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A Personality Identified with Christ

An article in the series on forging a strong Christian personality: "What an exciting challenge it is to forge a personality that clearly reflects the image of Christ Jesus!"

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Why do I react that way? Why am I like this? Can I change? These are questions we sometimes ask ourselves. And at times we pose

them about others: why is that person like that? Let us take a deeper look at these questions in view of our goal: to become more like Jesus Christ, allowing him to act in our lives. This process encompasses all the dimensions of someone who, in becoming divinized, retains the features of an authentic humanity while raising them in accord with our Christian vocation.

Christ is true God and true man: *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*. In him we contemplate the fully complete human being. “Christ the Redeemer fully reveals man to himself. If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity.”[1]

The new life we received at Baptism is destined to be built up *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*^[2]

The divine element, the supernatural one, is decisive in personal holiness, and it unites and harmonizes all the human facets. But we should not forget that included here, as an intrinsic and necessary element, is the human one: “If we accept the responsibility of being children of God, we will realize that God wants us to be very human. Our heads should indeed be touching heaven, but our feet should be firmly on the ground. The price of living as Christians is not that of ceasing to be human or of abandoning the effort to acquire those virtues which some have even without knowing Christ. The price paid for each Christian is the redeeming Blood of our Lord and he, I insist, wants us to be both very

human and very divine, struggling each day to imitate him who is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo.*”[3]

The task of building character

The action of grace in souls goes hand in hand with growth in human maturity, with perfecting our character. So while cultivating the supernatural virtues, a Christian who seeks holiness will strive to attain the ways of acting and thinking that characterize someone as being mature and balanced. He or she will be motivated not merely by the desire for perfection but by the eagerness to reflect Christ's life. Thus Saint Josemaría encourages us to examine ourselves: “My son, where do men find in you the Christ they are looking for? In your pride? In your desire to impose yourself on others? In those little character defects which you don't wish to

overcome? In your stubbornness? Is Christ to be found there? No, he is not!” The answer gives us the clue to this endeavor: “You need to have your own personality, agreed. But you should try to make it conform exactly to Christ’s.”[4]

Our personality is influenced first of all by what we have inherited, which began to be manifested from birth, often called temperament. It is also influenced by factors connected with our upbringing, personal decisions, relationships with others and with God, and many other factors, perhaps even unconscious ones. All this leads to a variety of types of personalities or characters (extroverted or timid, spirited or reserved, carefree or apprehensive, etc.), expressed in one’s way of working, of interacting with others, of considering daily events. These elements influence each person’s moral life, by facilitating the

development of certain virtues or, if the effort to attain these is lacking, the appearance of defects. For example, an enterprising personality can make it easier to acquire the virtue of industriousness, provided one has the discipline needed to avoid the defects of inconstancy and activism.

God counts on our personality in leading us along the path to holiness. Each one's way of being is like fertile land that needs to be cultivated. If we patiently and cheerfully remove the stones and weeds that impede the action of grace, it will begin to *bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*[5] All men and women can make fruitful the talents received from God's hands, provided they allow themselves to be transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, forging a personality that reflects Christ's face. But this does not imply losing one's own personal

traits. Saint Josemaría insisted: “you have to be different from one another, as the saints in heaven are different, each having their own personal and special characteristics.”[6]

While we need to strengthen and polish our own personality in keeping with a Christian way of living, we aren't striving to become some kind of “superman.” Rather the model is always Christ Jesus, who has a human nature like ours, but perfect in its normality and elevated by grace. Certainly, we also have a lofty example in our Lady: in Mary we see the fullness of humanity—and of normality. The proverbial humility and simplicity of Mary, probably the most cherished of her qualities in the entire Christian tradition, along with her closeness and tender affection for all her children, virtues of a good mother, are the best confirmation of her perfection. Although still a

creature we can tell Mary: “greater than you, none but God!”^[7] For she is so fully human, so charmingly feminine: the Lady *par excellence*!

Human and supernatural maturity

The word “maturity” means being ripe, fully developed, and by extension it refers to the fullness of being. Therefore, its best paradigm can be found in our Lord’s life.

Contemplating in the Gospels how Christ dealt with people, his fortitude in suffering, his decisiveness in undertaking the mission received from his Father—here we have the criterion of maturity.

At the same time, our faith incorporates all the noble values found in different cultures. So it is useful to take into account the traditional criteria of human maturity, while also purifying them.

This has been done throughout the history of Christian spirituality, to a greater or lesser extent. For example, the Greco-Roman classical world, which the Fathers of the Church so wisely Christianized, especially placed wisdom and prudence at the center of the ideal of human maturity, understood with various nuances. The Christian philosophers and theologians of the early Church enriched this view, pointing out the pre-eminence of the theological virtues, especially charity, *which binds everything together in perfect harmony*,^[8] as Saint Paul said, and gives form to all the virtues.

