

LETTERS

ST. JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA

ABOUT CHARITY IN THE TRANSMISSION OF THE FAITH

16 JULY 1933

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St. Josemaria Escriva

**LETTER OF ST. JOSEMARIA ABOUT CHARITY IN THE
TRANSMISSION OF THE FAITH**

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Content

The *Letter* deals with “the path we should follow in our apostolic work”. It sets out the form to be taken by the evangelising dialogue with men and women who want to come closer to the faith of the Church: combining a spirit of understanding and respect for the freedom of consciences with fidelity to the deposit of faith. Or, using expressions coined by St Josemaría, to practise “holy tolerance” with people while practising “holy intransigence” with error.

The topic appears in his very early writings, in the 1930s; but it becomes especially relevant in the context of the year 1966, when St Josemaría sent this text to the members of Opus Dei. These were moments of theological and disciplinary crisis in some ecclesiastical sectors, and he called for tolerance towards people, avoidance of all fanaticism or fundamentalist rigidity, but also for fortitude and clarity in the presentation of doctrine. The *Letter* describes the way in which the new evangelisation – to use a modern expression – should take place, in a world that was becoming less and less Christian.

St Josemaría’s message is one of optimism, of love for everyone, including those who reject God and religion, of understanding and living in harmony. And, at the same time, it is one of great clarity: faith and morality are untouchable and their demands cannot be watered down, in the hope that non-believers will be more attracted to a softened version of Christianity.

The content of the *Letter* could be broken down into several parts, although these divisions are not entirely clear cut. The first part (nos. 1-5) explains how the apostolate of Opus Dei takes place in the world, with friendship and trust in everyone, full of understanding, without being in enmity with anyone, trying to imitate Christ.

He then explains what “holy tolerance” and “holy intransigence” consists of (nos. 6-12). Fidelity to Revelation means not giving way in matters of doctrine, and standing firm in the truth. But, at the same time, this firmness requires the exercise of several virtues and a desire not to reject anyone, overflowing with charity and abhorring fanaticism.

In the next points (nos. 13-15) he explains this last topic, insisting on the attitude of not shunning anyone, of living in harmony with everyone, respecting and loving the freedom of each person, even if they are in error; in a universal apostolate that extends to all. He then speaks of the example of Jesus Christ, whom every disciple must imitate, aiming to be *alter Christus*, another Christ. He comments on several examples in the gospel, where the attitude he is describing in this *Letter* (nos. 16-18) is evident in the Saviour. He then gives other examples

from the New Testament (nos. 19-21) in the same vein.

He ends by addressing the issue of understanding and dialogue with those who have turned away from the Catholic religion, who have ignored it or even are against it (nos. 22-26). He teaches that a person should know how to forgive, have a universal spirit, opening “the doors of our houses to people of all ideologies and social conditions, without discrimination of any kind, with one’s heart and arms ready to welcome everyone” (no. 25).

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Madrid, 16 July 1933

1. *Vos autem dixi amicos, quia omnia quaecumque audivi a Patre meo, nota feci vobis (John 15:15)*; I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. My dearest daughters and sons, Christ our Lord’s words show us the path we should follow in our apostolic work. God has called us to bring his teaching to every corner of the world, to open up *the divine paths of the earth* and make Christ known to all those people who as yet know nothing about him. By willing to have us in his Work, he has also given us an apostolic way of working that moves us to be understanding, to be forgiving, and to practise attentive charity towards all souls.

Our apostolate is one of friendship and trust. We wish to exclaim always, with the Holy Spirit: *ego cogito cogitationes pacis et non afflictionis (Jer29:11)*; I have thoughts of peace and not of affliction, thoughts which seek concord, which try to create an atmosphere of charity, indispensable for God’s word to take root in souls. “Charity is the bond of fraternity, the foundation of peace, giving firmness and security to unity; it is greater than both hope and faith, it excels both good works and martyrdom, it will remain with us always, eternal with God in the kingdom of heaven.”^[1]

2. Jesus wants us to have this spirit, which is his spirit. Do you see his continual eagerness to be with people? Aren’t you moved to contemplate how he rejects no one? He has something to say to everyone, he speaks kindly to everyone. He teaches them, instructs them, and brings them tidings of joy and hope. What a marvellous, unique reality: God dwelling with men!

Sometimes he speaks to them from the boat while they are seated on the shore. At other times he speaks to them on the mountainside so that the whole crowd can hear him well. On occasions he speaks amidst the hubbub of a banquet, in the quiet of a home, walking through the fields, or seated under the olive trees. He addresses each person in terms they can understand. He uses examples of nets and fish for seafarers, of seeds and vines for those who till the soil. To the housewife he speaks about the lost coin, and with the Samaritan woman he talks of the water she has to fetch from Jacob’s well. Jesus receives everyone, he accepts people’s invitations and, when they don’t invite him, sometimes he invites himself: *Zachaeae, festinans descende, quia hodie in domo tua oportet me manere (Luke 19:5)*; Zachaeus, come down quickly, for I will stay at your house today.

