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An Ever Joyful Apostle

"God wants us to enjoy our mission as an apostle, to savor it, to savor Christ's love for souls."

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A desperate father approaches Jesus because his son is possessed by an unclean spirit. It is easy to understand his frustration: *I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able (Mk 9:18)*. When they heard these words, the apostles may have felt ashamed on realizing their

own failure. On previous occasions they had been able to cast out demons, but that day they had failed. Likewise, how often our life as apostles seems to lack the fruit we desire. How often Jesus has to repeat his firm reproach: *faithless generation!* (Mk 9:19) But He always adds affectionate and encouraging words: *For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed ... nothing will be impossible to you* (Mt 17:20).

To attain this trust, this small but sufficient faith, our life must be grounded on Christ's strength. *This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting* (Mk 9:29). This strong statement shows us how God wants us to assist Him in his desire to save all men and women. Jesus doesn't simply give us a "recipe" for being effective, but rather shows us a new way to focus our efforts—one based on faith and prayer. Once the

apostles grasp his new approach, they are able to face any challenge. They know that the mission doesn't depend only on them. They realize that they will be bearers of God's love, who longs for the happiness of each of his children.

First, prayer

Those lucky enough to take part in Saint Josemaría's canonization may remember Saint John Paul II's homily. At that important moment, the Pope, with his deep voice, read a point from *The Way* that they would have often pondered on: "First, prayer; then, atonement; in the third place, very much 'in the third place,' action."^[1] In a world like ours, marked by so much anxious activity, putting action last could seem surprising at first. Yet it makes great supernatural sense. Prayer and mortification—the prayer of the senses—open us to God's action and

draw us into the mission of Christ. The “logic” of this order proposed by Saint Josemaría is based on the strength of the Holy Spirit, who helps us in our weakness and *intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words* (Rom 8:26).

When we pray, we set aside our own goals and defenses and place our trust in Christ. We seek to do his work, and express our desire to work through Him, with Him, and in Him. We don't worry about our tiredness, or difficulties, or apparent successes or failures. But if we put action first, we run the risk of thinking that it is we who can change our friends. Then our own insecurity seeks security in the results. We want to be sure that we are *doing the right thing*. But this is usually a superficial and short-range outlook, and may lack the “grain of mustard seed” that Jesus speaks of to his disciples.

The temptation to put ourselves in first place can be present, in a more subtle way, even in our prayer. This happens whenever we think we need to “convince” God, to show we deserve his gifts or are “up to the task.” Unintentionally, at times we can view our prayer as something that we do exclusively ourselves. We place ourselves in front of Christ and not alongside Him; or, better said, we fail to realize that we are *in Him*. It is not difficult, then, for us to think of our prayer and our actions as a “coin” to buy apostolic fruit. Saint Augustine says that God’s intention is that “through prayer, our capacity to desire will increase, so that we become better disposed to receive the gifts He has prepared for us. His gifts are very great, but our capacity to receive is small and slight.”^[2] Ultimately, our prayer prepares us to be ready to unite ourselves to Christ’s plans, whatever they may be.

An experience that Saint Josemaría relates can help us overcome this “barter” mentality in our prayer: “In 1940, on the beach at Valencia, I remember watching some tough, hardy fishermen dragging a net ashore. A small child had got in among them and, in his efforts to imitate them, started pulling on the net as well. He was only getting in the way, but the sight of him softened the hearts of those rough-mannered seafarers. They didn’t chase him away, but let him go on feeling happy that he was helping them in their efforts. I have often told this story, because it moves me to think that God our Lord also allows us to lend a hand in his work. He is moved to compassion at the sight of our effort to collaborate with Him.”[3]

Prayer helps us realize how lucky we are to be able to take part in Christ’s mission. Our Lord wants us to realize that, in our littleness, we can truly

assist Him. On our efforts to lend a hand in hauling in Christ's nets "many great things depend."[4] Then it is He who will do everything and, moreover, He often offers us the reward as well: "We did not even see the battle and yet we were victorious; it was the Lord who fought, and we who have been crowned."[5] Christ grants us the possibility of taking part in his mission, and even lets us "take credit" for it, also when sometimes we fail to see visible fruits. God has promised that his chosen "shall not labor in vain" (*Is 65:23*), and his promise should be enough for us.

So they be happy

Saint Josemaría was about to leave one of his hiding places during the Spanish Civil War when he directed a meditation aloud to those accompanying him. He told them he would dearly like to write, if it

became possible one day, a little book entitled *On Happiness*. And he said the first sentence would be: “Jesus and I want you to be happy, both here and in the next world.”[6]

Although this book never saw the light of day, these opening words give us much to meditate on. That is what our mission as apostles should be: together with Jesus, trying to make others happy.

Christ wants to make us channels of his grace, of his miracles. By calling us to his boat, he has infused in us the hunger of his own Heart. Thanks to baptism, we all have a priestly soul, that is, the ability to be mediators. He has sent us out to bear fruit and so that our fruit should remain (cf. *Jn 15:16*). Sometimes we may only see the difficulties. It is then time to pray, to discover that the protagonist is the Holy Spirit. It is time for the prayer and sacrifice which, although they may seem of

little effectiveness, in reality are the remedy for the deepest ills afflicting the world. Other times, however, we will see the fruit of our efforts and we will be filled with thanksgiving. In both cases, God wants us to enjoy our mission as an apostle, to savor it, to savor Christ's love for souls.

