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New Mediterraneans (IV): "Don't speak: listen to him" (with audio)

"Resolution: foster, uninterruptedly if possible, friendship and a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit." Saint Josemaria discovers another "new Mediterranean" in his spiritual life.

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Before returning to his Father, Jesus told his Apostles, *Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Lk 24:49)*. So the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem, waiting for God's promise. In fact, the promise, the gift, was God himself, the Holy Spirit. A few days later on the feast of Pentecost, they received this gift and were filled with God's grace. "The disciples, witnesses of the glory of the risen Christ, were filled with the strength of the Holy Spirit, their minds and hearts were opened to a new light."[1] That same day they started to preach boldly, and Scripture tells us that those who welcomed Saint Peter's words were baptized, and *there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41)*.

Saint Josemaría often reminded us that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not a memory of the past, but an ever-

present reality. “Like the men and women who came up to Peter at Pentecost, we too have been baptized. In Baptism our Father God has taken possession of our lives, has made us share in the life of Christ and has given us the Holy Spirit.”^[2] First in Baptism, and then in Confirmation, we have received the fullness of God’s gift: the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Discovering the Paraclete

God’s Gift, the salvation we receive, is not an object but a Person. And so all Christian life is born from a personal relationship with the God who comes to dwell in our souls. This is a well-known truth, the basis of the life of faith. Nevertheless, it may also be something that we still need to discover.

One of the people most familiar with Saint Josemaría’s writings says: “Throughout 1932 there was a

noticeable growth in Saint Josemaría's devotion to the Holy Spirit.”[3] After months of trying to come closer to the Holy Spirit, he received a special light, opening up a new panorama, as we can see from a note he wrote that day:

“Octave of all Saints – Tuesday – 8 November 1932: This morning, not yet an hour ago, my Fr Sanchez revealed to me ‘another Mediterranean.’ He told me: ‘Make friends with the Holy Spirit. Don’t speak: listen to him.’ And while I was praying on my way home from Leganitos, my prayer was both gentle and filled with light. And I saw how the life of childhood, by making me aware that I was a son of God, had brought me to love the Father; that, even before that, I had gone through Mary to reach Jesus, whom I adore as a friend, as a brother, as his lover, for that is what I am. Up until now, I knew that the Holy Spirit was

dwelling in my soul to sanctify it... but I hadn't grasped the truth of his presence. Fr Sanchez's words were what I needed. I feel Love within me, and I want to get to know him, to become his friend, his confidant. I want to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting, enkindling. I won't know how to... but He will give me the strength. He will do everything, if I want him to... and I do! Divine Guest, Master, Light, Guide, Love: may this poor donkey make you welcome and listen to your lessons, and be set aflame, and follow you and love you. Resolution: foster, uninterruptedly if possible, friendship and a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit. *Veni Sancte Spiritus!*"[4]

In these notes Saint Josemaría summed up the spiritual journey God had led him on: the discovery of divine filiation, Mary's intercession with Jesus, the treasure of Christ's

friendship... until becoming aware of the presence of God's Love within him. As he wrote many years later, there comes a moment when the heart "needs to distinguish and adore each one of the Divine Persons ... And to spend time lovingly with the Father and with the Son and with the Holy Spirit; and to submit willingly to the activity of the life-giving Paraclete who, with no merit on our part, gives himself to us: the supernatural gifts and virtues!"[5]

That the Holy Spirit dwells in our soul in grace was something he already knew, but he had not yet grasped this truth in all its depth as a lived experience. The words of his spiritual director opened up a new horizon before his eyes, not only as something understood, but above all as *lived*. "I feel Love within me." In the face of this marvelous reality, he ardently desired to respond fully, to place himself at the service of Love.

“I want to get to know him, to become his friend, his confidant. I want to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting, enkindling.” And afraid that he won’t be up to it, he latches onto the certainty that it is God who will do it, if he lets him.

Welcoming God’s gift

The first thing to notice in this “Mediterranean” that opened up before Saint Josemaria is that *God is the one who acts*. A few weeks later it inspired point 57 in *The Way*: “Get to know the Holy Spirit, the Great Unknown, the one who has to sanctify you.”^[6] Our sanctity is God’s work, even though the God who sanctifies us is often the “Great Unknown.”

