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Sanctifying Work and "Christianizing" Society

Here is an article on a key aspect of Saint Josemaria's message: growing in holiness by offering our work done with love to God.

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It is easy to discern both the bright and dark features of our times. Human development, alongside the disorders with which it is plagued. Social progress in many areas,

combined with barbaric practices in others. Both advance and regression.... Pope John Paul II and his successors have made frequent reference to this reality.[1] We are all called to transform the society around us in accord with God's will. However, many people are unaware of this, and think this mission is only for those in government or those who are rich and influential. As for themselves, their role is that of spectators; they can applaud or protest, but they are not players on the field of action.

This attitude can't be ours, since it fails to accord with the reality of our Christian vocation. "We Christians have a supernatural responsibility to cooperate with God's power. For this is his all-merciful plan. He wants us to strive to re-establish the order that has been disrupted, to restore to the temporal structures of all nations their natural function as instruments

for the progress of mankind, and their supernatural function as means for reaching God, for the redemption."[2]

We are not mere spectators. On the contrary, lay people have the specific mission of sanctifying the world "from within like leaven,"[3] "striving to give a Christian direction to work, and to human institutions and structures."[4] In the words of the Second Vatican Council, the laity should "illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may come about and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and the Redeemer."[5] In a word: "Christianising the entire world from within, showing that Christ has redeemed all mankind."[6]

We have all the power needed to do so, although it is not human power. Ours is the power of prayer, and

work converted into prayer. "Prayer is the most powerful weapon a Christian has. Prayer makes us effective. Prayer makes us happy. Prayer gives us all the strength we need to fulfil God's commands."[7] Work converted into prayer is the specific means we have in order to transform society. Not merely work, but sanctified work.

God gave St. Josemaría light to understand this on 7 August 1931, while celebrating Holy Mass. As he raised the Sacred Host, Jesus' words resonated forcefully in his soul: *and I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself*.[8] "I understood it perfectly. Our Lord was telling us: if you put me in the heart of all human activities, fulfilling the duty of each moment, being my witness in what seems great and in what seems small...then *omnia traham ad meipsum!* My kingdom among you will be a reality!"[9]

Christianizing society

God has entrusted men and women with the task of building up human society in accord with their dignity, in service of their earthly and eternal good.[10] This requires a society whose laws, moral customs and institutions foster the integral good of its citizens, a society in which each person grows by seeking the good of others, since man "cannot attain his own fulfilment unless in the sincere giving of self to others."[11]

However, the sin of our first parents and the successive profusion of sins has introduced into the world a deep disorder. As the Catechism of the Church teaches, "Thus sin makes men accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence and injustice to reign among them. Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. 'Structures of sin'

are the expression and effect of personal sins."[12]

Christ our Lord, the Son of God made man, has come into the world to redeem us from sin and its consequences. This is what "christianizing" society means: freeing it from the consequences the Catechism lists for us above. On the one hand, it means freeing it from the *structures of sin*—for example, from civil laws and customs opposed to the moral law. At a deeper level, it means striving to ensure that human relationships are governed by the love of Christ, delivered from the selfishness of *concupiscence, violence and injustice*. "Your task as a Christian citizen is to help see Christ's love and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life: culture and the economy, work and rest, family life and social relations."[13]

Christianising society does not mean imposing the true faith on anyone. A Christian spirit requires respect for each person's freedom, in the practice of religion, to act in accord with one's conscience, even when in error, so long as the demands of public order and morality are safeguarded.[14] Those in error should be led to the truth, found in its fullness only in the Catholic faith, by our example and words, never by coercion. The act of faith is authentic only if it is free.

But when Christians urge respect for human life in the civil law from the moment of conception, the stability of families through recognition of the indissolubility of marriage, the parents' rights in the education of their children, whether in public or private schools, the right to truth of information, public morality, justice in labor relations, etc., they are not attempting to impose their faith on

others. Rather they are carrying out their duty as citizens and helping to bring about, as far as they can, a better society in accord with the dignity of the human person.

Christians possess a special certitude of the rightfulness of these demands thanks to divine revelation. But they can also be known by human reason, and therefore all men and women, whatever their beliefs, can appreciate the importance and value of these principles for the life of society.

"Struggle to make sure that those institutions and structures in which you work and move with the full rights of a citizen, are in accordance with the principles which govern a Christian view of life. In this way, you can be sure that you are giving people the means to live according to their real worth; and you will enable many souls, with the grace of God, to

respond personally to their Christian vocation."[15]

This requires "remedying the institutions and conditions of the world...so that they favor rather than hinder the practice of virtue."[16] It belongs to every citizen to aspire to a more just society—an aspiration that is strengthened by a Christian's faith—by seeking the common good of society. This common good is not only a question of economic development, although certainly it includes it, and at times this may be the most pressing need. Above all, it requires the best possible conditions to ensure freedom, justice and rectitude in moral life and peace in society, in accord with the dignity of every human being.