Christ *desires all people to be saved* (1 Tim 2:4) and no one to be lost. He is impatient to give his life for all in an outpouring of love that is a perfect holocaust. Jesus does not want to convince us by force. Living alongside us, he draws us gently to follow him in search of true peace and joy.

3. We must do the same, my daughters and sons, since it is Christ's own charity that impels us: *caritas Christi urget nos* (2 Cor 5:14). With the ever-new light of charity, with generous love for God and neighbour, we shall renew our desire to understand and forgive everyone. Seeing the Master's example, we don't regard ourselves as anyone's enemy.

We can summarise our attitude toward souls with St Paul's heartfelt cry: *Caritas mea cum omnibus vobis in Christo Iesu!* (1 Cor 16:24), my love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Through charity we will sow peace and joy in the world, loving and defending the personal freedom of souls, the freedom which Christ respects and won for us.^[2]

The Work of God was born to spread throughout the world the message of love and peace that our Lord left us, to invite all men and women to respect the rights of the person. I want my children to be formed to do this, and it is in fact what you do.

To your unity of life there should be joined a spontaneous magnanimity that is renewed each day. This magnanimity must be clearly seen and manifest itself in everything, so that, as faithful soldiers of Jesus Christ in the world, you offer yourselves as holocausts, truly saying: "Lord, in all sincerity, joyfully, have I dedicated myself, with everything that I have."^[3]

4. This is how you must prepare for the continuous apostolate Jesus asks of us – as continuous as our heartbeat. My children, God has called us to the Work at a time when there is a lot of talk about peace, but there is no peace: not in souls, not in institutions, not in social life, not among nations. People talk continually about equality and democracy, and yet there remain closed, impenetrable classes.

He has called us at a time when people are crying out for understanding, and there isn't any, sometimes not even among those who act in good faith and want to practise charity, for charity lies in *understanding* even more than in giving.

These are times when fanatical and intolerant people, blind and deaf to the viewpoints of others, defend themselves by labelling their victims as violent and aggressive. In short, God has called us at a time when many talk about unity, but it is hard to imagine a period of greater dissension, not only among people in general, but even among Catholics.

5. In this environment we have to set an example – at once humble and daring as well as persevering and sealed with our work – of an integral Christian life that is marked by hard work, understanding, and love for all souls.

Exiit qui seminat seminare semen suum (Luke 8:5); a sower went out to sow his seed. This is our task: to sow, to give good doctrine, to take part in all the upright occupations and interests of this world, in order to give the good example of Christ's followers.

Christ, my daughters and sons, *coepit facere et docere* (Acts 1:1); first he did and then he taught. And I want you to do this as well: to be true saints, in the middle of the street, in the university, in the workshop, in the home, with a very specific call from our Lord, which allows for no half-heartedness, but rather demands *complete dedication*.

This dedication needs to be humble and silent. It will make you capable of knowing the greatness, wisdom and perfection of God. It will also make you realise the smallness, ignorance and wretchedness of human beings. You will learn to understand other people's weaknesses by realising that you have your own. You will learn to forgive by loving, and you will want to establish relationships with everyone, because no human being can leave us indifferent.

My children, our zeal for souls should lead us to feel that we are not anyone's enemy, to have a big, universal, Catholic heart, and to soar like eagles on the wings of God's love without confining ourselves in a hen-coop of petty quarrels and factions, which so often render sterile the activity of those seeking to work for Christ.

In short, our zeal should bring us to realise that *in Christo Iesu neque circumcisio aliquid valet neque praeputium, sed nova creatura*.^[4] We realize that what really matters, when it is a question of doing good, are souls.

6. I am aware of the difficulties you will encounter. As I always tell you, this world in which you belong and where you remain, certainly has many good things, signs of God's inexpressible goodness. But people have also sown cockle, as in the Gospel parable, and have propagated false teachings which poison minds and cause rebellion, sometimes even violent rebellion, against Christ and his holy Church.

Faced with all this, how should a child of God in his Work react? Should we, like the sons of thunder, ask our Lord to send fire on earth to consume sinners?^[5] Or perhaps lament continually, like a bird of ill omen or a prophet of doom?

You well know, my daughters and sons, that that is not our reaction, because our Lord's spirit is different: *Filius hominis non venit animas perdere, sed salvare*. I like to translate this verse freely by saying we must drown evil in an abundance of good. Our first obligation is to spread doctrine, while loving all souls.

You also know my rule for putting this spirit into practice: *holy intransigence* for error, and *holy tolerance* for the individuals who are in error. You need, however, to teach many people how to act this way, because it is not hard to find those who confuse intransigence with bullheadedness, and tolerance with abdicating rights or compromising on the truth.

We Christians do not hold the legacy of Christ's truth – which is safeguarded by the Church – as though it were a human creation or our personal property to be used however we wish. It belongs to God, and his Church guards it, and we have no right to yield, cut down, or *give way* in what is not ours.

