

TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (X): How Close Jesus Is

“Every day I see more clearly *how close Jesus is to me at every moment*. I could tell you about small, constant incidents that no longer even surprise me—I thank Him for them and look out for them all the time.”¹ Blessed Guadalupe’s letter to Saint Josemaría from which this quote is taken must have caused him great joy. Although Guadalupe had only been in Opus Dei for six years, it testifies in its simplicity to how the life of piety she had undertaken was helping her attain a continuous presence of God, to make her ordinary life “a continuous prayer.”²

We find this teaching clearly expressed in the Gospels. Jesus told his disciples that *they ought always to pray and not lose heart* (Lk 18:1). We often see Him address his Father throughout the day, such as at the tomb of Lazarus (cf. Jn 11:41-42) or when the Apostles return from their first mission filled with joy (cf. Mt 11:25-26). After rising from the dead, our Lord draws close to his disciples amid a wide variety of circumstances: when they are walking filled with sadness to Emmaus; when they are huddling out of fear in the Upper Room; when they go back to their work on the Sea of Galilee... And moments before returning to his Father, Jesus assures them: *I am with you always, to the close of the age* (Mt 28:20).

The early Christians were well aware of how close our Lord was to them. They learned to do everything for the glory of God, as Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s* (Rom 14:8-10; cf. I Cor 10:31). In a world so fast-paced as ours, with so many things to do and so many deadlines, so much noise and rushing around, how can we too “get to know Him and to love Him, and to hold our conversation in heaven”?³

For the right reason

Some conversations are silent. For example, two friends who are walking together, or lovers who are looking into each other’s eyes. Words aren’t needed to share what is in their hearts. But no conversation can take place without paying attention to the person in front of us.

The dialogue with God to which we are called also requires paying attention to Him. It is an attention that is not exclusive, since we can discover God in many circumstances and activities that on the surface seem to have little to do with Him. Something similar happened with those stonemasons in the past who saw behind the stones they were cutting things as diverse as the

¹ Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, Letter to Saint Josemaría, 1 April 1946.

² Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 March 1930.

³ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 300.

servitude of manual labor, the food their family needed, or the splendor of the cathedral they were helping to build.

Saint Josemaría stressed the need “to exercise the theological and cardinal virtues in the world, and in this way to become contemplative souls.”⁴ It is not simply a matter of acting in the right way, but also of acting *for the right reason*, which in this case is to seek, love and serve God. This is what makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to be present in our soul and vivify it with the theological virtues. Thus, in the many different choices that we make each day, we can be attentive to God and keep our conversation with Him alive.

When going to work in the morning or heading to school; when taking the children to a doctor’s appointment or serving a client, we can ask ourselves: *What am I doing this for? Why am I trying to do it well?* The answer may vary and be more or less profound, but it can be a good opportunity to add: *Thank you, Lord, for counting on me. I would like to serve you with this activity, and help make your light and joy present in this world.* Then our work will truly be born of love; it will manifest love and be ordered to love.⁵

Looking with God’s eyes

“There are so many problems one could list now that must be solved, but none of them can be solved unless God is put at the center, if God does not become once again visible to the world, if He does not become the determining factor in our lives and also enters the world in a decisive way through us.”⁶ Being contemplatives in the middle of the world means that God occupies the center of our existence, on which everything else hinges. In other words, He needs to be the treasure on which our heart is always set, because everything else interests us only if it unites us to Him (cf. *Mt 6:21*).

Thus our work will become prayer, because we will learn to see in it the task God has entrusted to us in order to care for and beautify his creation, and to serve other men and women. Our family life will become prayer, because we will see in our spouse and children (or in our parents) a gift that God has given us in order to give ourselves to them, always reminding them of their own infinite value and helping them to grow. After all, that is exactly what Jesus would have done in Nazareth. How would He have looked upon his daily work in Joseph’s workshop? What hidden meaning would He find in his everyday tasks? And in the many small occupations of his home life? And in everything He did together with his neighbors?

Looking at events with eyes of faith, discovering God’s love in our lives, doesn’t mean that adversities no longer affect us: fatigue, setbacks, a headache, the shabby treatment we may

⁴ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 8 December 1949, no. 26

⁵ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

⁶ Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 November 2006.

sometimes receive from others... No, that is not all going to disappear. But if we live centered on God, we will know how to unite all these realities to the Cross of Christ, where they find their true meaning in the service of the Redemption. A humiliation can be a prayer if it helps us unite ourselves to Jesus, and thus becomes an opportunity for purification. The same is true of an illness or a professional failure. In everything we can find God, who is the Lord of history. In everything we can have the assurance that God always opens up possibilities for the future, because *in everything God works for good with those who love him (Rom 8:28)*. Even a small setback like a traffic jam on the way home can become prayer, if we use it to place our time in God's hands... and to ask Him for those sharing in our own "bad luck."

To attain contemplation in ordinary life, we don't need to do anything extraordinary. "We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves."⁷ A faith-filled outlook transforms, through charity, our entire life into a continuous conversation with God. And it enables us to live with a deep realism, since it reveals to us the "fourth dimension" of the *quid divinum* – the "divine element" – present in every reality.

