48). Yet real dialogue — with those who see things differently — is never as easy as it should be, even in a hyperconnected world. Jesus shows us the way here too, going out to meet everyone He encounters, unwilling to let disagreement have the last word.

These texts invite us to live out social friendship, justice, and peace, so that one day Christ may say to us: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

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You Did It to Me

Christians know that we are part of the great family of God's children. Our deepest identity, that of children of the Father, makes us brothers and sisters to all men and women, created in God's image and likeness. And yet we are only too aware that fraternal relationships are not easy. Due to original sin, our dealings with one another are marked by the wound of the first fall. It destroys the harmony of interpersonal relationships as well as humanity's relationship with creation.^[1] Since the first pair of brothers mentioned in the Bible, Cain and Abel, and the elder's fratricide, there have always been family conflicts: Esau and Jacob fought over their birthright, Joseph was betrayed by his elder brothers, Moses suffered because of Aaron and Miriam...

The Gospels also show us siblings among the people close to Jesus: Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Mary, Martha and Lazarus. There, too, we find conflicts between siblings. They are present in the stories Jesus tells his listeners (when the prodigal son in the parable returns and his father throws a celebratory feast, the older brother is enraged and refuses to enter the house (cf. *Lk 15:28*)) and in the people around him (*Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me (Lk 12:13)*; *Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me (Lk 10:40)*). However, Jesus has given human relationships a new dimension: *Truly I tell you, whatever you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40)*. He becomes one of us and identifies himself with the weakest of our brothers, with those who suffer and undergo injustice. Christians cannot be indifferent to others because we see in each of them something more than an equal: we see Christ himself. Becoming one of us, he identifies himself with the weakest of our fellow human beings, the one who suffers most, the one who suffers most injustice. No Christian can remain indifferent to another person, because in him he sees not only an equal, but Christ himself. "We must recognize Christ in each of these persons, and in each of them we have to see Jesus as our brother. By doing so it will be easier for us to serve them generously, attentively, affectionately, with peace and joy,"^[2] St. Josemaría insists.

The first commandment

Pope Francis, commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, notes that it draws from an age-old problem: "Shortly after its account of the creation of the world and of man, the Bible takes up the issue of human relationships. Cain kills his brother Abel and then hears God ask: *Where is your brother Abel?* (*Gen 4:9*). His answer is one that we ourselves all too often give: *Am I my brother's keeper?* (*ibid.*). By the very question he asks, God leaves no room for an appeal to determinism or fatalism as a justification for our own indifference. Instead, he

encourages us to create a different culture, in which we resolve our conflicts and care for one another."^[3]

If we were asked, we would probably say that we try to see Christ in strangers. But detachment from our brothers and sisters can occur subtly, in ordinary situations. Perhaps we criticize politicians we dislike the moment we see them on the news, distrust those who look and act differently, despise people in other socioeconomic spheres, and fight about sports or child-rearing. We might even judge other Christians because (rightly or wrongly) we do not think they behave as Christians.

We should not forget that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan when a teacher of the law, wanting to justify himself after a query about eternal life, asks, *Who is my neighbour?* His listeners already knew the answer to the original question because it was in the Torah: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself* (Lk 10:27; cf. Deut 6:4 and Lev 19:18). Jesus goes a step further when he identifies the commandments: *This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments* (Mt 22:38-40). At the end of the parable, when the teacher recognises that the proper attitude is that of one who has mercy on the wounded man, Jesus tells him: *Go and do likewise*.

Love your neighbour as yourself

In the New Testament, therefore, there is no doubt about what Jesus' followers are required to do. *You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna* (Mt 5:21-22). Years after these teachings, John urged the early Christians to live fraternal charity as an indispensable part of love for God: *If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen* (1 Jn 4:20).

We want to truly "see" our neighbour, as St. John says, recognizing Christ in him, especially in those who suffer. Sometimes we are the ones suffering and vulnerable, and sometimes we find others in pain: a homeless person we regularly pass on the street, a colleague who suffers ethnic or racial discrimination, an acquaintance with a degenerative illness or mobility problems that make life extraordinarily difficult, women whose professional or educational paths are blocked just because they are women, young people who go to class knowing they do not have the resources needed to complete their studies, friends addicted to pornography, gambling, or drugs... And the wars, famines, epidemics, and natural disasters that affect so many people.

Human dignity and Christian responsibility

Over the centuries, Christian values have spread through society and humanized it. Gradually we have learned to recognise that others have dignity, deserve to be treated with respect, and have rights equal to ours. Philosophy, sociology, and law, along with other disciplines, explore the value of human life and how to protect it,

both individually and collectively. Progress in engineering, economics, and medicine have improved living conditions for much of the world's population, but new challenges are constantly emerging and much remains to be done.

People often accuse Christians of professing evangelical principles and shirking public action or using faith as a crutch so we can evade responsibility, as if prayer meant passivity and hope in eternal life led us to disengage from the world and the needy. Sometimes we perceive that many people accuse Christians of a lack of coherence between evangelical principles and public action, or consider that faith is a refuge that allows us to evade responsibilities. As if praying were synonymous with passivity, or hoping for eternal life would lead to disengagement from the world, forgetting those who need us. "Faith has untold power to inspire and sustain our respect for others, for believers come to know that God loves every man and woman with infinite love and 'thereby confers infinite dignity' upon all humanity. We likewise believe that Christ shed his blood for each of us and that no one is beyond the scope of his universal love. If we go to the ultimate source of that love which is the very life of the triune God, we encounter in the community of the three divine Persons the origin and perfect model of all life in society."^[4]

The world as an inheritance

The Prelate of Opus Dei frequently encourages us to feel the whole world and all it contains as something very much our own, as St. Paul taught: *the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God* (1 Cor 3:22-23).

"In the face of this reality – all things are yours – we rejoice in the joys of others; we enjoy all the good things that surround us, and we get involved in the challenges of our time. At the same time, we feel the world's situation deeply, particularly the sad reality of war and other situations of great need and suffering on the part of so many people, especially the weakest."^[5]

God has given us the world as an inheritance (cf. *Psalms* 2:8), so it is in our hands to transform it. We did not choose the time or place in which we live, but the circumstances that befall us are what God uses to help us bring what he gives us to fruition.

As Christians, we want Christlike hearts that feel others' needs as our own and lead us to act accordingly. This is a gift from God: "Fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love,"^[6] we ask the Holy Spirit, for ourselves and for the whole Church. At the same time, "deeds are love, not sweet words," and Christians committed to God's love are necessarily Christians who actively seek to transform society, striving to conform it more closely to God's logic and love for humanity.

Personal and responsible

This commitment is shown, first of all, in constant, ardent prayer: the filial insistence of people asking for something good for those they love. "In prayer we too should be able to lay before God our labours, the suffering of certain situations, of certain days, the daily commitment to following him, to being Christian, and also the weight of the evil that we see within ourselves and around

us, so that he may give us hope and make us feel his closeness and give us a little light on the path of life."^[7]

In addition to a commitment to presenting all our needs to God, transforming the world to make it more human, Christian, and divine, and showing the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's plan for our happiness is a duty of justice. Christians, working with others, invoke all the creativity of love in seeking new ways to make Christ's Gospel message a reality in our own circumstances, here and now.