7. However, that is not the fundamental reason for holy intransigence. Whatever belongs to the deposit of Revelation, what we know to be Catholic truth – trusting

in God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived – cannot be an object of compromises, quite simply because it is the truth, and the truth does not admit of compromise.

Have you ever thought what would happen if, for the sake of “tolerance”, all the changes that people might ask for were made to our holy Catholic faith? We might arrive at something on which all were agreed, a sort of religion characterised only by a vague inclination of the heart, by a sterile sentimentalism, which indeed (with a bit of good will) may be found in any yearning for the supernatural. This doctrine, however, would no longer be the doctrine of Christ, and it would not be a treasure of divine truths, but something human, that would neither save nor redeem. It would be salt that had become insipid.

The madness of capitulating on principles, the desire to downplay doctrinal differences and make concessions in the untouchable deposit Jesus has given to his Church, would lead to just such a catastrophe. The truth is one, my children, and whereas in human affairs it may be difficult to know where certainty lies, matters of faith are not like that.

By God’s grace, by which we were born into his Church at Baptism, we know that there is only one true religion, and on this point we are unyielding, intransigent, with *holy intransigence*. As I often say to you, is there anyone with common sense who is prepared to yield in something as simple as the sum of two and two? Would they accept that two and two are three and a half? Compromise in matters of faith is a sure sign that someone does not possess the truth, or is unaware that they possess it.

8. Moreover, if you are asked to make concessions in just one aspect of faith or morals, don’t be deceived just because the entire content of our religion may not be at stake. The various elements of a particular teaching, both in theory and in practice, are usually intimately connected, united, and dependent on one another, in proportion to the vigour and authenticity of the whole.

It is only an artificial thing that can be dismantled without threatening the whole, and such a thing probably never had any life in it anyway. Generally, lack of unity is found only in things made by human beings. Our faith is divine; it is one as God is One. And this fact entails, as a consequence, that believers either defend all its tenets firmly and consistently or else, sooner or later, they will be forced to renounce it altogether. For it is certain that once a breach has been made in the wall, the whole city is in danger of being surrendered.

And so you will defend whatever the Church says, for when it comes to divine truths, she is the sole Teacher. And you will do so with your example, with your words, with your writings: with all the honest means at your disposal.

At the same time, inspired by love for everyone’s freedom, you will respect the views of others in matters of opinion or schools of thought. In such matters, as in all other temporal affairs, the Work will never have any collective opinion, unless the Church, as part of her teaching role, has defined one for all the faithful.

On the other hand, together with *holy intransigence*, the spirit of the Work of God

requires you to be always *tolerant*, also in a holy way. Being faithful to the truth, safeguarding doctrinal integrity and defending the faith does not mean being sad or dour, nor should it be animated by a desire to destroy those who are mistaken.

Perhaps some do act in this way, but it can't be our way. We can never "bless" like that poor deranged fellow who, applying Scripture his own way, called down upon his enemies *ignis, et sulphur, et spiritus procellarum* (Ps11[10]:6); fire and sulphur and a scorching wind.

We don't seek to destroy anyone. Holy intransigence is not rude or surly intolerance. Nor is it *holy* unless it is accompanied by holy tolerance. And I would like to add that neither of the two is holy if it does not involve, along with the theological virtues, the exercise of the four cardinal virtues.

9. Above all, exercise prudence so as to act with true charity and prevent a false zeal from spoiling the holiness of your intransigence. You need to be like a steel mallet, powerful and hard, but wrapped in a quilted cloth so as not to wound.

True charity, the kindness that stems from prudence, will enable you to speak with discernment, at the right moment and in the right way. It will make you sensitive to your neighbours' needs and circumstances, though not giving way when it would be wrong to do so. And at the same time it will confirm your faith, enliven your hope, and lead you to give thanks to God for having kept you in the fullness of his truth.

Justice is needed to treat each person as he or she deserves, without generalisations or superficial simplifications which do great harm and create many obstacles to harmony among people. Always remember, my children, that you cannot be truly just unless you listen to the facts on both sides of the case, and know as well the individuals who are stating those facts.

We need to be *fortes in fide* (1 Pet 5:9), firm in the faith, to defend the faith valiantly, to resist and teach others to resist the facile temptation of novelty, of seeking to promote or regard as dogma things which are just theories propounded by specialists. Seeking progress in the knowledge and expression of faith and morals is a good thing, so long as it always accepts the ecclesiastical magisterium. But we should not be so irresponsible as to give free rein to any idea whatsoever, or to propagate things which are merely working hypotheses, at times very provisional and lacking any foundation.

There are people, my daughters and sons, who put strange and confused ideas into circulation and then, as an attempt to disclaim all responsibility, have recourse to the ingenuous argument of the greedy child: having eaten the entire pot of jam, he makes the excuse that he didn't know that so much sweetness could do any harm. What the Catholic faithful need above all is sound, unambiguous doctrine, without getting into arguments.

