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The Ripe Fruit of Personal Identity

"If we often ask ourselves what God wants from us and try to please Him, we become stronger and more consistent men and women."

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Who are you? When we go for a job interview, when we go through customs at the airport, when we try to access an article on the Internet, and on many other occasions, we are asked to give personal data. It is easy to provide such information as our

name, date of birth, occupation, nationality, our height, weight and the color of our eyes.... We may even list certain features of our character: whether we are good at sports; whether we tend to put on weight easily; whether we are optimistic or pessimistic, extroverted or shy. But isn't it true that, in the end, we still haven't answered the question *who am I?*

At the beginning of these pages about the formation of our personality, we saw that a mature Christian has a clear and sublime goal in life, illuminated by our vocation as a child of God. Being aware of this goal and making it our own is what helps us to better define ourselves.

Successive chapters have helped us understand the way personal growth occurs and signs of maturity, which includes the action of the Holy Spirit in our soul. From the start of this process and right through to its end,

our identity is always a work in progress. As young children we already know who we are, and we begin to glimpse the goal, even when everything is yet to be achieved.

Little by little our identity strengthens and we become more aware of our value and mission in the world; we recognize our limitations and talents; we discover the good and evil existing in others. At the outset, our parents make the decisions for us. They choose our name and what we are to eat; they give us the faith, and select a school for us... As we enter adolescence, our distinctive characteristics become more apparent, and we spread our wings for an autonomous, though never solitary, flight. By the end of our earthly existence, a life filled with meaning comes to a close with a well-defined identity. Thus the story of our life that we have tried to write with God's hand guiding our pen-

strokes will come to an end, and there will open up before us our true story: we will find again, along with the “hundredfold,”^[1] all we have loved, and all the people *with* whom we have loved.

Aiming at the bullseye

Like the archer shooting an arrow, if we want to hit the target we have to aim high. We have to keep our ideals in view and head steadily towards them. A mature person tries to refocus on the goal before starting a new task, or before making a decision, so as not to mistake the means for the end. By knowing who we are and where we are going, we will not be deceived by the appearance of happiness promised by easy pleasures, or by the illusion of autonomy enjoyed by those who accept only their own viewpoint. To take sure aim at the target, we need to rely on the experience of someone

who tells us how taut the bowstring should be, how to hold the bow, and how to pay attention to what is really important. An onlooker may try to help us by telling us where our shots are ending up and correct us in a friendly and assured manner: higher, more to the right, more to the left, make allowances for the wind.... This is what parents try to do, or good educators or friends, or a priest who gives us advice for our Christian life.

Being docile to the suggestions of those who love us and to the promptings of God in our soul is the key for reaching the desired goal. To hit the target we have to aim right at the bullseye, but we can get distracted and look in other directions, ignoring all signs and warnings. It is not enough, therefore, to know the goal; we need to strive to pursue it at every moment, to persevere and ask for help.

So often we find it hard to change, to alter our way of being. Nevertheless, our response to these limitations can vary greatly and significantly influences our joy and the ability to share it with others. The way we act and react marks our personality. *In omnibus respice finem*, as an ancient heraldic motto says: *In everything you do, keep your gaze fixed upon your end.* At work or at rest, asleep or awake, we are always the same, with the same identity that never vanishes: an identity that it would make no sense to hide. Being afraid to show ourselves as we are is a clear symptom of a weak and wavering identity. Christians see God as their Father, and are concerned not so much about what to expect from life, as about what God and life expect from them.

If we often ask ourselves what God wants from us and try to please Him, we become stronger and more

consistent men and women. We not only know who we are, but also how to act in every situation. Our identity matures in our occupations and takes shape with our personal characteristics. We are happy to be ourselves and to do what we do. Our relationship with God is marked by a filial and trusting spirit, even when we fail to understand something, or experience our personal weakness. Our Christian “identity card” is the same as that of Jesus and also has his Cross as its distinctive sign.[2] By getting to know Christ we get to know ourselves better. By looking steadily at Christ, and with his powerful help, we will hit the bullseye.

The “Our Father,” a sure guide

Jesus, through his life and teachings, is our model. We receive from him the name of Christian and our own prayer, the *Our Father*, [3] which

provides an excellent guideline for our life and character. This prayer teaches us what we ought to ask for, and the order in which we ought to ask for it. Our experiences, our readings, the images captured by our retina, spur us forward or hold us back; there are so many factors that help us to advance or cause us to veer off the track. Prayer guides us in the midst of all this complexity, as we try to write a new page each day in our life story.

We have prayed the *Our Father* so often, but we can always be dazzled by it again. We realize once again that our Father God in heaven is watching over us: not outside or far away, but very close to us.^[4] We don't say *my* but *our Father*, because being human means being in relation to others. We ask that his *name* be *hallowed*. He doesn't need anything, and yet he wants to be known, adored, sought and glorified,

because only then can mankind satisfy its hunger for happiness.[5] And we go on to ask: *thy Kingdom come*. Our personal life is illumined by this aspiration, which is made true in Christ, by his grace acting in us, leading us to eternal glory. “This Christian identity, as the baptismal embrace which the Father gave us when we were little ones, makes us desire, as prodigal children – and favorite children in Mary – yet another embrace, that of the merciful Father who awaits us in glory.”[6] *Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven*: help our life to be oriented towards you, foundation and goal of our personal identity. All our successes and failures, joys and sorrows, are then viewed from this perspective.