The boiler and the connection

"When a person is entirely caught up in their own world, with material things, with what they can do, with all that is feasible and brings them success ... then their capacity to perceive God weakens. The organ for seeing God deteriorates; it becomes unable to perceive and sense. It no longer perceives the Divine, because the corresponding inner organ has withered, it has stopped developing."⁸ The reverse is also true: the ability to look at reality with eyes of faith can be strengthened. First of all, by asking for light, like the apostles: *Increase our faith! (Lk 17:5)*. And also by pausing throughout the day to open our heart to God. Although our whole day can be a time for prayer, "our life of prayer should also be based on some moments that are dedicated exclusively to our conversation with God."⁹ To keep our attention habitually fixed on God, we need to dedicate some time *exclusively* to Him.

Saint Josemaría once explained this need by using the example of a boiler heating a house: "If we have a radiator, it means there will be heat. But the room will only heat up if the boiler is on. So we need both the radiator and the boiler for heat. Right? The times for prayer, well done, are the boiler. And we also need the radiator at every moment, in every room, in every place, in every

⁷ Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 14.

⁸ Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 November 2006. He makes use here of an image borrowed from Saint Gregory the Great.

⁹ Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 119.

job: the presence of God.”¹⁰ We need both the radiators and the boiler. For God’s warmth to fill our entire day, we need to take time to kindle and feed the fire of his love in our heart.

Another image that can be helpful is that of the internet connection. People often try to ensure that their cell phones will connect when they are spending time in the country. And we may worry about the Wi-Fi connection on our cell phone, hoping that it will work as soon as it detects a known network. The simple fact that our phone is open to receiving a signal doesn’t mean that it will automatically do so. The signal reaches us when we are close enough to a network, and messages come in when someone sends them. We do our part by activating our phone and then we wait for messages to arrive.

Similarly, by dedicating specific times to prayer we activate the “Wi-Fi” of our soul. We say to God: *Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening (1 Sam 3:9)*. Sometimes He will speak to us during those moments; other times we will recognize his voice in a thousand and one small things in our daily life. In any case, these times of prayer are a good opportunity to place in his hands everything we have done or are planning to do, although perhaps at the very moment of doing it we have not raised our eyes to God. Furthermore, dedicating time exclusively to God is the best proof that we truly have the desire to listen to Him.

Unlike what happens with the cell phone, opening our heart is not something that we can take for granted, that once it is done it will remain that way forever. We need to prepare our heart to listen to God every day, because “it is in the present that we encounter Him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: *O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts (Ps 95:7-8)*.”¹¹ If we keep up this daily commitment, God will grant us a wonderful facility to live day by day in his presence. At times it will be more difficult for us. But in any case, from those moments we will draw abundant strength and hope to joyfully continue our daily struggle, our daily effort to enkindle the fire, to open the “connection.”

In everything that happens to us

Saint Josemaría’s words in his “campus homily” are well-known: “Your daily encounter with Christ takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.”¹² And he added: “He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work.”¹³ In the many different activities that fill

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from his preaching, 28 September 1973.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2659.

¹² Saint Josemaría, “Passionately Loving the World,” in *Conversations*, no. 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 114.

our daily life, God awaits us. He wants to hold a marvelous conversation with us so we can help Him carry out his mission in the world. But how can we understand this? And how can we live it?

God waits for us every day in order to converse calmly with us about what is happening in our life, just like a father or a mother who listens to their young child's detailed account of the exciting events that day. Young children talk about what has happened at school almost the moment they get home. It seems as though they want to take full advantage of their wonderful ability to remember and express what they have just experienced, recounting even the smallest events in great detail. And their parents listen closely, and ask how this took place, and what that other child said...

Similarly, God is interested in everything that happens to us, with the difference that, unlike parents on this earth, He never tires of listening to us. He never gets used to our talking with Him. Rather we are the ones who sometimes get tired of addressing Him, of seeking out his presence. But if we keep striving to do so, “everything – people, events, tasks – offers us the opportunity and topic for a continuous conversation with our Lord.”¹⁴ We can share everything in our life, absolutely everything, with Him.

God awaits us in our work so that we continue carrying out the work of redemption in the world, helping to bring the world closer to Him. This isn't a question of adding on “pious activities” to our daily work, but of trying to lead towards God every sector of our world: the family, politics, culture, sports... God wants us to put him into every noble activity. To do so, we first need to discover his presence there. In the end, it is about seeing our work as a gift from God, as the specific way in which we carry out his mandate to care for and cultivate the world, announcing the good news that God loves us and offers us his love. From the moment of that discovery, we will strive to turn all our actions into service to others, with a love like that which Jesus shows us and gives us every day at Holy Mass. By living in this way, uniting all our actions to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, we help carry out effectively the mission that our Lord communicated to us before returning to his Father (cf. *Jn* 20:21).

In an interview shortly before the beatification of Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, the Prelate of Opus Dei was asked what her “formula for sanctity” had been. He summed it up with these words: “Holiness is not about becoming perfect by the end of one's life, like an angel, but rather about reaching the fullness of love. As Saint Josemaria said, it is the struggle to transform work, ordinary life, into an encounter with Christ and a way of serving others.”¹⁵ The formula for sanctity

¹⁴ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 11 March 1940, no. 15.

¹⁵ Monsignor Fernando Ocariz, Interview, 13 May 2019.

then is to strive in everything we do to act with the same intention, with the same goal: to live with Christ in the middle of the world, bringing the world with Him to the Father. And this is possible because Jesus is very close to us.

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