This can be done in many ways, depending on the character of each place, time, and person, as well as our family and professional opportunities and our political, economic, and social preferences. "For by the very circumstance of their having been created," the Church teaches, "all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order. Man must respect these as he isolates them by the appropriate methods of the individual sciences or arts,"^[8] and "all Christians must be aware of their own specific vocation within the political community. It is for them to give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good."^[9]

There are many ways of doing good. The Church encourages her children to act freely and with plurality, without imposing any particular school of thought. Inspired by the same ideal, Christians may come together in civil or religious associations or — more often — work in public or private initiatives meant to improve society without being run by Catholic institutions.

Charity "gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)."^[10]

That is why each person should look for ways to contribute to solving the social problems around them. St. Josemaría encouraged the people he spoke with to be responsible citizens, capable of transforming society and improving it through their work. "My children, each of us acts in a personal and responsible way."^[11]

Small gestures can do great good. Little by little, they shape our attitude toward others. A parent making time to listen to an adolescent child facilitates openness to dialogue with contemporary culture. A child learning to be attentive and affectionate to elderly grandparents discovers the value of the fragile and vulnerable. A colleague refusing to engage in workplace conversations that criticise or defame people who are not present fosters a culture of respect and trust. At other times, our capacity for transformation is rooted in our professional training or social position. At work or through civil and political action, we influence bills that make it easier for families to access necessary resources, denounce abuse and economic corruption, end practices that segregate certain people, and so on. Doctors, members of parliament, CEOs, and journalists can do their jobs well without "getting into trouble," but they can also choose to "complicate their lives" and contribute through their work to the construction of a fairer world.

The social doctrine of the Church in dialogue with the world

The Church proclaims moral principles in the social sphere when the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls are at stake.^[12] It was instituted by Christ to bring the message of salvation to all people and cannot stand idly by in the face of what is human. From the 19th century onwards, to help Christians act justly amid new economic, political, and social systems, the Church has established parameters to keep the Gospel message in view in changing circumstances. For this reason, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church contains some guiding principles.

The principle of the common good affirms the need for "social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."^[13] The principle of the universal destination of goods reminds us that "created things [should] be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity."^[14] The principle of subsidiarity establishes that "all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help ("subsidium") — therefore of support, promotion, development — with respect to lower-order societies"^[15] in order to care for "family, groups, associations, local territorial realities; [...] for that aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth."^[16]

The principle of participation comes from the principle of subsidiarity and "is expressed essentially in a series of activities by means of which the citizen [...] contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs. Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good."^[17] Finally, the principle of solidarity "requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become part. [...] A similar debt must be recognized in the various forms of social interaction."^[18]

These principles help us realise that many of the social initiatives flourishing around us are founded on shared values. Studying and making them known is an opportunity to work together with our fellow citizens and build a fairer society.

Truth, freedom, justice, and charity

The principles of the Church's social doctrine are based on four fundamental values: truth, freedom, justice, and love.

Love for our neighbour should drive Christian life, both personally and socially. "The Church must not only proclaim the word but must also put the word — which is charity and truth — into practice."^[19] The global crises of recent years have illustrated this: those who suffer are united in solidarity. Families come together when a loved one is ill, and neighbours start to interact more when they are forced to spend more time at home. But we can also choose these attitudes when they are not forced by circumstances: Do I know the names of the people in my apartment building, or in the farthest house in my town? Have I talked to each of them, taken an interest in their concerns, and sought to be close to them?

What may appear to be simple gestures of politeness or shows of kindness can in fact reflect God's love for every person: "Love, overflowing with small gestures of

mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. For this reason, charity finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in macro-relationships: social, economic and political."^[20] A coherent Christian's unity of life leads him to act with charity at every level, in issues that affect him or her directly and those that seem more distant.

With respect for everyone, and valuing the good of the person over their own idea or opinions, Christians can intervene in all kinds of questions: we act creatively and responsibly, without attributing our personal preferences to the Church. "As Christians, you enjoy the fullest freedom, with the consequent personal responsibility, to take part as you see fit in political, social or cultural affairs."^[21]

"If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity."^[22] And vice versa: the struggle for the common good will always be guided by understanding and respect. It would be nonsensical to seek justice with hardness of heart or to rejoice in something objectively wrong because it confirms our personal beliefs.

When a Christian sees people suffering the consequences of immoral actions or lifestyles or rectifying, turning to God, and beginning another way of life, the only possible response is affectionate understanding. We accompany others; we can never look down on others in self-satisfaction. Just as the Church dialogues with the world out of charity, so we, in the world, try to hold conversations open to all, seeking to include everyone without closing ourselves off to ideas we perceive as threats, welcoming different points of view and learning from others.

The apostles were not a uniform group. They came from different backgrounds and professions, their characters were sometimes incompatible, and they held opposing opinions... But they were united by their love for Christ and their mission of bringing the Good News to the world. Thus, combining the primacy of Peter and collegiality with their own identities, they fulfilled Christ's command: *Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature* (Mk 16:15).

The Lord's promise

The Christian obligation to love one's neighbour begins, like all our obligations, with God's love for humanity. He is the one who transforms hearts and renews the world: "Charity and justice are not only social but also spiritual actions, accomplished in the light of the Holy Spirit."^[23]

We know that we cannot achieve perfect justice on earth, and we look forward to the justice of eternal life. This never leads us to neglect our earthly duties, however, because we know that eternal life depends on our struggle to live out Jesus' "you did it to me" here on earth. We hope to transform the world, contribute to the happiness of those around us, and so be happy ourselves, because Jesus himself made us a promise: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied* (Mt 5:6).

- [1] Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 400.
- [2] St. Josemaría, *Letter #3*, 31.
- [3] Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 57.
- [4] *Ibid*, 85.
- [5] Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter* 19.III.2020, 7.
- [6] Alleluia, Solemnity of Pentecost (Cycle B).
- [7] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 1-II-2012.
- [8] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.
- [9] *Ibid*, 75.
- [10] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 2.
- [11] St. Josemaría, *Letter #3*, 37.
- [12] Cfr. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2032; 2420.
- [13] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 186.
- [14] Cfr. *ibid*, 171.
- [15] *Ibid*, 186.
- [16] *Ibid*, 185.
- [17] *Ibid*, 189.
- [18] *Ibid*, 195.
- [19] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 25-IV-2012.
- [20] Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 181.
- [21] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 11.
- [22] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 6.
- [23] Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 25-IV-2012.

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One Heart and Soul

Pdf: Go and Do Likewise (II): One Heart and Soul

Right from the beginning, Christ's disciples lived in a relationship of both spiritual and material communion. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that *they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). All who believed were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46).*

This attitude also spurred the first Christians to undertake acts of solidarity with the brethren and people around them in need. The Acts show us their care for orphans and widows, the distribution of material goods to the needy, and even miraculous healings. Just as Jesus had dedicated a large part of his ministry to healing the paralyzed, the blind and lepers, to raising the dead, feeding the hungry and freeing the possessed, so too his disciples, moved by the charity of the Holy Spirit, endeavored to imitate Christ's merciful heart and to recognize Him in the poor, the sick and prisoners.

As the Church matured and expanded, it incorporated care for the material and spiritual needs of men and women in a more organized way. Saint Justin, around the year 150, describes the Sunday gathering of the faithful at Mass. The assembly begins with prayers and reading from the apostles or prophets, followed by an exhortation by the person presiding over the liturgy and prayers. The bread and wine are then offered and after the consecration distributed to those present. And finally, what we would now call a collection takes place: "those who have the means and want to do so, each one according to their free determination, give what they see fit. And what is collected is delivered to the presider, which he distributes to orphans and widows, to those in need due to illness or other causes, to those in jail, and to foreigners passing through."^[1] Later on, this individual attention was given material expression in institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, schools for families without resources, and universities.