At the same time, it is not a question of creating a religion for uneducated people, but of being realistic and realising that very often people's knowledge is at the level of the fellow who was asked "What do you know about St Isidore of Seville?", and answered, "St Isidore? Ah, yes, he was the founder of the Giralda."^[6]

The virtue of temperance will cause you never to be exaggerated, to avoid being swayed by anger, not to be fanatics. A child of God in his Work cannot follow the example of those who recommend hitting your adversary on the head “to save him from limping”.

10. As you can see, my beloved daughters and sons, harmonising the exercise of holy tolerance and holy intransigence is both easy and difficult. It is easy, because the charity of Christ animates us and his grace helps us. It is difficult, because the bad inclinations of our personal weakness work against us, and we have to take many factors into account to avoid resolving problems erroneously and hastily.

In the choir of the monastery church of St Turibius of Liébana^[7] there are, so I'm told, a set of corbels supporting the ribs of the vault; some of you have seen them. One of the corbels has the shape of a dog's head, while the one on the opposite side is shaped like the head of a cat. It is said that the cat represents the old man we all carry within us, while the dog signifies the new man who Christ brought into being through the Redemption. But at times it seems to me that these corbels could also be a symbol of human relations: nations, religions, races and people who live like cats and dogs, forever fighting with each other, but obliged to live together to support the weight of that vault which is the peace and tranquillity of the world.

Don't forget that if there are things which separate us, there are also always things which unite us and which facilitate respect and friendliness. We children of God in his true Church have to use and emphasise them in order to draw to the light *iis qui ignorant et errant* (Heb 5:2), those who are ignorant of the truth and are in error.

I have never really liked the comparison that sometimes is used to describe the conduct of Christians: good apples are spoiled when a bad apple is put into the same basket. My children, we should not be afraid of living in harmony with those who do not possess or practise the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Taking the proper precautions, we ought not to reject anyone, because we have enough spiritual, ascetical and intellectual resources not to let ourselves be spoiled. We, children of God in the Work, should not allow ourselves to be influenced by our surroundings. It is we who should influence those around us by creating our own environment, the environment of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lived among sinners and was friends with them.^[8]

11. Bad ideas are not usually completely bad. They ordinarily have some aspect of good, because otherwise nobody would follow them. There is always some spark of truth, and this is what makes them attractive, but that part of the truth is not theirs: it derives from Christ and from the Church. And so, these good ideas (which are mixed with error) should be seen as coming from Christians who possess the fullness of truth; it should not be that we Christians go after these ideas.

But that concept is valid only from the doctrinal point of view. In practice, in your personal relationships, you do have to go after those who are mistaken, not to be dragged along by their ideologies, but to win them for Christ and attract them

gently and effectively to the light and to peace.

You have often heard me say that the Work of God is not *against anything*. Certainly, we cannot say that error is a good thing, but those who are mistaken merit our affection, our help, our loyal and sincere friendship. We would not please God if we were to refuse it simply because they don't think the way we do.

12. In short, we should be engaged in a continuous dialogue with our companions, our friends, with everybody we meet. This is holy tolerance. We could certainly just call it tolerance, but I think that tolerance by itself does not go far enough, because it is not simply a matter of tolerating as a lesser or inevitable evil the fact that people think differently from us or are mistaken.

We have to be ready to give way and yield in everything personal, in debatable matters, in whatever could be a cause of disagreement, so long as it is not something essential. We must reduce friction wherever possible in order to create a basis of understanding which can provide light to those who are mistaken.

There are many people who are all in favour of tolerance, who are prepared to yield in matters of Christian morality, or who don't have any problem with perverting dogma. But they will not tolerate anyone touching their money, their comfort, their whims, their reputation, or their opinions. They may have no problem with people encroaching on the rights of the Church, but they attack like vipers if anyone tries to intervene in matters which they regard as their personal rights, although very often they are not rights at all but rather baseless whims or just muddled ideas.

There are others who do the opposite. Their life is a perpetual crusade, a constant defence of the faith, but sometimes they are blinded, and forgetting that their good desires should be governed by charity and prudence, they become fanatics. In spite of their good intentions, the great service they seek to render to the truth becomes distorted and they end up doing more harm than good, defending perhaps their own opinion, their self-esteem, or their narrow-mindedness.

Like the knight of La Mancha, they see giants where there are only windmills. They become quarrelsome, irritable, full of bitter zeal, rough-mannered. They can never find anything good but see everything as bleak; they fear people's legitimate freedom, and are unable to smile.

On a certain occasion a journalist told me about his attempts to find the tomb of Cesare Borgia,^[9] the famous *condottiero*, hated by some and esteemed by others. He went to Viana in Navarre, because he heard that Borgia had been buried in front of the door of the church. He explained what he was looking for, and someone said: "Don't bother looking for him. I dug him up myself and scattered his ashes to the winds."

Finally, there are some people who neither attack the faith nor defend it. They have slipped into a comfortable, self-centred scepticism which, under the guise of respect for other people's opinions, takes refuge in indecision and irresponsibility. Their attitude is well reflected in the verses which somebody wrote in jest (if he wrote them in earnest, we would have to conclude that he

understood the Gospel as poorly as he did literary style): “In this hostile world, / There is nobody you can trust. / It’s every man for himself, / Me for me, you for you, / And let him save himself who can.”