In our day and age the study of human maturity has been complemented by the different perspectives offered by the modern sciences. These findings are useful to the extent that they start from a vision of the human person open to the Christian message. Thus, some

tend to distinguish three key fields of maturity: intellectual, emotional and social. Significant features of intellectual maturity include: an adequate self-concept (with a close correspondence between how one views oneself and how one really is, firmly based on sincerity with oneself); clearly defined personal goals and purposes, with open and unlimited horizons; a harmonious set of values; ethical and moral certainty; a healthy realism in relation to oneself and others; the capacity for reflection and calm analysis of problems; creativity and initiative; etc.

Some features of emotional maturity, without trying to be exhaustive, would include: balanced reactions to life's events, without being discouraged by failure or becoming unrealistic after success; the capacity for flexible and constructive self-control; the ability to love and to give

oneself generously to others; confidence and firmness in decisions and commitments; serenity and the ability to overcome challenges and difficulties; optimism, cheerfulness, friendliness and good humour.

Finally, as elements of social maturity we find: a sincere affection for others, respecting their rights and seeking to discover and remedy their needs; being understanding when faced with a diversity of opinions, values or cultural features, without falling into prejudices; independence and a critical capacity in the face of a dominant culture, pressure groups or fashions; naturalness in one's behaviour that leads to acting without mere conventionalism; the capacity to listen and understand; the ability to work with others.

A path to maturity

We could summarize these traits by saying that the mature person is able to develop a noble, clear and coherent life-project, with the positive outlook needed to carry it out readily. In any case maturity is a process that requires time, and passes through various moments and stages. Its growth is usually gradual, although specific events in a person's life can lead to rapid advances. For example, the birth of a first child is a milestone that can suddenly wake a person up to the implications of this new responsibility. Or going through serious economic hardships can result in a new evaluation of what is truly important in life, etc.

The transforming power of grace is a significant factor in the path to maturity. We see in the better known saints their high ideals, their firm convictions, their humility (the most

adequate self-concept), their boundless creativity and initiative, their capacity for self-giving and love shown in deeds, their infectious optimism, their effective and universal openness, expressed in their apostolic zeal. A clear example of this is the life of St. Josemaría, who from his youth felt the action of grace in strengthening his personality. Despite confronting many difficulties, when still quite young he felt within himself a peace of mind out of the ordinary: “I believe that the Lord has put in my soul another characteristic: peace—the ability to have peace and to give peace—judging by what I see in the people I deal with or whom I direct.”^[9] The words from the psalm could quite appropriately be applied to him: *Super senes intellexi quia mandata tua quaesivi*^[10]: I have more understanding than the elders, because I keep your commands. But all of this is compatible with the

reality that maturity is usually acquired over time, through confronting the failures and successes that are part of the working of Divine Providence.

Relying on grace and time

Although it is often clear when a person has reached a certain stage of maturity in life, the task of bettering one's way of being is a lifetime project. Self-knowledge and the acceptance of our own character will give us the peace needed so as not to become discouraged in this endeavour. This does not mean being content with what we have already achieved. Rather it means recognizing that the heroism of holiness does not require having a perfect personality or aspiring to an idealized way of being. Holiness requires a patient day by day struggle, recognizing our mistakes and asking for forgiveness.

“The true-to-life stories of Christian heroes resemble our own experience: they fought and won; they fought and lost. And then, repentant, they returned to the fray.”^[11] God counts on our effort prolonged over time to polish our way of being. As someone told the servant of God Dora del Hoyo towards the end of her life: “Dora, nobody who saw you then would believe it if they could see you now! You’re like a different person.’ She laughed, knowing very well what I meant.”^[12] This person helped Dora to realize how, over the years, her character had reached a degree of equanimity that moderated her otherwise strong temperament. In this endeavour we can always count on our Lord’s help and Mary’s motherly care: “Our Lady does just that with us. Mary helps us to grow humanly and in our faith, to be strong and not give in to the temptation to be people and

Christians who are superficial, but to live responsibly, to tend increasingly towards what is highest.”[13]

In subsequent editorials we will consider various aspects of character development, and point out some key features of Christian maturity. We will contemplate the edifice that the Holy Spirit seeks to raise up in our soul with our active collaboration. And we will look at the characteristics that the foundations should have to ensure that the structure is firm, and how to remedy any fissure that might appear. What an exciting challenge it is to forge a personality that clearly reflects the image of Christ Jesus!

[1] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, 4 March 1979, 10.

[2] *Eph* 4:13.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 75.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 468.

[5] *Mt* 13:8.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 947.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 496.

[8] *Col* 3:14.

[9] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 1095, quoted in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, Scepter, New York 2001, p. 481.

[10] *Psalms* 118 (Vulgate).

[11] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 76.

[12] Recollections of Rosalia Lopez Martinez, Rome, 29 November 2006 (AGP, DHA, T-1058), quoted in Javier

Medina. *Dora del Hoyo, A Lighted Lamp*. Scepter, London-New York 2014, p. 94.

[13] Pope Francis, Homily before the image of *Sancta Maria Salus Populi Romani*, 6 May 2013.

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