A call to care

Pope Francis and his predecessors insist that we not remain indifferent to those who are most in need and urge us to create social structures that help the disadvantaged to develop their lives with dignity.^[2] But why should I take care of the poor or, if I am poor myself, those who have more needs than I do? To be a consistent Christian, isn't it enough that each one's personal and private life be upright before God? But Benedict XVI insists that "worship pleasing to God is never a merely private act."^[3] Indeed, "union with Christ is also union with all

those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own.”^[4]

Genesis shows us, at the beginning of mankind’s history, God’s concern for “the other”: “Cain, where is your brother Abel?” Cain’s response, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” rejects this responsibility and tries to cover over the guilt of his murder (cf. *Gen* 4:9). God’s question to Cain, Pope Francis says, shows that we cannot “justify indifference as the only answer” and opens the door to “creating a different culture that guides us to overcome enmities and care for one another.”^[5] Here we see the two great temptations that we often face with respect to our neighbor: the coldness of indifference and the exacerbation of our personal differences with them.

Adam, Christ and all humanity

The social, relational dimension of the person has been tarnished in recent decades, especially in some cultures, by individualism, consumerism and the weakening of human bonds.

This wasn’t the case in the early Church. The Jewish mentality preserved by the first Christians differed from ours in one key aspect: for them, Adam (and above all Christ, as the second Adam) was not only a singular man, but also a collective being who contained, in his body, all humanity. In its Semitic meaning, man does not “have” a body, but “is” a body.^[6] In Hebrew, the term *basar* means flesh, but also a living being – animated flesh – and a human being, including the soul. It is used in Holy Scripture with different meanings, and in Greek it is translated as both *sarx* (flesh) and *sôma* (body). The Hebrew meaning includes the unity between human beings by their shared nature and mutual relationship. That is why Eve is “flesh of his flesh” with respect to Adam. On the other hand, *sôma* refers only to the individual, and in this sense the distinction is emphasized: more than “we have the same flesh (nature),” it has the meaning of “my flesh (and, therefore, my life) is distinct from yours.” The West has inherited the second interpretation.

When Sacred Scripture speaks of Adam, it is also referring to the entire human race contained, in some way, in his body. “The whole human race is in Adam ‘as one body of one man,’”^[7] the Catechism teaches, citing Saint Thomas Aquinas. Hence every good act of any of its members strengthens the unity of the whole body and every infidelity, in contrast, breaks it apart, causing the division of humanity. Original sin, committed personally by Adam, becomes universal, as is the salvation won by Christ. Paul speaks of the “old man” that is in each of us because we belong to the human race, which is buried with Christ in baptism when we are reborn to a new life in Him.^[8]

In those first centuries, the Fathers of the Church viewed humanity as a whole, as a single body. They realized that Adam’s sin implicated all men and women. “We all bear his name,” says Saint Irenaeus of Lyon.^[9] We all share the same human nature passed down to us from our first parents, deprived of its supernatural gifts. “We all left Paradise together with Adam, who turned his back on it,” Saint Ephrem writes.^[10] Christ comes to restore lost unity to the body of Adam and reunite the human race. Christ overcomes the divisions set up in Babel. In Christ

we receive the Holy Spirit, so that even while speaking different languages, Christians can understand each other, in a new Pentecost.^[11]

The Church, the Body of Christ

Jesus' words addressed to Saul on the road to Damascus are striking: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (cf. *Acts* 9:4-5). The Risen Jesus identifies his disciples with Himself, and Saul understands that such a close union exists between Jesus and the Church that persecuting the disciples means persecuting Jesus himself. This identification of the Church with the Body of Christ entails that, if I identify myself with Christ, and my fellow believers also do so, the union between us is a much stronger bond than in any human institution.

As a good Hebrew, for Paul the notion of body referred to a unity that transcends the individuality of a man. In Christ, "by the nature of the body that He has made his own, the whole human race is contained there in some way."^[12] By becoming incarnate, Christ not only took on an individual human body, but in some way assumed all of us in his body. This is how Christ makes his salvation available to all humanity; all men and women are called and enabled to form part of his Body, the Church. The Church is catholic or universal not because she is spread over all the earth; she was already catholic on the day of Pentecost.^[13] The Church is catholic because her truth is addressed to all humanity, which forms a single body, that of Adam, torn apart by sin.

From here stems the inalienable social dimension of the Church, which is organically one. It is a body, the Body of Christ (cf. *1 Cor* 12:27), and not a federation of local assemblies. That is why if a member of the Church suffers, the others suffer with him.^[14] Thus we will understand what it means to be a Christian in a true and full way to the extent that we make this social dimension of the Church our own and live in accord with it. But when we ignore it, we stop showing others the true face of the Church.

The temptation of rejection

Although we understand this reality (that we are all brothers and sisters as descendants of Adam, in our human nature, and as part of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, by baptism), in our daily life we often fail to recognize the others as such. Sometimes it is a first impression made by someone that distances us from them; other times, it is a judgment resulting from a repeated experience. The effort to defend the truth can make us react harshly or sarcastically towards someone, or the weaknesses and errors we see in the lives of others can bother us. Among Catholics, legitimate options can end up turning upright, good, committed people into enemies on opposite sides, whether because of the way they participate in Mass, or the choices related to the education of their children, or the authors they like to read. It can even become hard for Christians to forget that what unites us is much stronger and deeper than what could be a cause of division: character defects, ways of reacting to a moral or social evil, differences of opinion on the best way to evangelize, political opinions, etc.

C. S. Lewis expresses this in a very graphic way in his well-known book *Screwtape Letters*. The experienced devil explains to the apprentice how even the visible Church can be turned into a "temptation" by which we Christians let ourselves be

carried away with astonishing ease. He gives some examples, filled with wit and good humor, of how the “patient,” a recent convert, finds it hard to understand the treasure of “communion in diversity” even during liturgical ceremonies: “Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sings out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must be somehow ridiculous.”^[15]

In this sense, human fraternity itself can teach us a lot about relationships between Christians. It is a universal experience for those who have siblings that, despite possible confrontations, the presence of an external problem (bullying, the illness of one of the parents, the death of a loved one) usually has as an immediate reaction that of forgetting about minor conflicts, which give way to support, affection and defending one another. People at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their ideas also sometimes come to recognize the humanity of the other person precisely for reasons of this type: because their husband is sick with cancer, because they have lost their job, because their daughter was born prematurely. These situations, in which we face deep human suffering, are often the occasion for us to open our eyes and see that “we are jointly responsible for taking care of the world, establishing relationships founded on charity, justice, and respect, especially overcoming the disease of indifference.”^[16]

Personal responsibility for everyone’s salvation

By considering humanity as a unity, Christianity also inherits from Judaism its communal conception of salvation.^[17] In other words, faith is not reduced to “an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer’s heart. By its very nature, faith is open to the ‘We’ of the Church; it always takes place within her communion . . . those who believe are never alone.”^[18] Other men and women are part of our own life and also become part of our own personal responsibility, since we all form part of the same Body. They are brothers or sisters we are called to watch over, to be reconciled with, to love. Being a Christian is not reduced to the individual conscience of each faithful.

