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Work and Contemplation (I)

What does St. Josemaría mean when he insists that our work can become contemplative prayer? A new article in the series on how to sanctify our daily work.

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"I would like us, in our meditation today, to make up our minds once and for all that we need to aspire to become contemplative souls, in the

street, in the midst of our work, by maintaining a constant conversation with our God and not breaking it off at any time of the day. If we really want to be loyal followers of our Master, this is the only way."[1]

For those who have been called by God to seek sanctity in the middle of the world, to convert work into prayer and have a contemplative soul, this is indeed the *only way*. For "either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find him."[2]

We should meditate slowly on this fundamental point of St. Josemaría's teaching. In this article we will focus on what contemplation is; later articles in this series will explore more fully the meaning of contemplative life in work and in our daily activities.

Like at Nazareth, like the first Christians

The discovery of God in the ordinary activities of each day gives our life its ultimate value and full meaning.

Jesus' hidden life at Nazareth comprised "years of intense work and prayer, years during which Jesus led an ordinary life, a life like ours, we might say, which was both divine and human at the same time." [3]

Thus he teaches us that our professional, family, and social life is not a hindrance to praying always, [4] but rather an opportunity to stay very close to God, until a moment comes when it is impossible to distinguish between work and contemplation.

The first Christians traveled along this path of contemplation in daily life, following in the Master's footsteps. "While walking, while conversing, when resting, while working or reading, a Christian believer prays," [5] writes a second-century author. Centuries later, St.

Gregory the Great describes an ideal found among many of the faithful: "the grace of contemplation is not something given to the great but denied to the lowly. Many great people receive it, as do many of the lowly, both among those who live apart from the world and those who are married. So if no state among the faithful is excluded from the grace of contemplation, anyone who guards his heart interiorly can be enlightened by this grace." [6]

The Church's Magisterium, especially since the Second Vatican Council, has often reminded us of this teaching. It is especially important for us, since we have the mission of bringing Christ everywhere and imbuing the world with a Christian spirit. As John Paul II said, in reference to St. Josemaría's teaching: "Daily activity is understood as a precious means of union with Christ, capable of becoming the setting and the

material for sanctification, the terrain for the exercise of the virtues, the dialogue of love which is realized in works. Work is transformed by the spirit of prayer and thus it becomes possible to remain in the contemplation of God, even when one is intent on carrying out various occupations." [7]

The contemplation of the children of God

The Catechism teaches that "the Church calls the contemplation of God in his heavenly glory 'the beatific vision.'" [8] Already here on earth we can have a foretaste of the perfect contemplation of God in heaven. This beginning, although limited and of a different nature than vision, [9] is already true contemplation of God, just as grace, while being different from glory, is nevertheless a true participation in the divine nature. *For now we see in*

a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood, [10] writes St. Paul.

Already in this life, contemplation of God as "in a mirror" is possible thanks to the theological virtues—a *living* faith and hope, informed by charity. Faith, united to hope and vivified by charity, "makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below." [11]

Contemplation is a loving and joyful knowledge of God and his designs as expressed in creatures, in supernatural revelation, and most fully in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. St. John of the Cross calls contemplation the "science of love. [12] St. Thomas Aquinas defines it as a clear knowledge of the truth, attained not by a process of

reasoning but by an intense charity.
[13]

Mental prayer is dialogue with God. "You write: 'To pray is to talk with God. But about what?' About what? About Him, about yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, noble ambitions, daily worries, weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions: and Love and reparation. In a word: to get to know him and to get to know yourself: 'to get acquainted!'"[14] In the spiritual life, this dialogue with God tends to simplify progressively as one's trusting filial love increases. Then words are often no longer needed in order to pray, neither externally nor internally. "One no longer speaks, because the tongue doesn't know how to express itself. The mind is stilled. One doesn't speak: one looks!"[15]

This is what contemplation means: an active prayer without words, intense and serene, deep and simple. It is a gift God grants to those who seek him sincerely, who put their whole heart into fulfilling his will with deeds, and who try to remain in his presence. "First one brief aspiration, then another, and another... till our fervor seems insufficient, because words are too poor... then this gives way to intimacy with God, looking at God without needing rest or feeling tired." [16] All this can take place, St. Josemaria insists, not only in the periods dedicated expressly to prayer, but also "while we carry out as perfectly as we can (with all our mistakes and limitations) the tasks allotted to us by our situation and duties." [17]

Under the action of the Paraclete

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell in our soul in grace;[18] we are temples of God.[19] Words fail to express the richness of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity's indwelling in our soul. The Father eternally engenders the Son, and the Holy Spirit, subsistent bond of Love, proceeds from the Father and the Son. Through God's grace we take part in this Trinitarian life as sons and daughters. The Paraclete unites us to the Son, who has assumed human nature in order to make us sharers in the divine nature: *when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman...so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* [20] In this union with the Son we are not alone, but form one body, the Mystical Body of Christ, to which all men and women are called to be incorporated as living members and

to be, like the apostles, instruments to draw others, sharing in Christ's priesthood.[21]

Contemplative life is the life of the children of God, a life of intimacy with the divine Persons and overflowing with apostolic zeal. The charity that the Paraclete pours into our hearts grants us a knowledge of God that would otherwise be unattainable, because *he who does not love does not know God; for God is love* .[22] The more we love God the more fully we know him, because that love (supernatural charity) is a participation in the infinite charity of the Holy Spirit,[23] who *searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God* .[24]

This Love, with a capital L, gives the soul a deep familiarity with the divine Persons, and an understanding of God that is more penetrating and rapid, more accurate and spontaneous, in profound harmony with the Heart of Christ.