13. My beloved children, we have to be open to everybody and not antagonistic to anybody. There are many supernatural reasons why this should be so, and I have reminded you of a number of them; I now want to mention one more.

When we come to the Work, we don’t separate ourselves from the world. Before Christ called us we were in the world, and there we continue to be afterwards. Our interests and likings, our professional activity, and our manner of being have not changed. You should not be worldly, but you do belong to the world, and you are ordinary people just like the people you mix with every day at work or study, in the office or at home.

In this shared life you will find opportunities to bring souls to Christ Jesus, and naturally you will not refuse them. Rather, you need to seek and develop them actively, in an apostolate of friendship and trust. You are apostles and you cannot enclose yourselves behind walls that isolate you from your companions, either physically, because we are not religious, or spiritually, because your noble, sincere friendship with everybody is the human channel for your work of apostolate with souls.

Thus, your conduct towards others will have certain characteristics born of charity: considerateness in your relations with them, good manners, love for everyone’s freedom, cordiality, and affection. The Apostle says it so clearly! *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some (1 Cor 9:19-22).*

And he adds the reason, in writing to the Romans: *For, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Rom 10:13-14).* To preach Christ, my children, you don’t merely speak or set a good example. You also have to listen and be ready to engage in open, cordial dialogue with the souls you wish to attract to God.

Certainly you will encounter many who, moved by grace, desire nothing more than to hear the good news from you. But even they will have issues to resolve: doubts, questions, opinions they wish to clarify, difficulties. Listen to them, accompany them, and live in harmony with them, so that you can get to know them and let them get to know you.

The Work of God, don’t forget, is the very opposite of fanaticism: it is a great friend of freedom. And we are convinced that, to bring others to the truth, the proper procedure is to pray, to understand, to become friends with them; and

then, to help them to reflect and study things well.

14. The life of the children of God in Opus Dei is apostolate. From this comes the desire to live peacefully with all mankind, to overcome all barriers in the charity of Christ. From this too comes our desire to struggle to eliminate all forms of intolerance, compulsion and violence in man's behaviour toward his fellow man.

God wants to be served in freedom, and so an apostolate that didn't respect the freedom of consciences would not be right. And so each of you, my children, has to aim for a boundless charity at all times: understanding everybody, making allowances whenever necessary; with a great zeal for souls, certainly, but the attractive kind of zeal, without any rough manners or off-putting behaviour. We cannot place error on the same level as truth, but, while always respecting the right order of charity, we ought to welcome those who are in error with a great sense of understanding.

I always like to remind you, so you appreciate it very clearly, that the Church's teaching is not compatible with errors against the faith. But can we not be firm friends with people who profess these errors? If we ourselves are solidly grounded in our behaviour and our doctrine, can we not pull the same cart as them in many areas of life?

Our Lord wants us to be present on all the paths of the earth, sowing the seed of understanding, charity and forgiveness *in hoc pulcherrimo caritatis bello*, in this most beautiful war of love, forgiveness and peace.

Don't think that this is just a good idea, or something to be recommended. It is much more than that: it is an imperative command from Christ, the *mandatum novum*^[10] I speak about so much, which obliges us to love all souls, to understand other people's circumstances, to forgive them if they do anything that needs forgiving. Our charity has to be such that it makes up for all the deficiencies of human weakness, *veritatem facientes in caritate* (Eph 4:15), treating those in error with love, but not making any concessions in matters of faith.

15. God has called us to his Work so that we can spread his message of infinite love throughout the whole world. Not a single soul is excluded from our charity. When Christians understand and implement the catholicity of the Church, when they realise how urgent it is to announce the good news of salvation to everyone, they find that they have to become *all things to all people, that by all means I might save some* (1 Cor 9:22).

Then our apostolic desire becomes our very life. Beginning with what we have at hand, our everyday occupations, our desire for the harvest spreads outwards little by little in concentric circles: from the heart of the family to our workplace, then to civil society, to the seats of learning, or to the political arena. Our apostolic zeal is at work among all our fellow-citizens in every walk of life. It reaches out to international relations, and encompasses whole races, continents, and civilisations in its love.

As apostles you should begin your divine work with what you have in front of you, and not waste your zeal on fantasies and *wishful thinking*. That is my advice to

you. The day will come when you can put into effect your desires of love and apostolate among all the peoples of the earth. Right now, my daughters and sons, the Work has just been born and you are very restricted materially. But our spirit is universal and we will also be universal in reality: our supernatural undertaking knows no frontiers.

16. But now and always we have to be ready to live in harmony with everyone, to give them, through our friendship, an opportunity to draw close to Christ. We have to feel united to everyone without distinction, without dividing people into watertight compartments or putting labels on them as if they were commodities or insect specimens. We cannot separate ourselves from others, because if we did, our lives would be miserable and selfish.