Our personality will be all the stronger the more solid our realization is of belonging to the Body of Christ. We cannot fall into the easy excuse that it is the Church, as an institution, that is responsible for watching over our brothers and sisters in need, through its charitable or educational organizations, and that my responsibility as a baptized person is only to bring forward my own life and that of those closest to me. “Not a single soul – not one! – can be a matter of indifference to you,” Saint Josemaría said emphatically.^[19]

The way we understand the faith, also in its social dimension, directly affects our actions. Considering our own life apart from others is not consistent with the social dimension of the Church, of the humanity Christ has assumed in his own Body.

This has a number of very practical consequences: Do I feel responsible for others, that they be happy, and feel welcomed and understood, accompanied on the path towards Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life? When defending my opinions, do I always do so with a demeanor and tone that recognizes the other

person in his or her humanity? Do I see in others brothers and sisters in the common endeavor to build up the Church?

A strong family

The lack of unity in the Church, whether due to indifference or disagreement, can remind us of the tower of Babel. This time the problem does not necessarily occur between neighbors, but perhaps on social networks, through publications in the media, attacks from anonymous accounts or writings that ridicule other ways of thinking, etc. After two millennia of the Church's expansion and growth, some aspects have been strengthened (theology, pastoral care, evangelization), but we also find divisions, often within the same community. Among those who prefer one way or another of celebrating liturgical acts, or those who vote for different political parties or those who defend different ways of carrying out evangelization, the banner can be raised claiming "this is the truly Catholic option." Saint Josemaría warned: "It seems to me that I hear Saint Paul crying out, when he says to the people in Corinth: is Christ divided? Has Paul by chance been crucified for you, or have you been baptized in his name, so that you can say: I am of Paul, I of Apollo, I of Cephas, or I of Christ?"^[20]

The wounds in the body of Christ hurt us, because they fracture what is most intimate to the Christian identity: we are called to be members of a Body, living stones in building up the Church, and the mission of evangelization is damaged by divisions among those who should be joyfully working together. Therefore the Church frequently reminds us that we are called to be "forces of unity within the Body of Christ. With great humility and trust, let us ask the Spirit that every day we may strive to grow in the holiness that will make us living stones in the temple that He is raising up right now in the world. We have to be authentic forces of unity; let us forgive the offenses suffered and control all feelings of anger and confrontation."^[21]

By caring for others, we strengthen the Church and all humanity. Above all, we contribute to building up the Church, making possible its mission of bringing Christ's message to those around us, as the first Christians did: *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31), for the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32).*

^[1] Saint Justin, *I Apology*, 67.

^[2] Cf. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 116, 137, 168-169, 179, 183, 186.

^[3] Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 83.

^[4] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 14.

^[5] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 57.

^[6] Cf. *Rom* 12:4-5; *1 Cor* 10:17; *1 Cor* 12:13.

^[7] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 404; cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, 4.1.

^[8] Cf. Francis, Audience, 9 May 2018; *Eph* 4:20-24.

- [9] Saint Irenaeus, *Against the Heretics*, III, 23, 2.
- [10] Saint Ephrem the Syrian, Hymn 49.
- [11] Cf. John Paul II, General Audience, 29 July 1998.
- [12] Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *In Mt IV*, 12.
- [13] Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 37-38.
- [14] Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 7.
- [15] C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, ch. 2.
- [16] Fernando Ocáriz, “Enlarging the Heart,” in *Be to Care*, 29 September 2022.
- [17] Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 46.
- [18] Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 39.
- [19] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 951.
- [20] Saint Josemaría, *Letter* no. 4, 19 (1 Cor 1:13).
- [21] Benedict XVI, Homily, 19 May 2008.

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At the Forefront of Transforming the World

A quick glance at any social media platform or news site, as well as our own personal experience, shows us two things: that there is much suffering in the world, and consequently that there are many calls for the world to be better. Sometimes these voices seem harmonious, and many other times they are discordant, as they ask for different, even opposite things. Yet the desire for what is due, the awareness of shared vulnerability, and the conviction that we must care for others definitely mark our consciousness today.

Following Christ means caring about the world and its problems. If “goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all” but “have to be realized each day,”^[1] then each of us must ask how we are to act: “What is my role in all this?”

A calling to make the world ours

If we really think about it, the world is ours at least twice over. On one hand, we have been called to *co-create* the world, and on the other hand, we have been called to *co-redeem* it.

The universe has been created *in statu viae*, “in a state of journeying” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 302) and we have been given the task to collaborate in this perfection. On the other hand, the world we are asked to cultivate is marked by sin, and so also marked by suffering. And this moves the heart of Christ. When He saw the crowds who needed healing from disease and illness, *his heart was moved with compassion for them because they were troubled and abandoned like sheep without a shepherd* (Mt 9:35-36) and He tended to them tirelessly. Again He is moved when those who had been following Him for three days had nothing to eat (Mt 15:30-36). He draws his disciples into the problem, having them think of solutions and giving them responsibility over the others: *Give them some food yourselves* (Lk 9:13). With the little the disciples are able to find, the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes takes place. In the face of indigence, distress or suffering, Christ is moved — and more importantly, He is never passive. He tends to tangible needs, but always in order to reach souls and draw them to eternal life (cf. Jn 6). And as the Father has sent Him to redeem all men, He sends us to collaborate in this redemption (cf. Jn 20:21, Mt 28:18-20).

In other words, any truly Christian efforts to establish just ways of operating or to promote solidarity are motivated by more than simply a desire for pain and suffering to cease or be mollified. That is good and noble, but the heart of Christ seeks more: *This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (Jn 13:35). A child of God knows that the deepest motivation for social

action lies in God's love for the world and for all humanity, and that we are called to bring the world back to God the Father in Christ, his Son. He or she knows that "while we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age."^[2]

Key virtues for serving society

The call to be at the forefront of transforming the world cannot remain in the abstract. Caring, or better love, translates to action: justice, solidarity and charity are virtues to be lived. Each perfects a different aspect of the choices and activities we carry out in relation to others. And each of these can be lived in two broad areas: in our effort to renew the structures and systems in our different social spheres, and in our encounters with individual persons.

Justice is classically defined as the habit that enables us to give or render to each his or her due, consistently and in a committed way.^[3] It is a virtue we can live on a horizontal level — with our peers and colleagues — and on a vertical level, whether or not we are someone who holds authority over a particular group or community. One key way to live it is to train ourselves to recognize what is really due to others by virtue of our relationship with them. We can thus first consider how we live justice in our professional work by doing our job well and with integrity — or, if we are in authority, by really looking out for the good of those we are responsible for, and not simply aiming for profit. However, if we take the fact that God has entrusted the world to us seriously, we will see that our activity should not stop at our immediate circle of work or family. We could consider taking on extra projects or joining initiatives outside of what we already do, to create conditions for other members of society to be able to live according to their dignity.