When we pray, Jesus imbues us with the madness of his own Heart, a madness that led Him to lower Himself until he became one like us, that led him to Bethlehem and to the Cross, and that keeps Him in the Tabernacle waiting for us. "Apostolic zeal is a divine craziness I want you to have. Its symptoms are: hunger to know the Master; constant concern for souls; perseverance that nothing can shake."[7] Filled with this fervor, an apostle embarks on the adventure of sharing this joy with others, sharing God's happiness, the happiness of a Creator won over by the fragile affection of his creatures.

It is so simple to accompany Him, to persevere alongside Him. All that's required is prayer and sacrifice, something within the reach of every person in any situation.

The apostolate of dreaming

The Pope asks us to “to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges.”^[8] Dreaming is easy, but if it is to bear fruit we need to give priority to prayer. Hence we need to give priority to the Holy Mass, since it offers us the immense gift of being able to enter into Christ's own prayer and self-giving.

Blessed Alvaro reminds us that “in the Holy Mass we find the remedy for our weakness, the energy needed to overcome all difficulties in our apostolic work. Be convinced that, to open furrows of God's love in the world, we need to live the Holy Mass very well. To carry out the new

evangelization of society that the Church is asking of us, put great care into the Holy Mass. To obtain from our Lord vocations with divine abundance and so that they may be well formed, have recourse to the Holy Sacrifice. Beseech the Lord of the harvest day after day, closely united to our Lady, filling your Mass with petitions.”^[9] When we are present at the Holy Sacrifice, it is an ideal moment to dream, to beseech without growing tired. When we pray with Christ—and that is what we do at Mass—we dare to cast the net again in the same place where perhaps previously we “failed” when we were working alone.

A true apostle is centered on the Master, and simply the fact of working in his vineyard along with Him is already the best payment (cf. *Mt 20:1-16*). Hence when inviting others to join in this task, an apostle certainly is insistent *in season and*

out of season (2 Tim 4:2), but always with the creativity of love, which suggests and opens horizons.

Precisely because our goal is to make our friends happy, we never try to force them. If sometimes we have to insist, we do so without becoming tiresome, since we are simply trying to follow Christ's gentle command.

An apostle tries to follow the "style" our Lord showed us—a God enamored of us but respectful and delicate, the enemy of forcing any conscience. This is the style that most readily attracts others, that spurs them to respond.

Saint Josemaría also invited the people around him to dream big because he knew that, when we do so, our hearts are enkindled with a fire that spurs us to put into action all our talents. Hence we would be wrong to oppose prayer and action. It would be just as wrong to think that everything depends on our

actions, as it is to be happy with a prayer that does not move us to do the impossible to bring a soul closer to Jesus. We are well aware of the difficulties we may have to overcome, especially our own inner resistance and comfort-seeking. But our work as apostles, even when we feel like *useless servants*, always bears fruit (cf. *Lk 17:10*).

Apostolic fruit, then, can never be “bought.” Not only because its value exceeds any amount we could ever raise; it is not even for sale. The fruit is free and God grants it when and how He wants. *Your Father knows what you need before you ask* (*Mt 6:8*). The main fruit of our prayer and mortification is what we ourselves receive. Our relationship with Jesus is strengthened by our abandonment in Him and frees us from the temptation to think that everything depends on us.

Spirited souls

More often than we realize, in carrying out our mission we may fail to take into account God's times and ways. For example, when the apparent lack of fruit robs us of our peace or saddens us. Or when we lack the daring needed to undertake new initiatives or stick to set ways of doing things that give us security. It is easy, then, to reproach others for their lack of commitment or to judge them harshly. But these attitudes are not appropriate for an apostle because they are not Christ's attitudes. Saint Teresa of Avila said that "it is very important never to lessen your desires, because His Majesty is a friend of spirited souls."[10]

A true apostle never stops dreaming of the fruit that will come. He or she has a deep understanding of their mission and of where their

effectiveness comes from. They know that God counts on their freedom, and that at the same time everything depends on grace, which is a mystery. They dream of what God's love can achieve in the world and strive to do everything possible to make it present among those close to them.

Saint Josemaría, after mentioning the title of the little book he wanted to write one day, sketched out what its approach would be: “Without an overbearing style, without the pretentious tone of someone who tries to expound maxims, I would like to explain three or four ‘bedrock ideas’ in warm, colloquial language.”^[11] That is our mission: to help Christ stir and enkindle hearts. This requires, more than anything else, an atmosphere of affection, closeness and, in a word, friendship.

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With prayer and mortification we free ourselves from doing only *our* mission, and instead we unite it to that of Christ. We finally understand his way of saving us, his exquisite respect for our freedom, how He offers an invitation and patiently waits for people to respond. Jesus frees us from ourselves so that we will be fruitful and happy, so that we can enjoy taking part in his mission. We can turn to the Queen of apostles, teacher of prayer, to help us experience this immense joy: “Mary, teacher of prayer. See how she asks her Son, at Cana. And how she insists, confidently, with perseverance. And how she succeeds. Learn from her.”[12]

Diego Zalbidea

[1] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 82.

[2] Saint Augustine, *Letter 130*.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 29 September 1957, no. 65.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 755.

[5] Saint John Chrysostom, *On the cemetery and the cross*, 2: PG 49, 396.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Growing on the inside*, “The Vocation,” 30 August 1937..

[7] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 934.

[8] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit*, no. 15.

[9] Blessed Alvaro, *Letter*, 1 April 1986.

[10] Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 13, 2-3.

[11] Saint Josemaría, *Growing on the inside*, “The Vocation,” 30 August 1937.

[12] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 502.

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