We recognize ourselves as creatures in need of material goods, of *our daily bread*. Besides, on a deeper level, this bread refers to the

Eucharist, to Jesus himself who invites us to receive Him. During the Mass, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest addresses the congregation saying: *we dare to say...* and then he joins the people in reciting the prayer that our Lord taught us. *Daily*: today and now is the time to choose Him, to amend our life in accord with God's will, to forgive and not to hold grudges. How can we fail to hear Jesus' words as addressed to each one of us: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?*

Once, in a country where believers were a minority, during a class on the local language for foreigners, the teacher asked a Christian student: *What does God do?* as she was pointing at the word *punish* in the dictionary. That student found himself in a quandary because even though he thought that the teacher's statement was unfair, he didn't feel

confident enough to give a full explanation. Nevertheless, he surprised his classmates by simply saying *God forgives*. We ask God to help us share in that feature so characteristic of him, by which we come to resemble him.

We end by saying *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. We want God to fill us with his love, with his mercy, which not only involves forgiving, but also alerts us to the dangers along the way. Through his Church, God points out to us what we should avoid. The Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount set forth a demanding program leading to a virtuous and peaceful life. In contrast, sin not only offends God, but also harms us and robs us of our serenity, because it divides our heart, and *no one can serve two masters*.^[7] Therefore we are grateful on being told where it is safe to place our feet when climbing,

where to place our hopes in order to see them fulfilled. Through prayer, our identity sets down deep roots. We discover that our life is a constant dialogue with God. And *if God is for us, who is against us?*^[8]

Staking everything on one card

With our eyes raised on high, we direct our steps towards heaven. We know that “Christ has asked us for all our love, all our life, all our heart, all our mind. And we need to respond by staking everything on one card, the card of God’s love. Lord, I love you simply because I want to.”^[9] Our Christian identity is forged by responding to God’s gifts and demands, as we follow our own vocation. Each of our actions, our interpersonal relationships with our friends and our colleagues at work, should carry this seal. Our identity requires being consistent with the call God has addressed to us.

Maturity is a task that never ends, and therefore giving consistency to our life means learning to be who we really are. Whoever wants to win a game or a bet usually takes many factors into account and doesn't risk too much. But on our Christian path, we abandon everything in God's hands. Our whole life acquires meaning from this goal. Love for God, which is impossible without a real love for others shown in deeds, unifies our way of being. When we discover a clear mission in life that fulfills us, we thank the one who helped us to see it, and we put our trust in him. A well-defined Christian identity leads to risking everything on God once and for all. That is the "risky security of the Christian."[10]

The goal of our Christian vocation is identification with Christ. If we are consistent, if we live with naturalness and simplicity, we will recognize Him, since He praises

those in whom *there is no guile*.^[11] In contrast, “all that is tangled and complicated, the twisting and turning about one’s own problems, all this builds up a barrier which often prevents people from hearing our Lord’s voice.”^[12] Developing our identity means getting rid of the barriers that seem to provide a false security; we have to remove the walls that separate us from others and from God. In Jesus, earth and heaven are united. Identifying ourselves with Him means finding out the truth about ourselves.

A supernatural identity

Only the human person is capable of actions that become eloquent gestures, and a language filled with meaning. In the human person, the beauty of the body shines forth, a beauty that is protected by modesty, a sign of identity and a space for freedom. Only in mankind can

instincts become tendencies, since we can know the purpose of our impulses and learn to control them. We are not meant to be dragged along by blind forces, but to govern them with our intellect and will. Only man and woman were created by God in his image and likeness, as persons.[13] He destined them to receive education and mature little by little. He destined them, above all, to participate in his intimacy, to build on human foundations a supernatural identity.

This identity does not isolate us, but is formed with others and for others. It leads us to forget about ourselves and to look outwards. We see this in a baby who, after a few months, begins to recognize his mother's face and smiles. Later on he discovers that he is not the "master" of the world; he stops claiming everything as his own and stops saying *mine, mine...* A teenager learns that he

cannot demand everything. If he wants his parents to buy him a bicycle, he waits before asking, and perhaps will try to improve his behavior until his birthday arrives. Thus he learns the value of waiting, which prepares him for the true waiting, filled with optimism: Christian hope.

As we grow up and mature, we begin to realize that freedom means not only the capacity to choose, but also responsibility: something or someone expects a response from us. Therefore forming our own personality is not first of all a question of our own fulfillment, but rather of developing our openness to others and improving whatever we can do for them. This task begins in the home, in the family. "A family marked by loving trust, come what may, helps its members to be themselves and spontaneously to reject deceit, falsehood, and lies."[14]

In a family, each one learns who he or she is and what can be done for others.

Astonishment at such a wonderful divine plan leads to the question about the meaning of our existence: *who am I?* Our fragile identity as creatures rests on the full identity that only God possesses. Our first brothers and sisters in the faith understood it well: “Christians live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh. They spend their lives on earth, but are citizens of heaven.”[15]

[1] *Mt* 19:29.

[2] Cf. Pope Francis. Homily at Saint Marta, 26 November 2014.

[3] Cf. *Mt* 6:9-13

[4] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 267.

[5] Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily 11 September 2011.

[6] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 144.

[7] *Mt* 6:24.

[8] *Rom.* 8:31.

[9] Saint Josemaría. Notes from a family gathering, 30 November 1960.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 58.

[11] *Jn* 1:47.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 90.

[13] Cf. *Gen* 1:26.

[14] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, 19 March 2016, no. 115.

[15] *Letter to Diognetus*, 5 (PG 2, 1174).

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