“For Christians are not distinguished from other people by country or language or the customs which they observe... As citizens, they share in all things with others.”^[11] We Christians – you and I, my daughters and sons – must imitate Christ, we must be *alter Christus*, another Christ. And Jesus our Lord so loved us that he became man, taking on a nature like ours, and lived on earth for thirty-three years in daily contact with poor and rich, with the just and sinners, with young and old, with Jews and Gentiles. Don’t you want to learn from Christ and follow the example of his life? Let us open the Gospel and listen to God’s dialogue with mankind.

17. We read in the eleventh chapter of St Luke: one day Jesus was praying. What must Jesus’ prayer have been like! The disciples were nearby, perhaps watching him, and when he finished, one of them said: *Domine, doce nos orare, sicut docuit et Ioannes discipulos suos (Luke 11:1)*; Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples. *And he said to them, “When you pray, say ‘Father, hallowed be your name...” (Luke 11:2).*

My daughters and sons, what a marvellous scene! The disciples speak to Jesus, and as a fruit of their conversation our Lord tells them how to pray and teaches them the great wonder of divine mercy: that we are children of God, that we can speak to him as a child speaks to his or her Father.

Converse with God, and converse also with your fellow men. A few scenes from the Gospel, taken from among many others, will suffice for you to understand even better the divine depth of our apostolate of friendship and trust.

18. The first describes Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. *Rabbi*, says this leader of the Jews, *we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him (John 3:2)*. Jesus, my children, answers with a phrase which is apparently unrelated to what Nicodemus has said, but which catches his attention and wins him over. He starts up a dialogue: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3)*.

Thus begins this conversation that you know well. You also know the outcome: at the hour of the “failure of the Cross”, Nicodemus will be there to ask Pilate boldly for our Lord’s body.

But what about the Samaritan woman? Doesn't Jesus do the same thing with her? He begins to talk with her, taking the initiative, even though *non enim coutuntur Iudaei Samaritanis* (John 4:9), Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus talks about what he knows will interest that woman, about the water she must toil to fetch every day from Jacob's well. He then describes a living water so marvellous that the one who drinks it will never be thirsty again: *qui autem biberit ex aqua, quam ego dabo ei, non sitiet in aeternum*; whoever drinks of it shall never thirst.

The fruit of Christ's dialogue also appears in the Gospel. It is the conversion of that sinner, the transformation of her soul, which becomes an apostolic soul: *venite et videte hominem, qui dixit mihi omnia quaecumque feci: numquid ipse est Christus* (John 4:29); come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ? Another fruit is the faith of the other Samaritans who first *believed in him because of the woman's testimony* (John 4:39) and then said, *It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world* (John 4:42).

On another occasion it is a rich young man – from a good family, we would say nowadays – who asks our Lord a question: “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Luke 18:18). And Jesus replies: “*Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.*” He said to him, “*Which ones?*” And Jesus said, “*You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*” The young man said to him, “*All these I have kept. What do I still lack?*” (Matt 19:17-20).

From a human point of view, my children, that was the obvious moment for compromise. What more could be desired than to have that rich, influential young man – *dives erat valde*^[12] – join the group of Christ's followers? But there was only one answer that Jesus could give, because when it comes to doctrine there is no room for compromise, even though it might seem that, by making concessions, we will attain apostolic results. Our Lord's reply is full of affection – so much so, that when the young man went away sorrowful, it wrung a lament from the heart of God – but it is clear, emphatic and without any ambiguities that conceal the rigour of the truth: *One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me* (Luke 18:22).

There is still another example, the one Jesus gave us from the Cross, as if to teach us that our zeal for souls and our concern to reach those around us, should express itself even at the moment of death. Jesus engaged in that moving conversation on Golgotha with the two thieves crucified alongside him.

This time it was not Jesus who began the conversation. But his presence on the scaffold and his sufferings were more eloquent than words. *Are you are not the Christ? Save yourself and us!* blasphemed the bad thief. But the good thief said, *Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, “Domine, memento mei..., Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”* (Luke 23:39-42). My children, Jesus' brief intervention in that conversation between the two criminals meant salvation for

the repentant thief: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise”* (Luke 2:43).

19. Those examples are enough to ensure that we never forget how we ought to carry out our apostolate with souls and in what spirit. Our greatest ambition has to be to live like Christ our Lord and like the first faithful, without any divisions of race, nation, language or opinion.

We also have to teach all Catholics and all people the New Commandment I reminded you about earlier. I seem to hear St Paul crying out to the faithful of Corinth: *divisus est Christus? Numquid Paulus crucifixus est pro vobis? aut in nomine Pauli baptizati estis? (1 Cor 1:13)*, is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul, so that you claim, *“I follow Paul,”* or *“I follow Apollos,”* or *“I follow Cephas”?* (1 Cor 1:12).

We are all God’s children and we are all redeemed by Christ: this is the deepest reason for unity among all people. No other title is needed. You don’t give other names to pure gold and pure silver. When the silver is silver and the gold is gold, we simply call them what they are, without any additions. If at times we do qualify the name with some other term, it is not good metal but a cheap imitation.