Christians who do all they can to better society in this way are acting in accord with their faith. They are not following a political ideology that

is open to opinion. "That is how the first Christians acted. They didn't have any social or human programs to fulfil by reason of their supernatural vocation. But they were filled with a spirit, a view of life and the world that could not fail to have clear consequences on the society in which they lived."[17] "The apostolic task that Christ entrusted to all his disciples leads to specific results in social matters. It is inconceivable that a Christian, in order to fulfil his task, should have to turn his back on the world, and become a defeatist with regard to human nature."[18]

We have to bring the healing balm of the Christian spirit to the social structures of the society around us. But that is not enough. Though it may seem a lofty aim, it is simply a basic requirement. Much more is needed. We have to help the people around us to live their Christian faith integrally, so that each from their

own place spread the light and love of Christ, the good aroma of Jesus, [19] through their daily actions. The goal is not that structures be purified, but rather that persons become holy. It would be a mistake not to care whether social laws and morals conform to the Christian spirit, but it would be equally wrong to think that this is sufficient. Moreover, at that very moment these sound structures would once again be endangered. We must always be starting anew. "A new mankind cannot be found, if men are not renewed in the ever springing waters of baptism and a life lived as the Gospel teaches."[20]

By means of work

"Many great things depend—don't forget it—on whether you and I live our lives as God wants."[21] What matters most is personal holiness, our union with God. This is the path

that leads to Christianizing society.

"We must, each of us, be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ Himself. Only in this way can we set about this great undertaking, this immense, unending task of sanctifying all temporal structures from within, bringing to them the leaven of redemption."[22]

We must never lose the salt, light and fire that God has given us to transform our surroundings. As Pope John Paul II said, "this is a task which demands courage and patience."[23]

Courage, because we must not be afraid to clash with the prevailing atmosphere when necessary. And patience, because it takes time to change society from within. In the meantime, we cannot grow accustomed to the evils that flourish around us: growing used to a fatal illness is tantamount to succumbing to it. "A Christian has to be ready, at all times, to sanctify society from within. He is fully present in the

world, but without belonging to the world, when it denies God and opposes his lovable will of salvation, not because of its nature, but because of sin."[24]

God wants us to infuse a Christian spirit into the society around us through the sanctification of our professional work, since "through work a Christian exercises dominion over creation (cf *Gen* 1:28), ordering it towards Christ Jesus, the center in whom all things are destined to be re-united (cf *Eph* 1:10)."[25]

Professional work is, in practice, "an indispensable means to social progress and to greater justice in the relations between men."[26]

Each of us must set about this task of christianizing society through work. First, by striving to bring to God those who work alongside us or who we meet by reason of our work, so that they too will sanctify their work

and spread a Christian tone around them. Secondly, and inseparably, by endeavoring to christianize the structures in one's own professional environment, so that they conform to the moral law. A pharmacist, a lawyer, a journalist, a business executive..., must seek to bring a Christian influence to the institutions and labor relations in one's own sphere of work. It is not enough to avoid being "stained" by immoral practices. Rather, we have to strive to purify our own professional environment, bringing it into harmony with human and Christian dignity.

"The formation we receive should awaken in us, as we embark upon our professional work, an instinct, a healthy yearning to make that work conform to the demands of a Christian conscience, to the divine commands that should govern society and human activity. We need

to be convinced that not only is there no incompatibility between Christianity and the problems that arise in the wake of temporal progress; but that on the contrary, the true values of man and his personal and social dignity can only be safeguarded if they are grounded on the Christian view of life."[27]

Besides the work environment itself, many other possibilities exist to Christianize society through work. Exercising a profession in society brings with it the right to set up or collaborate in various projects together with others who share the same ideals. These could be schools that provide the human and Christian formation so necessary and urgent today. Or social service projects, pro-life organisations, institutes that protect the right to truth in the media or the right to a healthy moral atmosphere. All this needs to be carried out with the

professional outlook of God's children, called to sanctify themselves in the world.

"Let us give our lives fully to God our Lord, finishing our work as well as possible, each in our own profession and state. But let us never forget that we have only one aspiration in all our endeavors: to place Christ at the summit of all human activities."[28]

[1] Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (28 June 2003), 1

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 30 April 1946, 19

[3] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 9 January 1959, 17; quoted in E. Burkhardt, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, I, Rialp, Madrid 2010.

[5] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, 112

[7] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 439

[8] *Jn* 12:32

[9] Saint Josemaria, *Notes taken from a meditation*, 27 October 1963; quoted in E. Burkhardt, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, I, Rialp, Madrid 2010.

[10] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 353, 1929, 1930

[11] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 24

[12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1869. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et poenitentia* (2 December 1984), 16

[13] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 302

[14] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis humanae*, 1, 2 and 7

[15] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 718

[16] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 36

[17] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 9 January 1959, 22; quoted in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, I, Rialp, Madrid 2010.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 125

[19] Cf. 2 Cor 2:15

[20] Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 18

[21] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no 755.

[22] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 183

[23] John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991), 38

[24] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing by*, 125

[25] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 6 May 1945, 14; quoted in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, I, Rialp, Madrid 2010.

[26] *Conversations*, 10

[27] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 6 May 1945, 15; quoted in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, I, Rialp, Madrid 2010.

[28] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 15 October 1948, 41; cf *The Forge*, 68.

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