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Saint Josemaria's "Theology of the Donkey"

Some reflections on the Palm Sunday liturgy and the donkey's role in carrying Christ to Jerusalem, and how Saint Josemaria made use of this scene to develop a true "theology of the donkey."

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I still retain vivid memories of Palm Sunday when I was growing up. Along the streets and at the traffic

lights people were selling colorful braided palm leaves. The railings in front of the churches were adorned with palm fronds, with large baskets full of olive branches.

The procession before Mass was a festive celebration. But then the Passion of the Lord was read in the Gospel, with the variety of voices reading and the intense silence when everyone knelt down, because Jesus had died. This abrupt change in emotions confused me; it was a happy day, but also a sorrowful one. A mysterious and uncertain day, when you didn't know whether you should rejoice or be sad.

This double sensation continues to accompany me on every Palm Sunday. But little by little I have come to better understand the meaning of this day, when two different liturgical traditions converge to express in a united

whole Christ's royal triumph in his Passion. As an ancient hymn says: *Regnavit a ligno Deus*, God ruled from the wood of the Cross.[1]

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is a very animated scene. I like to think of it as a real "mess," where people's enthusiasm explodes irrepressibly. Perhaps they were above all young people, since the Gospel especially mentions children crying out.[2] I can easily imagine the apostles' feeling of importance as they try to restore order in the crowd surging around our Lord. They are electrified, in the paucity of their human vision, thinking that the moment of triumph has finally arrived.

But if there is a character in this scene especially worth identifying with, I think it is the donkey. He is the one physically closest to our Lord during that triumphal entry. He

walks with his precious load over the cloaks spread out on the ground, amid that forest of palm branches. But he never imagined that he was fulfilling an ancient prophecy: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding a donkey.”[3]

And the donkey was, in a sense, becoming a new prophecy for each of us. In his unassuming humility he was showing us how we too can draw close to God.

Saint Josemaría understood this message right from the first steps of his interior life, and formulated a true equation for himself: “Pure mathematics: Josemaria = mangy donkey.”[4] This is how he saw himself before God. To nourish his prayer as God’s donkey he made use of some verses where the psalmist

compares himself to a poor beast of burden. “*Ut iumentum factus sum apud te*,”[5] he frequently told the Lord, while trusting in these other words from the same psalm: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and you will receive me in glory.”[6] It was in 1932, when considering himself as a donkey before Jesus, that a divine light flashed through his heart: “A donkey was my throne in Jerusalem.”[7]

With this clarity of soul, his dialogue with God over the years gave rise to a true “theology of the donkey.” Reflecting on the many simple details of the life of a poor donkey who works steadily without receiving any glory, Saint Josemaria found many parallels with his own efforts to serve God, and a guide to the daily life of those who would follow the path of Opus Dei: a model of meekness and humility, but also of

resilience and patient
industriousness.

That small donkey that carried our Lord to Jerusalem can also be a guide for us. We will strive during these days of the Easter triduum to become like him, realizing that we carry on us—within us!—Jesus Himself, sometimes praised, but so often forgotten, denied, abused.

Here is a good resolution, a good prayer: Jesus, may I never let you down when you choose my poverty to travel along the roads of the world. May I love you to the end, and accompany you closely during your Paschal mystery.

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[1] Hymn *Vexilla Regis*.

[2] Cf. *Mt* 21:15.

[3] *Zech* 9:9.

[4] “Apuntes intimos,” no. 116. Cited in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, p. 261.

[5] *Ps* 73 (72):22.

[6] *Ps* 73 (72):23-24

[7] “Apuntes intimos,” no. 543. Cited in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, p. 359.