

Building Interior Order

A new article in the series on developing a strong Christian personality. "One of the traits of a mature personality is the ability to combine intense activity with order and interior peace. Achieving this equilibrium requires real effort."

04/14/2016

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When Saint Augustine, towards the end of his life, wrote the words *pax omnium rerum tranquillitas ordinis*, the peace of all things is the tranquility of order,[1] he did so with the experience of one who for years had felt the constant tug of many different demands: the pastoral care of the portion of the People of God entrusted to him; his abundant preaching; the challenges of unsettled times, with changes in society and culture. So this was not an adage written amid a calm retirement, but rather in the hustle and bustle of daily life, with all its unpredictable demands. The unified life of this saint was a daily conquest. Over time, his steady effort to “aim at the target” led in the end to a strong character.

One of the traits of a mature personality is the ability to combine intense activity with order and interior peace. Achieving this

equilibrium requires real effort. Saint Josemaria once told someone who mentioned the difficulties his work presented for looking after his own formation: “I would like to see you inside this cassock! I also have to do multi-tasking. On top of this disorder we have to build order.”[2] Order, the harmony of our life, is a prize we have to win, bit by bit, on the battlefield of each day. “Beginning the least pleasant but most urgent job first, perseverance in the fulfillment of our duty when it would be easy to abandon it, not leaving for tomorrow what should be finished today: and all this, to please him, Our Father God!”[3]

Self-mastery

This serene struggle is not just about our exterior actions and the tasks that fill our day, but also about our heart. Without that inner heartbeat, order would only be time-

management, “task optimization,” cold efficiency, and not an authentic exercise of Christian maturity.

Christian consistency is built on a constant flow, from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside. It grows with self-mastery, order in one’s exterior activities, inner recollection and prudence.

We are not unaware of the obstacles in the way of achieving this interior harmony. While we appreciate the great attractiveness of a fully Christian life, we often feel different, and sometimes contrary, tendencies. Saint Paul expressed this forcefully: *So I find it to be law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.*[4] We know something is good, yet we feel attracted to

something else. We are aware of being divided between what attracts us and what we should do, which can end up clouding our vision. It might even seem to us that, when all is said and done, it won't matter if we are a bit inconsistent—a clear sign of a wavering love.

Nevertheless, our Lord's praise for Nathaniel resounds in our heart: *Behold a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile.*^[5] Those who strive to be guided by God's voice echoing in their conscience spontaneously inspire great respect. People with an undivided heart are attractive, because everything in them speaks of authenticity. In contrast, a double life, compensations (even small ones), the lack of sincerity, mar the beauty of a soul. As we are all prey to these small deviations, it's a matter of acting with simplicity and correcting these defects perseveringly. In this way, one avoids

the risk of going adrift on the high seas of life.

Playing God's melody

Putting our inner life in order is not just a matter of our intellect “dominating” our imagination and channeling the force of our feelings and sentiments. We need to discover everything that these travelling companions in life can and want to tell us. In other words, we cannot correct the dissonance by suppressing one of the melodies: God has made us “polyphonic.” Self-mastery, also called temperance, is not cerebral frigidity. God wants us to have a heart that is “big and strong and tender, affectionate and refined.”[6]

We can, as it were, play music for God with our heart. But to play it well we need to tune it properly, just as instruments are tuned in order to sound the right note. We need to

educate our affections, developing a sensitivity for what is really good because it is in accord with all the dimensions of our being as a person. Our feelings give color to our whole life and allow us to perceive what happens around us with greater depth. Nevertheless, just as a canvas with unbalanced colors is not very attractive, or a musical instrument out of tune is bothersome, so a heart abandoned to the vagaries of sentiment disrupts the harmony of our personality and erodes our relations with others, sometimes seriously.

Saint Josemaria advised people to lock their heart with “seven bolts.”[7] As he once explained: “lock it with the seven bolts that I recommend: one for each of the capital sins. But don’t give up having a heart.”[8] The accumulated experience of past centuries, also in parts of the world where Christianity has not yet

arrived, shows that the affections and instincts, if not controlled, can drag us along like floodwaters that sow destruction wherever they go. It's not a matter of stopping the flow of water, but of doing what engineers do who channel the torrent of water rushing down the mountainside to power turbines that produce electricity. Once the torrent that might have uprooted trees and demolished houses is channeled, everyone can live peacefully and use the electricity to light up and heat their homes. If our spirit fails to channel in a stable way the instinctive and affective impulses of our nature, we cannot have peace or calm, nor can interior life exist.

Taking charge of our day

An important step towards self-mastery is the effort to overcome laziness, a silent but effective virus which could little by little paralyze us

if we do not keep it in line. Laziness takes root in someone who has no clear direction in life, or who, having such a direction, doesn't walk that way. "Don't confuse serenity with being lazy or careless, with putting off decisions or deferring the study of important matters."[9]

Concentrating on matters that need our attention, confronting something that requires a bit of effort, not leaving for later what we can do now—on these habits one can readily build an agile, strong and serene personality.