As a virtue, solidarity highlights our interdependence. If justice recognizes that each person deserves certain goods, solidarity recognizes our oneness with others —that is, that we share the same human nature. It is "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good,"^[4] that is, "thinking and acting in terms of community."^[5] On one hand, the practical exercise of this virtue is similar to that of justice: we target certain conditions of society with our work and projects, so that our cities and communities become places where each person can reach his or her perfection. On the other hand, solidarity is also expressed in taking the time to share suffering and not just address it. Some of us may be the type to publicly advocate for a particular cause; say, for instance, that we try to raise awareness for mental health and psychological safety in families. Others may show solidarity in more private, one-to-one ways, such as committing to visit the sick or dying without posting it on social media. Solidarity is particularly attentive to vulnerability and suffering; it is "born of the consciousness that we are responsible for the fragility of others as we strive to build a common future" and "finds its concrete expression in service."^[6]

Christian justice and Christian solidarity, however, are motivated by much more than the recognition of a common humanity. Why *should* I care for the other? When we use the lens of faith, we see that the unity of the human race does not

merely stem from the fact that we share a nature, but in that we have a common divine and human origin, and a common destination and end.^[7] A loving God is Creator of each and every one of us, and, most importantly, we are destined for happiness with God through Christ and his Body, the Church. In short, there exists a real union between all human persons; a real union that is actualized in love. Justice and solidarity find their full meaning only if we think that man's good life is about love — charity — making us responsible for each other's flourishing in this life, in view of the next.

In truth, charity unites us first and foremost to God.^[8] One concrete way in which this informs our social action is in ensuring that our goals, projects, and plans are always coherent with the Gospel, even if perhaps they are not explicit about it. Moreover, when we engage in activities for the sake of others, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is this union with God — his grace — that makes love for our neighbor possible. Through charity, we consider the other “as somehow united to ourselves,” and this affection “makes us freely desire to seek their good.”^[9] If we relate to others in this way, we can come closer to a culture of what Pope Francis calls social friendship: a love and fraternity that excludes no one, is open to all, transcends borders, and can be a strong basis for cities and countries.^[10]

Each one of us finds himself in different environments and circumstances. Moreover, societies and their sub-units differ from country to country, and so the paths to materializing justice, solidarity and charity will have myriads of variations. But there are some concrete steps that all of us can consider, in order to become agents of true justice, solidarity, and charity.

Transforming the world by continuously transforming ourselves

The first step is to cultivate our capacity to perceive situations of need. To exercise any virtue, one must be able to perceive the right situation for it: in this case, the social problem. Perhaps our scope of transformation is small, because we have been primarily absorbed with daily life and our immediate circle of action. Perhaps we know in a general way that there are a lot of problems in society, but we have not paused to take a closer look at them. Perhaps we are used to seeing or hearing bad news and shaking our heads, and we have never thought of letting these situations speak to us so that we respond. And perhaps this makes us less sensitive even to the needs of those beside us.

Choosing to cultivate our perception can mean watching or reading the news more, paying attention to the surroundings as you drive from one part of the city to the other, looking at the bulletin board or Facebook page of our parish or school, following news or advocacy accounts on social media... Every society has at least one sector in need of justice, solidarity, and charity: the elderly who are left alone; the terminally ill; people without adequate food, water, or shelter; the disabled and the families that support them (or who abandon them); the mentally ill or psychologically distressed; un- or under-educated children or adults; isolated communities, perhaps of native or immigrant groups; the homeless and refugees; victims of violence or abuse; victims of natural disasters; the unemployed or underpaid; laborers in inhumane working conditions; people in prison; people living in insecure or conflict-ridden areas; people without access to leisure, sports, arts, or culture; people who are socially abandoned (single parents, street

children, drug addicts, out-of-school youth, victims of bullying)... Enumerating them helps us see that really, there is no lack of opportunities to act.

Thus the next step is to commit to acting and not only feeling. Perhaps the examples mentioned above bring concrete images from recent local or international news to mind. We live in a world where we risk being passive in the face of constant input. True solidarity means not only feeling compassion for the misfortunes we see, but trying to alleviate the suffering when we can. We cannot provide solutions for every problem we hear about. But perhaps we can study how our work can contribute to a more just society, or how we can fit an extra social project into our time, perhaps even with family or friends. If large-scale problems seem out of our league (although for some of us they may not be out of reach), then perhaps we can make whatever donation we can to an organization we know.

If we choose to engage in some socio-civic activity, another important habit to acquire is that of thinking and planning for meaningful or lasting impact, even if it is something like a one-day outreach at a shelter for persons with disabilities. Though some of us might be limited to short-term events, it would indeed be a waste to provide only band-aid solutions or create good feelings. And if some of us are able to carry out long-term initiatives, we do have to avoid creating permanent dependence on aid. We can carry out good projects if we clearly identify the goals we want to achieve in the timeframe we have: say, in this one-day visit to a shelter for disabled persons, we teach our volunteers to affirm their personhood and highlight that the good we give them is companionship, since they have been abandoned. We can also carry out good projects if we truly ponder the problem we have at hand, and get to the root of the issues, such that the interventions we design will empower the persons we are helping, giving them the capabilities and tools to eventually help themselves. Instead of simply rebuilding homes for a poor community for free, for example, we can involve the persons such that they truly feel ownership for the homes, and commit to a plan to capacitate themselves for work such that they have the means to maintain a healthy and humanized environment.

Pope Francis tells us that “solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity.... It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history.”^[11]

Expanding our comfort zone

Becoming an agent of justice, solidarity, and charity doesn't end in personal attitudes. There are at least two more areas where we can continuously challenge ourselves as Christians.

When we engage with the problems around us, we are surely going to encounter people who are also passionate about “changing the world,” but who perhaps think or live in a way that is not informed by faith in Christ. Yet this does not mean that we cannot share with them some common goals that are true to the human person. One very concrete way of living solidarity and charity is to dare to

dialogue with those who think differently from us; to find a way to work together with them instead of against them. The attempt to rebuild justice might bear more fruit if we make an effort to overcome polarization, which is particularly relevant in today's environment, both online and in-person. We first have to listen and converse, in order to discover what might unite us, in order to bring about more good for those who suffer most in our society.

Finally, we can dare to take a step further each time. For instance, from trying to live justice at work, we can consider investigating ways that our company or institution can impact another community. Later, we could evaluate the possibility of collaborating in a social initiative outside of work entirely. And then we can get more people involved. If we choose a particular need to address, commit to action, and plan and collaborate with long-term solutions, then justice, solidarity, and charity will come closer to becoming realities in our surroundings.

To see Christ in each person

When we look at our imperfect world, we see that the possibilities for transformation are inexhaustible. There is obviously much work to be done, and we have tried to pinpoint different habits that capacitate us to carry out effective social action, to offer real solutions to the problems we see. But there is one thing that must be at the forefront of the mind and heart of a child of God: the true mission of a Christian in the world does not consist in merely solving problems, but in giving value to the singular person.

In other words, efficiency is important, but we cannot stop there. We might succeed in setting up and maintaining a program for an underprivileged group, and we might succeed in creating a commitment to solidarity among those who collaborate in said program. But if those we assist remain an anonymous mass to us, mere “beneficiaries,” then we have not yet reached the heart of the Gospel. Justice and solidarity may not be separated from true charity, which enables us to see Christ in the other. This could mean that in whatever activity we participate in and in how we act, we try to focus on the people involved. “The wider spread of social remedies... which make it possible to achieve humanitarian results today that could not have been dreamed of in other times — will never be able to supplant the efficacious tenderness, both human and supernatural, of immediate, personal contact with our neighbor...”^[12] We also try to be conscious of the way we look at the persons we are helping, to know who they are and not just what they lack, because each person is much more than what he or she is suffering.