In a world like ours in which the accent is all on human endeavor and the results of our own efforts, we do not always realize that the salvation we receive from God is in the end a

free gift. In the words of Saint Paul: *for by grace you have been saved through faith (Eph 2:8)*. Certainly, our own efforts are important, and the way we live really matters.

Nevertheless, everything we do starts from the certainty that “Christianity is grace; it is the wonder of a God who is not satisfied with creating the world and man, but puts himself on the same level as the creature he has made.”[7] And this is something that everyone has to discover *personally*. As Pope Francis likes to stress, we need to recognize that “God gets there first. We go in search of him, but he finds us first.”[8]

From this discovery is born “an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the *primacy of grace*.”[9] As the years go by, the words with which Saint John Paul II prepared the Church for the new millennium continue to be fully relevant. In particular, he put us on guard

against a temptation that can try to undermine our spiritual life and apostolic mission: “thinking that the results depend upon our ability to act and to plan.”[10] If we fall into this trap, we could easily imagine that the reason our interior life is less intense than we wish is that we are not making enough effort, or that the reason our apostolate does not produce the fruit we expect is that we have not been sufficiently demanding. This may be part of the problem, but it is not the only reason. We Christians know that it is God who makes something successful. “Apostolic undertakings grow not by human effort, but by the breathing of the Holy Spirit.”[11]

Here we have another way of recognizing that our life has value not because of what we do, nor does it lose value because we do less or because of our failures, as long as we return to this God of ours who has

wanted to live among us. “To live according to the Holy Spirit means to live by faith and hope and charity – to allow God to take possession of our lives and to change our hearts, to make us resemble him more and more.”[12] The authentic starting point for Christian life, for the good works that our Father God wants (cf. *Eph 2:10*), is gratefully accepting and welcoming God’s gift, which leads us live in the hope-filled self-abandonment that marks the life of God’s children.[13]

“Foster a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit”

To receive the gift of God is to receive a Person, and thus we can understand Fr Sanchez’s advice to Saint Josemaria: “Make friends with the Holy Spirit. Don’t speak: listen to him.” Friendship is between persons, and friendship grows through dialogue. That is why on discovering

the personal presence of God in his heart, Saint Josemaria made the specific resolution: “foster, uninterruptedly if possible, friendship and a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit.” We can do this on our part too, in order to *listen to him*.

This is a path open to all Christians: to open themselves continually to the action of the Paraclete, listen to his inspirations, and let themselves be guided *into all the truth (Jn 16:13)*. Jesus had promised the Twelve: *He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (Jn 14:26)*. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to live according to God’s plans, for it is he who *will declare to you the things that are to come (Jn 16:13)*.

The first Christians understood this reality, and above all experienced it in their lives. “There is hardly a page

in the Acts of the Apostles where we fail to read about him and the action by which he guides, directs and enlivens the life and work of the early Christian community.”[14] Indeed, *all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:14)*. And we let ourselves be led by him in as much as we train ourselves day after day in the “difficult discipline of listening”.[15] Friendship with the Holy Spirit means listening to his voice, “which is speaking to you through the events of daily life, through your joys and sufferings, the people who are close to you, the voice of your conscience thirsting for truth, happiness, goodness and beauty.”[16]

In this regard, there is an interesting passage in the recent book of interviews with Benedict XVI. The journalist asked him if he experienced any lonely hours when he felt terribly alone inside.