20. Following the order of charity – I insist – we will show constant affection to those who, through ignorance, pride or misunderstanding, are verging on error or have fallen into it. If people make mistakes, my children, it is not always because of bad will. At times people err because they lack the means to discover the truth by themselves, or because they find it easier to repeat foolishly what they have just read or heard, echoing falsehoods. We must find excuses for them.

We need to know what their reasons are. It is not pleasing to God when people judge without hearing what the defendant has to say, sometimes judging in secret, and not seldom – given the unfortunate weakness of human nature – with witnesses and accusers who use the cloak of anonymity to calumniate or defame.

It would not be true, my children, if I said that my advice comes only from the experiences of others. I have lived it in my own flesh. But, by the grace of God, I can also say that, ever since then, I have loved the Church even more, precisely because there are ecclesiastics who condemn without listening.

21. Do you recall the scenes recounted in the Gospel of John the Baptist’s preaching? What a lot of gossip there was going on! Is he the Christ? Is he Elijah? Is he a Prophet? So many rumours were flying around that *the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”* (John 1:19).

For someone with little supernatural outlook, it might seem that John the Baptist wasted an opportunity to win converts. He could even have answered with the testimony which Jesus was to give of him: *ipse est Elias, qui venturus est. Qui habet aures audiendi audiat* (Matt 11:14-15); he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Those who went to ask John, however, lacked the dispositions needed to understand those words correctly. *He confessed and did not deny... “I am not the Christ ... I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”* (John 1:20, 23). Truly,

his words resounded in a wilderness. Those who seemed to be seeking the truth refused to listen to it.

The same happened when Jesus began his public life: gossip, astonishment, fear, envy... The Gospel tells us that the news about him *spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country (Luke 7:17)*. The stories also reached the followers of John the Baptist. *The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Luke 7:18-19)*.

How beautiful is John the Baptist's way of acting! How pure, noble and disinterested! He really is preparing the ways of the Lord. His disciples know Christ only by hearsay, and he urges them to talk with the Master. He points him out to them and prompts them to get to know him, and he offers them the opportunity to admire the wonders Jesus works: *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them (Luke 7:22)*.

Like John, my children, we must always have the fortitude to make sure we are well informed before making up our mind. And we have to teach everyone to do likewise, and not allow themselves to be taken in by appearances or gossip. To describe someone as upright and blameless in their behaviour, although this be true, it is, unfortunately, unremarkable and doesn't attract attention. But if you attribute to them Machiavellian schemes or other intrigues, although this be untrue, it will attract attention and be repeated, at least as a hypothesis or rumour.

22. Be understanding, even towards those people who seem incapable of understanding others and judge them rashly. The best help for them will be your upright charity and example, when they see that you struggle to overcome the bad inclinations and tendency to error that we all have, and that with God's grace you succeed.

It does not matter whether they are souls far from God or are "good people" who misunderstand. Their prejudices arise precisely because of a lack of contact and the absence of an honest dialogue that would help them to see what they don't *understand*. We should not be the ones who reject such a dialogue; and if they reject it, we will not hold it against them, because their misunderstanding sanctifies us. A sensible patient feels no antipathy towards the scalpel the surgeon uses in treating him.

Your affection, your sincere, honest dealings, should be offered both to people who don't know the Faith and to those who have left the Church. We will always receive them and – without yielding on matters of doctrine, because it is not ours – we will be yielding with the individuals, and we will invite them to work side by side with us, at the heart of our endeavours. We will put them at the centre of what we most love on earth, and give them the wonderful opportunity to become God's hands and arms, to do his Work in the world.

23. You will see how your behaviour will draw them to the faith, a faith which they never had before or which they had lost, often without much fault on their

part. When this happens, you should redouble your affection, continuing to accompany them on life's journey. You should talk together as sincere friends and foresee the possible difficulties they may face, in order to confirm them still more on the right path, while carefully strengthening your own faith through study, because it is sterile and counterproductive to try to talk about these issues without sound doctrine and the gift of tongues.

This is another reason why you should feel the urgent need for solid, continuous, deep formation, well founded on sure principles. With that degree of preparation you should not fear contact with people who are in error. I have sometimes been saddened to hear people refer to someone who embraces the faith after years or maybe an entire life without seeing the light, by saying: "Be careful, he's a convert!"

We have to take care to love them even more, unreservedly, joyfully, *because there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7)*. But we should also be careful not to betray their desires to follow Christ, and not to offer them something as good when in fact it is not. We want to avoid that, due to their uncertainty (they are like children new-born in the faith) or their enthusiastic impulsiveness, they go astray from the good path they have begun to travel.

24. Our charity is not exhausted even then. We must also get along with those who are opposed to Christ, since otherwise we could not help them by enabling them to come to know him. Don't, however, let yourselves be fooled by false apostolic tactics, for you will encounter people who are blinded even by the very ideal of winning souls. On the pretext of seeking the lost sheep, they end up falling into the quicksands of the very error they are trying to combat, deceived by imprudent tolerance, compromises, or concessions.

