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To Give Light, Burn: Marriage and Apostolic Celibacy (II)

Living like Christ, whether in marriage or celibacy, means embracing a new lifestyle given to us by the Holy Spirit: a fruitful love, a pure heart, and a preference for God's riches and for caring for those in need, as the Gospel shows us.

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In the mid-50s AD, Suetonius writes that Emperor Claudius "banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus."^[1]

From the perspective of the Roman authorities, there was a group motivated by someone named "Chrestus," whom they assumed to be alive, although those from Jerusalem insisted he had been crucified: these were the Christians from Judea who had possibly traveled to the empire's capital to proclaim the life of the risen Jesus. They understood that this mission was not only for the twelve apostles but for all of Christ's disciples throughout all ages. Saint Paul reminds one of the early communities: *You are a letter from Christ, written in their hearts with the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor 3:3)*. All of them were called to be messages for others, written by Christ Himself.

In that group, many were married, like "the centurion Cornelius, who obeyed the will of God and in whose home the Church was made accessible to the gentiles (*Acts* 10:24-48); Aquila and Priscilla, who spread Christianity in Corinth and Ephesus, and who cooperated in the apostolate of St Paul (*Acts* 18:1-26); Tabitha, who out of charity attended to the needs of the Christians in Joppe (*Acts* 9:36)."^[2] Many others, however, did not embrace marriage for various reasons, among them having received the gift of celibacy, a call to also unite themselves with that aspect of Jesus' life. Around the year 200, Galen, a famous pagan physician, recounts that "among them are women and men who have abstained from sexual union all their lives."^[3] At the same time, St. Justin testifies to the same reality: "Many men and women, now in their seventies, who have been Christians since their youth, remain virgins."^[4]

There was something in the values and lives of those Christians – celibate or married, widowed or single – that the emperor himself feared. What was it?

Living under a new law

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19): with these words, Jesus sends the apostles — and us, today — into the world. Moreover, He added that wherever they went, they should teach people to *observe all that I have commanded you (Mt 28:20)*. If they reached Emperor Claudius, those words would have discomfited him, for Jesus Christ was establishing a new law affecting every territory, including his own. Christ's commandment, however, was very different from what he might have imagined: the law of the disciples, the lifestyle that was to

distinguish them from others, was to love as Christ Himself loved.

Jesus called this unique law the *new commandment* (Jn 13:34) and, in a way it will always be new, because learning to love in this way is not easy. Around us there are many siren songs inviting us to live in a very different way and give ourselves over to idols, whether internal or external. Even within ourselves there are tensions, failures, and fears that gradually erode our self-esteem and challenge our ability to love ourselves as our Lord commands. Who can love God, oneself, and one's neighbor as Jesus did?

Embracing reality as loved by God, without returning evil for evil, without seeking justice on our own, striving to see how we can love it as well, is part of *observing all that [He] commanded* (Mt 28:20). In their wedding ceremonies, spouses

declare to each other: "I take you and I give myself to you... I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love and honour you all the days of my life." God does something similar with us: He promises that we can live every part of reality with Him. Even in the darkest moments (misfortunes, illnesses, injustices, infidelities, and failures) we can discover a mysterious meaning, a faint light. With his help, we can understand how *all things work together for the good of those who love God* (Rom 8:28).

Blessed Guadalupe^[5] said she would be "happy wherever I'm needed"^[6] to carry out the apostolate of Opus Dei, because she knew that any circumstance was suitable for living out Jesus' new commandment, his new law of love that invites everyone to live by a different logic. Therefore, "her life was greatly expanded when

it became part of the divine plan. Guadalupe let herself be led by God, with joy and spontaneity, from one place to another, from one job to another. Our Lord strengthened her abilities and talents, enriched her personality, and multiplied the fruitfulness of her life."^[7] The lives of the saints remind us of what it means to live under that new rule that conquers selfishness with the love of Christ incarnated in Christians.

The call to spiritual fatherhood and motherhood

Following this logic, we can understand how the disciples began to see people with new eyes: they no longer saw national or any other distinctions, but sought to love Jews, Samaritans, Galileans, Romans, Greeks, and Persians all from God's merciful heart. Imitating Jesus led them, gradually, to develop fatherly

and motherly hearts: they were called to communicate a new life, and give birth to many people in faith. Saint Gregory of Nyssa points out that the reason Jesus was celibate was precisely because he came into the world not to generate children born of blood or flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:13), but to give us supernatural life, engendering us as children of God.^[8] All Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, whether single or married, are called to this spiritual fatherhood or motherhood.