[25] On the human plane as well, those who love one another understand each other more easily. St. Josemaria used this analogy to explain to some degree what the contemplation of God is like. "Where I come from they sometimes say, 'See how that person contemplates!' They may be referring to a mother with a child in her arms, or to a fellow looking at his future wife, or to a woman watching over her sick husband—pure and noble human affection. That's how we should contemplate." [26]

But all human experience, however beautiful, is no more than a glimmer of the contemplation that God grants

to faithful souls. Supernatural charity greatly exceeds any simply human love in stature, quality and strength, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit enable us to be led docilely by him. These gifts (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and filial fear) grow in unison with a "co-natural" familiarity with God, and the whole spectrum of the contemplative life begins to unfold.

In particular, through the gift of wisdom, the first and greatest of the gifts of the Holy Spirit,[27] we are granted not only to know and assent to the revealed truths about God and creatures, as happens with faith, but to "savor" them, to know them with "a certain tasting of their sweetness." [28] Wisdom, *sapientia*, is a knowledge that is "tasted": *sapida scientia*. Thanks to this gift, not only does one grow in love for God, but one comes to know in a new way.[29]

"There is a knowledge which is attained only with holiness. One encounters hidden souls, unknown to the world, who are deeply humble, self-sacrificing and holy, and who have a marvelous supernatural outlook. *I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to little ones (Mt 11:25).*"[30]

Through the gift of wisdom contemplative life enters into *the depths of God* .[31] St. Josemaria invited us to meditate on "a text from St. Paul in which he proposes to us a whole program of contemplative life—knowledge and love, prayer and life.... *May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith; may you, being rooted and grounded in love, have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,*

that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:17-19)."[32]

We should ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of wisdom, together with the other gifts that accompany it. They are gifts of divine Love, jewels the Paraclete gives to those who love God with all their heart, all their soul, and all their strength.

The path of contemplation

The greater one's degree of charity, the greater is one's familiarity with God, which makes contemplation possible. Even the lowest stage of charity, found in a person who is content with not sinning grievously but who doesn't seek to do God's will in everything, establishes a certain conformity with the divine will. Nevertheless, a love that does not aspire to love more, that does not possess the fervor of piety, is more akin to the formal courtesy of a stranger than to the affection of a son

or daughter. Anyone who is satisfied with this relationship with God will attain only a weak and transient knowledge of revealed truth, *for if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like .*
[33]

Very different is the case of a person who sincerely desires to embrace God's will in all things and, with the help of grace, uses the means at his disposal: mental and vocal prayer, reception of the sacraments (frequent confession and holy communion), work and the faithful fulfilment of one's duties, seeking God's presence throughout the day, being faithful to a plan of life and striving for a deep Christian formation.

Modern society leads many people to live on externals, ever anxious to acquire things, to move around, to look, to distract oneself, perhaps seeking to mask one's inner emptiness, the loss of the transcendent meaning of one's life. But we, having discovered the divine call to holiness and apostolate, should have the opposite experience. The more agitated our exterior activity, the more intense should be our inner life, our interior recollection, seeking to dialogue with God present in our soul in grace, mortifying the desires of *the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life* .[34] To contemplate God one needs a clean heart. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* .[35]

Let us ask our holy Mother Mary to obtain for us from the Holy Spirit the gift of being contemplatives in our

daily life, a gift that shone forth so brightly in her own life.

Footnotes:

1. St. Josemaría , *Friends of God* , 238.

2. St. Josemaría , *Conversations* , 114.

3. St. Josemaría , *Friends of God* , 56.

4. Cf. Lk 18:1.

5. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* , 7, 7.

6. St. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezechiel* , 2, 5, 19.

7. John Paul II, Address to conference o "The greatness of ordinary life" for the centenary of Blessed Josemaría, 12 January 2002, 2.

8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , 1028.

9. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* , I, q.12, a.2, c; II-II, q.4, a.1; q.180, a.5, c.

10. 1 Cor 13:12.

11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , 163.

12. St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* , 2, 18, 5.

13. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* , II-II, q.180, a.1, c and a.3, ad 1.

14. St. Josemaría , *The Way* , 91.

15. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God* , 307.

16. St. Josemaría , *Friends of God* , 296.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Cf. Jn 14:23.

19. Cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16.

20. Gal 4:4-6.

21. Cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13, 27; Eph 2:19-22;
4:4.

22. 1 Jn 4:8.

23. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa
theologiae* , II-II, q.24 a.7, c. *In Epist.
Ad Rom .*, c.5, lect. 1.

24. 1 Cor 2:10-11.

25. Cf. Mt 11:27.

26. St. Josemaría, "The joy of serving
God".

27. Cf. John Paul II, Address, 9 April
1989.

28. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa
theologiae* , II-II, q.45, a.2, ad 1.

29. Cf. Jn 6:69; Rom 8:5.

30. St. Josemaría, "The liqueur of wisdom".

31. 1 Cor 2:10.

32. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 163.

33. Jas 1:23-24.

34. 1 Jn 2:16.

35. Mt 5:8.

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