For the time we are in contact with those we are aiding, we enter into their needs and pains, offering them care and not matter-of-factness or indifference.^[13] This brings real consolation, a human-to-human contact which is as treasured as any material solution. We share time, attention, and presence with them, and so bring about — both for them and for ourselves — the presence of Christ. In this way, we give the “sincere gift of self,” which is our true fulfillment.^[14] We do not only love our neighbor, but “become a neighbor” to each person, just as Christ has asked us to.^[15]

[1] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 11

[2] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.

[3] “...justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will”: and this is about the same definition as that given by the Philosopher (Ethic. v, 5) who says that ‘justice is a habit whereby a man is said to be capable of doing just actions in accordance with his choice’ (*Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 58, Art. 1 co.).

[4] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 193.

[5] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 116.

[6] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 115.

[7] Cfr. *Laudato si'*, no. 202.

[8] *ST* II-II Q. 26, Art 1 co. and Art. 2 co.

[9] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 93.

[10] Cfr. *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 94, 99.

[11] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 116.

[12] St. Josemaría, Letter 24-X-1942, no. 44.

[13] Cfr. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter 14-II- 2017, no. 31.2.

[14] “For [Jesus] implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24).

[15] “Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group. In this case, the Samaritan *became a neighbour* to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers. Jesus concludes the parable by saying: ‘Go and do likewise’ (*Lk* 10:37). In other words, he challenges us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked. I should no longer say that I have neighbours to help, but that I must myself be a neighbour to others” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 81).

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Called to Listen

The Gospels recount a number of Jesus' dialogues with people, although we can imagine many others. One of the most moving is when He is alone with the Samaritan woman at the well. The apostles are astonished when they return to find Him talking with a woman, and one who had to go to the well alone in the heat of midday, rather than with the other women of the village at cooler times of day. She herself is shocked that He would speak to her, since, as the evangelist explains, "Jews, of course, do not associate with Samaritans" (Jn 4:9). But in this scene Jesus teaches us to be interested in everyone. With a touching refinement, He gently guides her towards the truth. He does not ignore her erroneous beliefs or her sinful actions, but neither does He condemn, accuse or even pressure her. Acknowledging the beliefs they have in common and listening to her explain what she believed, He simply witnesses to the truth of revelation and above all, to the dignity and value she has in his eyes.

A one-to-one conversation

You may also have had a similar experience: being listened to and really taken seriously by someone, although they didn't actually agree with you. Maybe, they gave you time to express yourself and explain your thinking, listening thoughtfully to your point of view, without interruption or impatience. Perhaps they asked a question that, although somehow challenging and clearly coming from a position of disagreement, was phrased with real respect and genuine interest, and which demonstrated that they had been paying attention all along.

What might have struck you was their readiness to be enlightened, to learn from what you had to say; how they had their own ideas but held onto them with a certain grace and humility that invited a climate of mutual esteem. It's not that your interlocutor didn't have an opinion on the issue, or that they changed their opinion to match yours, rather, it was that they showed such a high opinion of you. Whether they convinced you of nothing else in the whole exchange, they showed that they value you as a person. This kind of affirmation could even have given you new courage, not only to form and voice your own judgments, but also to allow your beliefs to be confronted by those of others. By listening to you, they encouraged you to listen to others. True dialogue is contagious.

Perhaps the discussion was about something benign, like whether a particular series is worthwhile. You are a big fan, but with exquisite tact, they were able to delicately express their distaste without you feeling rejected. On the other hand, it could have been something more serious, like politics or economics. There are many valid ways of organizing society: developing and promoting a position in what we could call the "temporal" sphere is a good sign of healthy human

maturity, but being able to listen and learn from the position of others is better still. There are some issues that transcend the temporal, like religious or ethical issues. If this was the centre of your conversation, then there was an objective truth at stake. But somehow your partner managed to not only maintain a calm disagreement but also a thoughtful consideration for what you had to say.

Whatever the topic in question was, this person has communicated to you the most important of all truths - that you are important, that you have value, that you are loved. "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."^[1] The fact that each person is individually "loved into existence" by God is the first truth that we are all called to embrace, and the first truth we are called to share with others. Speaking about this beautiful reality of human dignity, the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* explains, "For if people exist it is because God has created them through love, and through love continues to keep them in existence. They cannot live fully in the truth unless they freely acknowledge that love and entrust themselves to their creator."^[2]

Dialogue: together towards the truth

True dialogue is when two people speaking to one another are both seeking the truth. Each comes with their own perspective and experience, and even if this has solidified into a strong conviction, dialogue does not build walls around this belief; instead it is characterised by an openness to the other and a desire to learn from them. This is because genuine dialogue is motivated by wanting to draw ever closer to the truth, and if possible together.

We do not engage in dialogue to defend our opinions or to convince others, but to walk together to reach the truth. As Pope Francis said on World Communications Day, "We need to resolve our differences through forms of dialogue which help us grow in understanding and mutual respect. A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive."^[3] That means being open to receive whatever light can come from engaging with the other person, whether it be something that contributes positively to our knowledge, or something that reveals a new gap we hadn't thought of before. "And in striving to understand others, to grasp their point of view, we discover aspects of the truth we hadn't seen before. Our suggestions are better aimed and we become more 'understandable' to others. If, in contrast, the work of communication ignores others' questions and perplexities, monologue supplants dialogue."^[4]

Interestingly enough, the first commandment, both in Jewish law and in Jesus' teaching to Christians, begins with an imperative verb: "Hear, O Israel" (Dt 2:4; Mk 12:19). Love of God and love of others necessarily involves opening our ears, being attentive to God's word and to the needs of those around us.

If truth itself is our highest motive for dialogue, then we can never neglect one of the greatest truths of all: God's love for the person we are dealing with. No matter how much good we hope to do by convincing someone of the truth about any particular issue, we cannot do so at the expense of the truth about their dignity as a person. Regardless of what is in debate, our respect for others cannot depend on their agreeing with us. How we treat people speaks louder than any argument, and it should testify to their personal dignity as a child of God. "Human

personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).”^[5]

Freedom: a responsibility

This same reality of human dignity is the very basis for freedom, including that of opinion and expression, and that of religion and conscience. It is because each person is created by God as a unique individual, and also with their own human liberty, that we differ from one another in what we hold to be true. It is wonderful that this freedom results in a great diversity of opinions and approaches to things; evidence that the human being is somehow transcendent, and is not determined by some base drive or instinct that we all have in common. “When the value of freedom is fully understood and the divine gift of freedom is passionately loved, the pluralism that freedom brings with it is also loved.”^[6] Diversity is something to be celebrated inasmuch as it is an expression of freedom, because freedom itself is something to be loved and protected.