Living this new type of fatherhood or motherhood is the highest mission of any person. Just as Genesis emphasizes the vocation to physical fatherhood and motherhood (cf. *Gen* 1:28), we might say that the first disciples, heirs of a *new* human race from the Resurrection of the Lord, were called to a *new* fatherhood and motherhood in Christ. When writing to Saint Josemaría, Blessed

Guadalupe was often unable to hide her joy at seeing this new life grow in the people around her, especially the students of the residence where she lived: "“Sometimes, when we see how happy and hard-working they all are, we think everything is fine, and forget that our job is nothing less than teaching them to be holy by being holy ourselves.”^[19]

Spouses receive this fruitfulness particularly through the grace of marriage, but not only there. Through the Holy Spirit and in the other sacraments, they receive new light and strength to care for each other and to educate their children (whenever they come), nurturing them with the life of God. Couples who do not have children can discover this fruitfulness by kindling the love of God in people and places they might not have imagined. And the same Holy Spirit grants a special grace to single people or those who

have received the gift of celibacy: by it, they imitate the life of Christ in the particular way they care for and give spiritual life to so many people.

Marcelo Câmara^[10] was a supernumerary of Opus Dei who passed away at a very young age, and his life clearly illustrates this spiritual fatherhood. A friend of his recounts that he would try to talk to Marcelo whenever he was feeling sad: "Once again," this friend says, recalling one of those conversations, "I experienced the same sensation, like having Christ right beside me for a few moments, encouraging me in my faith. It was a feeling of indescribable peace."^[11] Students of Arturo Álvarez,^[12] a member of Opus Dei, Mexican engineer and professor, remember something similar. In a letter they wrote to him, they said: "A true teacher is someone who, besides carrying out his teaching tasks, gives his students part of his own being,

his philosophy of life and beliefs. In attending your classes each morning we have seen how in every activity you are a person who strives to improve, to seek sanctity (...). You are a professor who will leave a lasting mark on our lives."^[13] —

A necessary cleansing of the heart

During the intensity of the Last Supper, Jesus tells the apostles, *You are clean*, although He immediately adds, referring to Judas, *but not all of you* (Jn 13:10). Here is another clue about this new life to which He invites the apostles: it is "clean," a consistent lifestyle, in harmony with Him, finding in his heart the best way to love others. This call is for everyone, regardless of their state in life. Saint Josemaría understood this well, which is why he wrote: "I promise you a book — if God helps me — that could bear this title:

'Celibacy, Marriage, and Purity.'"^[14]___

Purity of heart is a source of fruitfulness for everyone. Although the founder of Opus Dei never wrote that book, he taught that everyone can be equally blessed with fruitfulness if they find the source of their life in the love of God and love for others, in that "new commandment." To married people, he would say: "I see the marriage bed as an altar."^[15]___ And to the celibate: "Longing for children? Children, many children, and a lasting trail of light we shall leave behind us."^[16]___

Perhaps we can understand the "purity" that the Lord speaks of by looking at the story of Judas with a bit more perspective. His lofty plans and ambitions were mixed with a worldliness he refused to relinquish. In the end, he was not satisfied even by the thirty pieces of silver he had negotiated for himself, and he ended up despising everything else he had:

his money, his place among the apostles, and even his own life. Anything that tarnishes our purity of heart ultimately reveals itself as a vile and disappointing deception. It distances us from our true happiness. Jesus' temptations in the desert are eloquent in this regard: the devil promises bread, glory, and honour, when he is really interested in diverting Jesus from fulfilling the divine plans. The devil will entice us with something good if it means diverting us from the mission that gives meaning to our lives. The temptation does not lie so much in "appropriating" certain goods, whether small or large, but in those goods ensnaring us and preventing us from dedicating our best energies to the service of God and others.

Purity of heart, is forged deep within the soul, but it is also manifested outwardly, often in small gestures. In married life, small gestures are vital,

like remembering anniversaries, surprising one another, remembering the other's preferences, etc. The Alviras^[17] illustrate this: "Paquita often chose colours that her husband liked when she went clothes shopping," and "at the cinema, Tomás would always choose films that he knew she would enjoy."^[18] Celibate people also show, in words and attitudes, that they are called to give supernatural life and that the Love of their life has a name. They learn to be understanding with everyone and sensitive to the needs of others, as well as not to send mixed messages that could misrepresent the commitment of their life and intimacy. "Apostolic celibacy," the Prelate of Opus Dei writes, "means making a commitment to God with an undivided heart, it has to be noticed in the tenor of our dedicated life, analogous to that of a married person, who cannot behave as if they

had not made a commitment of faithfulness to their spouse."^[19] —

Christ is our true wealth

The "cleansing" that Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper teaches us yet another lesson. We know that Judas's lack of purity was due, at least in part, to his growing disordered desire for wealth (cf. *Jn* 12:6). We do not know the exact amounts of money handled by the group of the twelve. It may not have been a great fortune, but they had enough to support themselves and to help those in need. When Jesus tells Judas, *What you are going to do, do quickly*, the others thought that, since he held the money bag, Jesus was asking him to buy what was needed for the feast or to give something to the poor (cf. *Jn* 13:27-29).