We want to do good to everyone, to those who love Jesus Christ and to those who may hate him. But these latter make us feel very sorry, and so we must try to treat them with affection and help them to find the faith, drowning evil, as I say, in an abundance of good. We should never see anyone as an enemy. If they attack the Church in bad faith, our firm, friendly, upright behaviour will be the only means they have, with God's grace, to discover the truth or at least respect it.

If their attacks are based on ignorance, then our doctrine, confirmed by example, may be what makes the veil fall from their eyes. We will always defend the holy rights of the Church, but we will try to do so without wounding or humiliating and will try to avoid causing any resentment or mistrust.

Who are we against? Nobody. I cannot love the devil, but as for all those who are not the devil, no matter how bad they are or appear to be, I wish them well. I don't feel, nor have I ever felt, that I am against anyone. I reject ideas against Christ's teaching or morals, but at the same time I have the duty to welcome, with Christ's charity, anyone who holds such views.

Often their errors are the result of being badly formed. In plenty of cases, these poor people had no one to teach them the truth. I think that on judgment day many souls will answer God like the paralytic at the pool: *Hominem non habeo*

(John 5:7), I have no one to help me. Or as the labourers who were not working replied to the owner of the vineyard: *Nemo nos conduxit (Matt 20:7)*; no one has hired us; no one asked us to work.

Though their errors may be blameworthy and their persistence in evil deliberate, at the heart of their lamentable state lies a profound ignorance, which God alone can measure. Remember Christ's cry on the Cross, finding excuses for those putting him to death: *Pater, dimitte illis: non enim sciunt quid faciunt (Luke 23:34)*, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Let us follow Christ's example and never reject anyone. To save one soul we should go as far as the very gates of hell; further, no, for beyond them one cannot love God.

25. This is our spirit. And we show it by always opening wide the doors of our houses to people of all ideologies and all social conditions, without any distinctions, with our hearts and arms wide open to everyone. Our mission is not to judge. Instead, we have the duty to treat everyone as our brother or sister.

We exclude no soul from our friendship, and no one should approach the Work of God and go away empty. Everyone has to feel loved, understood, treated with affection. I love the most wretched person in the most forgotten corner of the world, even if what he is doing is wrong. And with God's grace, I would give my life to save his soul.

With the clear ideas that your formation provides, you will be able to recognise in each case what is essential, which is where we cannot make concessions. You will also be able to discern those things that some hold as immutable, but which are simply the product of specific eras or customs, and this discernment will help you to give way joyfully. And in matters that are even more open to differing opinions (which is almost everything), you will likewise give way, especially when the good of souls is at stake.

I insist, however, that you don't let yourselves be deceived by false compassion. Many who appear to be moved by a desire to pass on the truth, give way in matters which are inviolable. They say they are being understanding towards those who are in error, when what they are really doing is criticising the teaching of our Mother the Church, sometimes quite brutally and pitilessly. Don't fail to be understanding towards them too, but at the same time defend the truth with moderation, calmly and firmly, even if some people *accuse* you of being polemical.

26. This behaviour of yours will be humanly and supernaturally very fruitful. The Work of God is a great instrument to bring happiness to all people, if we are faithful, because *the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one (2 Thess 3:3)*.

I see the Work projected down through the centuries, always youthful, elegant, beautiful and fruitful, defending Christ's peace, so that all may come to possess it. We will help society recognise the rights of the person, the family, and the Church. Our efforts will help lessen fratricidal hatred and mistrust among peoples. And my daughters and sons, *fortes in fide (1 Pet 5:9)*, firm in the faith, will know how to anoint every wound with Christ's Charity, which is the sweetest of

balms.

Doesn't it give you joy that God wanted this spirit for our supernatural enterprise, the spirit that imbues the Gospels but seems so forgotten today? Thank Jesus for it, thank our Lady. And renew your desires to co-redeem and be apostolic. What a great apostolate awaits us! For he who began the Work in us will bring it to completion.^[13]

May the Lord watch over these children of mine.

^[1] St Cyprian, *The Good of Patience*, 15.

^[2] See *Gal* 5:1

^[3] See *1 Chron* 29:17.

^[4] ... in Christ Jesus neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (*Gal* 6:15).

^[5] See *Luke* 9:54

^[6] *St Isidore of Seville*: Doctor of the Church, theologian and writer, notable figure in the history of the Church in Visigoth Spain of the 6th–7th centuries.

^[7] *Saint Turibius of Liébana*: an old monastery in Cantabria (Spain).

^[8] See *Luke* 15:2

^[9] *Cesare Borgia*: Born in 1475, Cesare was a politician and a *condottiero* (military mercenary).

^[10] *a new commandment* (*John* 13:34).

^[11] *Letter to Diognetus*, 5, 1,5.

^[12] . . . for he was extremely rich (*Luke* 18:23).

^[13] See *Phil* 1:6

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