Paradoxically, this freedom, which arises from our human dignity, is a freedom that we are obliged to use by our very same nature, as “beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility.”^[7] We both can and should take a position in the many “matters which God has left to the free discussion of men [...] For example, decisions referring to different philosophical or political views, to different artistic or cultural trends, or to the problems of professional and social life.”^[8] In these questions, St. Josemaría always insisted that we defend the “personal freedom of every layman to take, in the light of principles given by the Church, all the concrete, theoretical or practical decisions which he considers most appropriate and most in agreement with his own personal convictions and aptitudes.”^[9]

Whilst this is a freedom everyone enjoys, it belongs in a special way to lay people, whose diverse personal vocations have in common the mission of sanctifying the world from within. To us, God speaks his truth through the ordinary circumstances and relationships of our daily lives, and we share this truth with others through our conversations, friendship and work, and so bring Christ to the pinnacle of all human activities. And yet these activities of the secular sphere, by their nature, can be carried out in many different ways, and insofar as they are compatible with truth, they are all equally valid. “All Christians... must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions.”^[10] Or, as St. Josemaría liked to repeat, “there are no dogmas in temporal affairs.”^[11]

Wherever God has placed us, we can be sure to find many good people, fellow Catholics or not, who have different but also legitimate solutions and approaches to promote the common good. This definitely doesn’t mean we should simply take up the ideas of the next man without thinking, or worse still, adopt no position at all. This would be to hold our own freedom in contempt and would deprive the world of the contribution we could make. Moreover, if we do not add to the great diversity of views that are in line with the truth, those which miss the mark may become the loudest and most popular voices. “We children of God, who are citizens with the same standing as any others, have to take part fearlessly in all honest human activities and organizations, so that Christ may be present in them.

Our Lord will ask a strict account of each one of us if through neglect or love of comfort we do not freely strive to play a part in the human developments and decisions on which the present and future of society depend.”^[12] At the same time, whilst we are free, and indeed have a personal responsibility to take part in the debates of the world around us and to establish and promote our own position, so is our neighbour.

Freedom and falsehood

This freedom finds a place in the dialogue between any people, even when the truth is in question, simply because each stance is held by a member of the human race. We are fortunate to be free and intelligent beings, yet “unfortunate” in that our intelligence is limited. Consequently, when confronting contingent or challenging matters, or those dependent on time, space, or human sensitivity, the outcome yields a wide array of opinions.

Freedom is what allows us to believe that vanilla ice cream is better than chocolate, or that a republic is better than a monarchy. However, it also allows us to believe something objectively false, like that revenge is justified or even that God does not exist. Ignorance and error can have the use of freedom at their root, as we can misuse this great gift. In this way, the differences in what we know and believe are not only an expression of freedom, they can also be a manifestation of human limitation and sometimes of sin. That's why it is not difference itself that we love, but the freedom behind it. Should we really defend freedom even when we know it might lead to error and even sin? God Himself has loved our freedom to such an extent, that He gives us the freedom to cling to error voluntarily as it were.

It's important to distinguish that the essence of freedom does not lie in the possibility of making mistakes. We might even be tempted to do the opposite of what we know is good in an attempt to assert our independence. However, true freedom is found in seeking the truth and acting accordingly. The opposite would be to become bound by our passions or mistakes.

Therefore, loving and defending this freedom of each person, not only to have an opinion we don't share but also to hold on to an erroneous belief, is not the same as loving or defending falsehood itself. Moral relativism is when we pretend that there is no truth and so it doesn't really matter what one believes, or that everything one holds to be true is equal and what matters is that one believes it. We may be tempted to think that the loving thing to do in the face of difference is to be indifferent - to adopt the attitude of, “you have your truth and I have mine.” But real charity is never indifferent. Charity seeks the good of the other.

Because we love others, we don't just want to grow closer and closer to the truth ourselves, we want this for them as well. We know that the truth will make them even more free (cf. Jn 8:32). And so, without denying others their freedom, we are willing to do what we can to help them, always being open to receiving help from them as well. “Truth [...] is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.”^[13] By virtue of our human dignity, each of us is free in the pursuit of the truth, and what we choose to believe is our own free choice, but we depend on one another, on dialogue and freely engaging and accompanying each other in the search.

Children of God

Commenting on Jesus’ words that “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32), St. Josemaria elaborated, “How great a truth is this, which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives. I will sum it up for you... It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father... Do not forget: anyone who does not realise that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself.”^[14] This is our most fundamental identity, deeper than the position we establish on any issue. And no matter how different our opinions, this is true of our interlocutor as well. We can live out and transmit this truth when we engage in dialogue in the spirit Christ has taught us.

Thus, we gradually identify with Christ, who, being God, was infinitely free. Not because he could choose evil, but because he delighted in goodness. Angels and saints have also preceded us on this path of freedom. Each one, according to their character, preferences, interests, work, era... united in love for God and others.

You may have had an experience in which someone refused to listen to you. Or gave the impression of listening, albeit impatiently, when actually they were just eagerly waiting for you to stop talking, preparing themselves, like a lion getting ready to pounce, so they could spring to attack, tearing apart each of your points, one by one. Maybe you felt your instincts coming into play, as your heart began to pound and tension began to build in your chest, and you felt the urge to shout out and defend your position. Perhaps they were really aggressive, or somehow made it personal. The last thing you probably felt like doing was trying to be understanding. But charity calls for understanding in all circumstances, an understanding that communicates God’s love. If you feel like this is beyond you, you are right. “For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same” (Lk 6:32-33). To dialogue with those who think like you, to listen to those who will listen to you - this is natural. But sometimes to be understanding is really supernatural - a testimony of God acting in us as His instruments, bringing His tenderness and affection, “for He Himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Lk 6:35). It is by treating others according to their dignity as children of God that we ourselves “will be children of the Most High” (Lk 6:35).

^[1] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass on the Occasion of the Beginning of his Petrine Ministry, 24-IV-2005.

[2] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.

[3] Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day, 1-VI-2014.

[4] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Closing Address, 11th Professional Seminar for Church Communication Offices Pontifical University of Santa Croce Rome, 19-IV-2018.

[5] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Economic Justice for All,” no. 28

[6] *Conversations*, no. 98

[7] *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2

[8] *Conversations*, no. 12

[9] *Conversations*, no. 12

[10] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 75

[11] “The Riches of the Faith,” published in ABC, Madrid, 2-XI-1969.

[12] *The Forge*, no. 715

[13] *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3

[14] *Friends of God*, no. 26

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Grateful Children

The creator's design

The beginning of the Book of Genesis highlights God's universal and unlimited power: only He has absolute dominion over all things and exercises it to give rise to life. In the context of creation, God entrusts the first human couple, created in His image and likeness, with the task of subduing the earth and having dominion over every living creature (cf. *Gen* 1:26-29). The Hebrew word "image" used in the text meant statue, sculpture, or representation, and it also referred to the images of gods that presided over temples (cf. *Ez* 7:20; 16:17; *2 Kings* 11:18; *Num* 33:52). Similarly, just as kings of the time erected images of themselves to mark their dominion in distant lands, Adam was placed on earth as the image of God and representative of his sovereignty.

In the second account, Adam is given the task of naming the animals. Naming something implies subjecting the named object to an order that determines, in a certain sense, the place it should occupy in the world. Adam participates in God's divine authority and has been designated his representative on earth, governing in the name of the divine sovereign. God, in turn, accepts the names Adam gives his creatures. Thus, man exercises dominion over creation, and this exercise of dominion means that the destiny of the cosmos is linked to human freedom, by the creator's design.

The creation story and the fact the man's dominion depends *on* and participates *in* God's may seem like random trivia, unimportant in a Christian's everyday life. But "in Israel's profession of faith, to affirm that God is Creator does not mean merely expressing a theoretical conviction, but also grasping the original extent of the Lord's gratuitous and merciful action on behalf of man. In fact, God freely confers being and life on everything that exists."^[1] The principle of the divine creation of all things, manifested many times in Sacred Scripture (especially in the Book of Genesis) provides us with a key to understanding reality and acting accordingly: we live in constant gratitude, stemming from the gratuitousness of God's love.