This "cleansing" to which the Lord invites his apostles includes order in

our relationship with material things; it is a powerful reminder of how crucial it is to trust in God and, therefore, to live with the conviction that material goods are meant to support our spiritual mission. When sending out seventy-two disciples to proclaim the Kingdom, as well as on many other occasions, Jesus reminds them not to burden themselves with superfluous things, not to hoard senselessly, and not to worry overmuch about earthly possessions. Our hearts can easily become attached to these securities, allowing the faint light of the Holy Spirit to be overshadowed by the false glow of greed. This is why it is not surprising to see the apostles, in the early days of the Church, generously distributing goods to those in need (cf. *Acts* 4:34; 24:17; *1 Cor* 16:1-4; *Gal* 2:10; and others) and always, whether they had wealth or not, demonstrating the true source of their mission: *Silver and gold I do not*

have, Saint Peter told a paralyzed man, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk! (Acts 3:6).

Christians learn to love "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health;" some by juggling accounts to make ends meet, others by creatively finding ways to put their resources at the service of others. The Alviras note that they achieved a real "economic miracle"^[20] by successfully supporting all their children's education. Toni Zweifel,^[21] a Swiss numerary of Opus Dei, is remembered as someone who "led a generous and sober life;"^[22] but that was the mature fruit of a journey that began when he was a young professional. Before discovering his vocation as a numerary, he owned a sports car, a gift from his father as a reward for his excellent engineering studies.^[23] When he embraced apostolic celibacy, "he soon made it

clear to his father that he needed a car model more suited to his lifestyle, and managed to have it exchanged for something more useful for the residence: a seven-seater Saab"^[24] which proved a great help for all of them. He learned to use his resources in a way that reinforced his mission as an apostle.

Given a choice, Jesus prefers those in need

One distinctive trait in the apostle's lifestyle stems from those we have already considered. Knowing oneself to be an apostle, learning to love always and everyone like Christ, and living with a pure heart anchored in the goods of God, allow one to feel a preference — like Christ — for those we are weak and in need. Indeed, Jesus heals the sick, praises the simple-hearted, cares for children, and shows compassion for sinners. We might say that, given a choice,

Jesus prefers the weakest and the most in need, those who feel lost, disadvantaged, and unprotected. When the disciples of John the Baptist want to know if He is the Messiah, He sends them this message: *Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me (Mt 11:4-5).*

Why does Jesus warn us about the possibility of being scandalized by Him? Perhaps because humans often have different priorities. The human heart has been described as a "machine of preferring or despising,"^[25] and to a large extent, this is true, as we tend to desire what pleases us and reject what bothers us. We might spontaneously gravitate towards those who benefit us and

distance ourselves from those who inconvenience us; we seek the "first place" and are willing to trample others to achieve a good. In contrast, the Lord's disciples are called to be those who, having purified their hearts, affections, and senses, prioritize the people and areas most thirsty for the life of Christ; they allow themselves to be *impressed* by what is a treasure to the Lord.

Pedro Ballester,^[26] for example, noticed that there was an eight-year-old boy in the neighbourhood who had no one to play with. Pedro was several years older, but he invited the boy to play at his house. From then on, that child frequently knocked on the Ballester's door.^[27] We too can identify, among those near us, those who are most in need of God's love, namely, the sad, the weary, the inconvenient, or those cast aside due to age or illness. "Children. The Sick. — As you write

these words don't you feel tempted to capitalize them?" Saint Josemaría asks. "The reason is that in children and in the sick a soul in love sees Him." [28]

In the Work, Saint Josemaría wanted special care to be given to those most in need. For this reason, he taught young people to serve the poor, to give catechesis to children, and to promote social initiatives in various environments. With paternal sensitivity, he asked all members of Opus Dei to recite the *Memorare* of Saint Bernard ("Remember, O most gracious Virgin...") to our Lady every day, praying for the member of the Work who needs it the most. Isidoro Zorzano, one of the first members of the Work, exemplifies how this was already lived out during the Spanish Civil War. Isidoro, who had freedom of movement due to his Argentine nationality, could visit the members of Opus Dei who were in hiding in

Madrid. He never hid the fact that he had a favourite: Vicente Rodríguez Casado. Isidoro would simply say, "I see him frequently: he is the one who is most alone."^[29]

"What is to give light must endure burning,"^[30] says a contemporary poet. Indeed, we need to guard and nurture the inner fire of the Christian vocation if we want to be, as Saint Paul told the Corinthians, *a letter from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh* (2 Cor 3:3). This fire, whether in single people looking for a partner, married couples, or people who have received the gift of celibacy, is kindled in the love of Christ, spreads to other fires, purifies the heart, and seeks to give warmth to those who need it most.