We should also be wary of the other extreme—disordered activism. *Do not be entangled, my son, in too many enterprises...Some men's lives are all toil and haste and anxiety; yet the more they toil, the less advantage they win, for want of piety.*[10] A mature personality means pondering things, putting order into our activity. Then life will not overwhelm us with its

unlimited demands. Rather we will take the initiative by distributing our activity among the time available; by planning our day, without being too rigid, we can give priority to what should take first place, rather than whatever comes up at a given moment. Thus we will prevent what seems urgent from replacing what is really important. Of course it is not necessary to program everything, but we should avoid the improvisation that leads to wasting time simply because we get involved in whatever happens during the day. As Saint Josemaria often said, “we should put order in our timetable, since we cannot do everything at once.”

Each day contains certain key moments that we can decide on beforehand: the time to go to bed, the time to get up, the time we are going to dedicate exclusively to God, the time to work, times for meals... Then, we will do very well all those things

we need to do, working hard and as well as we can, that is, working with love. “Carry out the little duty of each moment: do what you ought and concentrate on what you are doing.”[11] This is, in the end, a program for holiness that does not shackle us, because it is ordered to a great end: to please God and make others happy. At the same time, the very love that leads us to subject ourselves to a timetable will tell us when this plan needs to be set aside, because the good of others requires it, or for other good reasons that become clear to anyone living in the presence of God.

Nurturing interior space

The interior world of the person is the vital center, where one's strengths, qualities, dispositions and actions form a unity. Whoever is able to reside there, to recollect the senses and faculties and quiet the soul, will

develop a richer personality, more capable of relating to others and dialoguing with them. “Silence,” said Benedict XVI, “is an integral part of communication, and without periods of silence words with deep meaning would not exist.”[12]

To avoid skimming along the surface of life, we need to spend time reflecting on what has happened to us, on the books we have read, on what others have told us, and above all on the lights we have received from God. Reflection broadens and enriches our interior space and helps us to integrate the various aspects of our life—work, social relations, leisure, etc.—into the plan of Christian life we are carrying out led by God’s hand. This habit implies that we learn to enter into our soul, overcoming haste, impatience and dispersion. Thus a space for meditating in God’s presence will open up. “Which of us, at night time,

when our day has ended, and we are alone, does not ask himself: What happened in my heart today? What occurred? What sorts of things passed through my heart?"[13]

This calmness of spirit is achieved when we cut ourselves off from the tensions of life and detain the demands of pending matters and our imagination, when we slow down the rhythm of exterior life and we are quiet exteriorly as well as interiorly. Then our knowledge and experience acquire depth; we learn to be surprised, to contemplate, to savor the riches of the spirit, to listen to God. When we go out to others with this interior richness, we can enjoy communicating with them more, since we have something personal, something of *our own*, to contribute.

In silence, we can hear God's voice. When the Lord wanted to pass by Elijah on Mount Horeb, Sacred

Scripture tells us that he was not in the violent wind that shattered the boulders, nor in the fearful earthquake, nor in the fire that followed, but in the gentle breeze that could hardly be detected.[14] To be quiet is beautiful; it is not emptiness but an authentic and full life, if it allows one to establish an intimate dialogue with God. “The tuneful sound of silence: in this way we can approach God, since the melody of silence is something proper to people in love.”[15]

Wisdom of the heart

The wise man is esteemed for his discernment.[16] The capacity for recollection allows us to establish with ever greater depth the motives that guide our life. And then consistency in our life matures just as fruit ripens in the sun, and into our heart there is poured the liqueur

of wisdom that helps us make correct decisions.

We don't always need to give an immediate response to what we confront. Often prudence will lead us to seek further information before making a judgment or taking a decision, because things are often not as they appear at first glance. A mature person is characterized by considering matters attentively, recalling past experiences of similar situations, and seeking advice from those who are in a position to give it. And above all, something that for a Christian seems very natural, almost a reflex: seeking advice from God. "Never make a decision without stopping to consider the matter in the presence of God."^[17] Thus it is easier to apply to the particular situation a judgment that has been carefully considered, without giving in to superficiality, to comfort, to bad habits from the past, or to pressure

from our surroundings. And we will find the courage needed to make a decision—even though every decision involves a risk—and to carry it out without delay, with the readiness to rectify if later on we realize that we have made a mistake.

Christian consistency—fruit of a rich inner life—enables us to dedicate ourselves to an ideal and to persevere in it. “Lord, grant me the grace to give up everything that has to do with myself. I should have no other concern than your Glory—in other words, your Love. Everything for Love!”[18]

[1] Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XIX, 13.1.

[2] Saint Josemaria, notes taken in a get-together, November 23, 1972.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 67.

[4] *Rom* 7:21-23.

[5] *Jn* 1:47.

[6] *Friends of God*, no. 177.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, nos. 161, 188.

[8] Notes taken in a get together in Santiago, Chile, June 30, 1974. "These sins are called 'capital' because they engender other sins, other vices. They are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony and sloth or acedia." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1866)

[9] *The Forge*, no. 467.

[10] *Sir* 11:10-11.

[11] *The Way*, no. 815.

[12] Benedict XVI, *Message for the 46th World Day of Social Communication*, January 24, 2012.

[13] Francis, Homily, October 10, 2014.

[14] Cf. *1 Kgs* 19:11-13.

[15] Francis, Homily, December 12, 2013.

[16] *Prov* 16:21.

[17] *The Way*, no. 266.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 247.