"I thank you, Father"

Gratitude consists of the disposition of the will to recognize and reciprocate a received good. Beyond feelings of appreciation or acknowledgment, it means a practical response in words or actions. Therefore, gratitude entails a perspective capable of recognizing the benefit received and, at the same time, actions expressing that recognition.

The Gospel shows us several people who showed Jesus kindness, from those who cared for his family in Bethlehem (the shepherds and the magi) to those who eased his burden on Calvary (Simon of Cyrene, the good thief, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the women accompanying Mary...). Each of them received a grateful look, smile, or words of appreciation from our Lord.

The "thank you" that resonates most powerfully in the Gospel is the one Jesus addressed to his Father: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (*Mt* 11:25). The "things" Jesus refers to are the knowledge of God and the world, and He teaches them to us. The wisdom of God is accessible to everyone. The "little ones," people who view the world simply and without prejudice, know that they have received everything from God, and they understand it more easily.

Grateful eyes and hearts

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* reminds us, "the attitude that must characterize the way man acts in relation to creation is essentially one of gratitude and appreciation; the world, in fact, reveals the mystery of God who created and sustains it. [...] The world presents itself before man's eyes as evidence of God, the place where his creative, providential and redemptive power unfolds."^[2]

Christian actions are rooted in a thankful acceptance of God's gifts because of our faith in creation and grateful outlook. We are free, and each person can choose to reject or accept God's power, to deny his dominion or to worship Him and see reality as a gift. The first approach considers created things as objects to be manipulated and possessed arbitrarily, while the second receives, admires, understands, enjoys, and shares them. Above all, the second approach refers things back to God because they come from Him. Every human decision, no matter how minute or seemingly irrelevant, ultimately involves the rejection or grateful acceptance of God's gifts.

We could refer to any number of everyday examples: celebrating a special occasion with family and friends, achieving a professional milestone, experiencing something new, sharing a talent... All of reality, including the material universe and our relationships with others, is a divine gift.

The grateful acceptance of these gifts is seen in a special way when we accept and welcome others as gifts: "Made in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26), and made visible in the universe in order to live in society (cf. *Gen* 2:20,23) and exercise dominion over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:26,28- 30), the human person is for this reason called from the very beginning to life in society: 'God did not create man as a *solitary being* but wished him to be a *social being*. Social life therefore is not exterior to man: he can only grow and realize his vocation in relation with others.'"^[3] When we gratefully accept others, we necessarily also care for them, which – among other things – means trying to contribute to the common good.

Welcome others as gifts: an invitation to the common good

Pope Francis reminds us that integral ecology – a concept closely related to the care of creation, understood not only as the natural world, but also human society

– is essential to the common good. This principle plays a central and unifying role in social ethics. Our dedication to preserving and caring for creation will be more genuine if it is directed toward building up the common good, which is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily,”^[4] or, in other words, integral and sustainable human development.

As Christians, when we see other people in need or notice problems in our community, we should feel the urge to respond. We are called to be responsible and generous, to genuinely seek the good of all people. The ideal of the common good is not a vague abstraction: it is a call for everyone in society to look beyond their own interests and collaborate according to their personal abilities. This means seeing past what would be “good for me” alone to a horizon lit up by charity, through openness to others and a desire to harmonize the various dimensions (familial, social, political, cultural, technical, etc.) of our complex society.

Underlying this perspective is the awareness of the infinite dignity of every human person, whatever their circumstances. The order of things must be subordinated to the order of persons and not the other way around, as Jesus implied when He said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (cf. *Mk 2:27*). This order, founded on truth and animated by charity, outlines the primary goal of the common good: a society that seeks to serve human beings at all levels.

One manifestation of this challenge can be seen in the impact of technology. We cannot ignore the signs of the times: social relationships are increasingly complex, due to the ease and speed of communication and transportation (to give just two examples) and the new lifestyles and forms of interpersonal contact they bring with them. Technological changes are somewhat ambiguous, because general progress can go hand-in-hand with potential risks to human dignity and development. Innovations can lead to solidarity and positive social initiatives or tragic conflicts and division, depending on how they are used. They can help people reconnect or create more superficial relationships; lead to learning or addiction; facilitate exploitation or opportunities for development. Welcoming creation in this context means safeguarding respect for the person *as such*, in both ends and means, and being guided by ethical principles rather than mere efficiency.

Building the common good in communion

Each of us must take on our share of the common good, contributing what we are called to do in this world; something only we can offer, for no one can replace us in this task. This attitude is in opposition to passivity, indifference, and individualism, because it involves a continuous commitment and willingness to engage in the effort to foster an environment of communion. It means broadening our focus to something greater than our personal well-being. “It is one thing to feel forced to live together, but something entirely different to value the richness and beauty of the seeds of common life needing to be sought out and cultivated.”^[5]

The common good is brought about in action, through the everyday activities of each citizen. The state of society depends on our personal relationships and work, which can either contribute to or take away from a healthy social and legal order. (This includes but is not limited to basic human rights, like food, housing, and transportation.) For this reason, we want to do our daily work excellently, competently and with passion. This means understanding the world, making an effort to stay informed and to be aware of the reality around us, avoiding the trap of complacent resignation under the pretext that our actions are too small to have an impact. Christ tells us his judgment will be based on small actions done for ordinary people: “Whatever you do for the least of these...” (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46).

Moreover, the Church's magisterium has always highlighted the need for Christians to participate in and take responsibility for public life: God calls us there. The realization that our capacity is limited should lead us to combine forces and work with others to build the common good in communion. Jesus gives us the example of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37), who, through his actions, made us realize that “each and everyone's existence is deeply tied to that of others: life is not time merely passing by, life is about interactions.”^[6]

All of these things come together to form what we could call the “intrinsic dimension” of the common good: living well in community. It is not enough to do good *for* others; we must also try to do good *with* others. Solidarity is bigger than taking responsibility for our part in a particular project. It leads to the desire to be with others and to work with them to achieve their goals. The common good is not only about our external condition as a society, because we build up our personal and social good through relationships.

The sum of many little things

Simply being together is already good, because we can rely on the support we receive from one another to face our shortcomings and mistakes. When a community unites in the face of a natural disaster, for example, to help save people and their surroundings, despite pain, suffering, or fatigue, there is an inner fullness from having done good together and a deep shared gratitude. The challenge is to achieve that same intensity in everyday life.

Although we have all experienced the relief of mutual support in a community, we often default to resolving things on our own or asking for and offering assistance while keeping track of how much we owe or are owed. The intrinsic common good, however, is built on the logic of gratuitous generosity when it comes to relationships, mercy, and communion. “We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies. Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people's troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen. [...] Let us foster what is good and place ourselves at its service.”^[7]

Gratuitousness and gratitude go hand in hand: they guide our relationship with others, grounding it in our relationship with God, as grateful, responsible children.

* * *

The book of Genesis reveals that man is called to be the guardian and steward of creation, exercising a shared sovereignty given by God. We have received everything from Him and can never thank Him enough. We are called to accept his gifts gratefully and to care for, develop, and enrich creation – which means welcoming others as gifts, participating in building up the common good, and working together with others. Thus we fully realize our social nature, strengthening the bonds of fraternity and contributing to the flourishing of all.

[1] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 26.

[2] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 487.

[3] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 149.

[4] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164.

[5] Pope Francis, *Humana communitas*, no. 6.

[6] Pope Francis, Video message to TED 2017 in Vancouver (26 April 2017).

[7] Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 77.

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