[1] Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Life of Claudius, XXVV, 3. The original version reads: “Iudeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit.”

[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 30.

[3] Galen, *Book of Sentences of Platonic Politics*, collected by Abu Al-Fida Ismail Ibn-Ali, *Abulfedae Historia Anteislamica Arabice*, F. C. G. Vogel, Leipzig 1831, 109. The original version reads: “Sunt enim inter eos, et foeminae et viri, qui per totam vitam a concubitu abstinerint.” Galen was born in Pergamum (Turkey) around the year 130 and died in 201. He was a court physician during the times of Marcus Aurelius, as well as his son Commodus and the following emperors.

[4] Saint Justin, *First Apology*, 15, 6-7.

^[5] Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri (1916-1975) was a Spanish chemist and educator, one of the first women of Opus Dei, being a numerary. She stood out for her dedication to education and her evangelizing work in Spain and Latin America. She was beatified in 2019.

^[6] María del Rincón, María Teresa Escobar, *Letters to a Saint: Letters from Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri to Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, Opus Dei Information Office, digital edition, 2018.

^[7] Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, Message, 9-IV-2019.

^[8] Cf. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 2, 1, 1-11.

^[9] María del Rincón, María Teresa Escobar, *Letters to a Saint: Letters from Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri to Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, Opus Dei

Information Office, digital edition, 2018.

^[10] Marcelo Henrique Câmara (1979-2008) was a Brazilian layman, lawyer, and professor, known for his profound life of faith and apostolate in Opus Dei. He stood out for his joy, spirit of service, and Christian witness in everyday life. His cause for beatification is in process.

^[11] Maria Zoê Bellani, Lyra Espindola, *No caminho da santidade. A vida de Marcelo Câmara, um promotor de justiça*, Cia do eBook, 2020, pg. 69. Our translation.

^[12] Arturo Álvarez Ramírez (1935-1992) was a Mexican chemical engineer and professor, recognized for his dedication to teaching at the University of Guadalajara for over thirty years. He was noted for his kindness and availability to all. His beatification process began in 2021 in Guadalajara.

[13] Javier Galindo Michel, *La vida plena de Arturo Álvarez Ramírez*, Minos, Mexico City 2018, pg. 71.

[14] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 120.

[15] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering (1967), included in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2013, pg. 490.

[16] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 28.

[17] The marriage of Tomás Alvira (1906-1992) and Paquita Domínguez (1912-1994) was an example of Christian life in marriage and family. Members of the Work, they lived their faith with joy, simplicity, and a spirit of service, striving to pass on the faith to their children and those around them. Their beatification process is underway.

[18] Hilario Mendo, *El secreto de los Alvira. Un ejemplo de amor*

matrimonial, Palabra, Madrid 2023, pg. 29. Our translation.

[19] Mons. Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter of October 28, 2020, n. 22.

[20] Hilario Mendo, *El secreto de los Alvira. Un ejemplo de amor matrimonial*, Palabra, Madrid 2023, pg. 116. Our translation.

[21] Toni Zweifel (1938-1989) was a Swiss engineer, known for his work with the Limmatt Foundation, dedicated to promoting development and education projects worldwide. He was noted for his profound life of faith, spirit of service, and trust in God, even during his illness. His beatification process is currently in progress.

[22] Agustín López Kindler, *Toni Zweifel. Huellas de una historia de amor*, Rialp, Madrid 2016, pg. 140.

[23] Cf. *ibid.*, pg. 33.

[24] *Ibid.*, pg. 51.

[25] José Ortega y Gasset, *La elección en amor [Revelación de la cuenca latente]*, in *Estudios sobre el amor*, Revista de Occidente, 8th Edition, Madrid 1952, pg. 92-99.

[26] Pedro Ballester (1994-2018) was a young Briton known for his profound faith and joy amidst illness. He was a numerary of Opus Dei. Despite being diagnosed with cancer at the age of 17, he faced his suffering with strength and trust in God, inspiring those who knew him. His cause for beatification is underway.

[27] Jorge Boronat, *I've Never Been Happier: Pedro Ballester Arenas*, digital edition, 2023.

[28] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 419.

[29] José Miguel Pero-Sanz, *Isidoro Zorzano*, Palabra, Madrid 1996, pg. 203.

[30] Anton Wildgans, *Helldunkle Stunde (Chiaroscuro Hour)*, 1917.

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