“Certainly,” replied Benedict XVI, “but because I feel so connected to the Lord, I’m therefore never entirely alone.” And right away he added, “One simply knows, I’m not the one doing things. I also could not do it alone. He is constantly there. I must only listen and make myself wide open for him.”^[17] The goal of sharing one’s whole life with God and living in friendship with him, is as attractive today as it has always been. But, the journalist asked, “How does one listen and open wide for him?” The Pope Emeritus laughed and the journalist persisted, “How does one do it best?” And Benedict XVI replied, “Well, now, you just beg the Lord – You must help me now! – and recollect yourself inwardly, stay silent. Then one can time and again knock on the door with prayer, and thus, you’re already doing it.”^[18]

Learning to recognize his voice

In our prayer life, perhaps not deliberately, we might sometimes hope for something a bit extraordinary that will guarantee we are talking to God, that he is listening to us, that he is speaking to us. But in reality the spiritual life is a more everyday affair. Rather than looking for extraordinary graces, “we should be aware of the work of the Holy Spirit all around us, and in our own selves.”[19]

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:14). The Holy Spirit usually leads us, not by specific instructions, but by giving us light and guidance for our daily path. In quite varied ways, he sheds light on the small and great events in our life. We see one detail after another in a new, different way, with a light that shows the meaning of something that was clouded and uncertain before.

How does this light come to us? In a thousand different ways: reading Scripture, the writings of the saints, or a book of spiritual reading; in unexpected circumstances, a conversation between friends, or reading a piece of news. There are countless specific moments when the Holy Spirit can be suggesting something to us. But he relies on our understanding and our freedom to give shape to his suggestions. It is good to bring these lights to our prayer; to meditate on them slowly, day after day; to pause in our prayer and ask our Lord, “This thing that worries me, this thing that has happened, what do you want to tell me here? What does it mean for my life?”

In this patient listening it is good to bear in mind that the voice of the Holy Spirit can reach our heart mixed with other very different things: our selfishness, our appetites,

temptations from the devil... How are we to recognize what comes from the Holy Spirit? In this, as in so many other things, there are no hard and fast rules, but there are signs that can help us discern his presence. First, we have to remember that God does not contradict himself; he will not ask us for anything that goes against Jesus' teaching, as found in Holy Scripture and taught by the Church. Nor will he suggest something opposed to our vocation. Secondly, we have to consider what the inspirations imply. A tree is known by its fruits (cf. *Mt 7:16-20*); and as Saint Paul said, *the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23)*.

The spiritual tradition of the Church has been constant in its teaching that "the Spirit of God unfailingly produces peace in our souls, and the devil unfailingly produces

agitation.”[20] In the course of the day so many “good thoughts” may occur to us: thoughts of service, of caring for others, of forgiving them. Often, these good thoughts do not come from ourselves, but from the Holy Spirit in our heart. Acting on these inspirations from the Paraclete will fill us with *gaudium cum pace*, with joy imbued with peace.

Hence we need to foster a serene docility to the Paraclete, with the help of spiritual guidance. It is significant that this new horizon was opened up to Saint Josemaría precisely in the context of spiritual direction. The advice he received – “listen to him” – also reveals the awareness that Fr Sanchez had of his mission as a spiritual director: to make it easier for the Holy Spirit to take on progressively more of the guidance of Saint Josemaría’s soul, “to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting enkindling.” This is the job

of those who accompany others in their spiritual lives: helping them to get to know themselves so that they can discern more clearly what the Paraclete may be asking of them. Thus little by little each soul learns to see God in what happens to them and in events in the world around them.

Anchored in God's Love, with the breath of the Holy Spirit

Ever since our Lord's Ascension into heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we have been living in times of mission. Christ himself has given us the task of taking salvation to the whole world. Pope Francis has often talked about this reality, speaking of "how God challenges those who believe in him 'to go forth'," [21] and pointing out that, together with this mission, our Lord has given us the strength to fulfill it. Indeed, this dynamism "is not a strategy, but the actual strength

of the Holy Spirit, uncreated
Charity.”[22]

In his catechesis about hope, Pope Francis reminded us of the importance of letting ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, using an image much loved by the Fathers of the Church. “The Letter to the Hebrews compares hope to an anchor (cf. 6:18-19); and we can add to this image that of a sail. If the anchor is what gives the boat its stability and keeps it ‘anchored’ amid the undulations of the sea, the sail is instead what makes it move and advance on the waters. Hope is truly like a sail; it gathers the wind of the Holy Spirit and transforms it into a driving force that propels the boat, as the case may be, out to sea or to the shore.”[23]

Being anchored in the depths of God’s Love gives us security; while being docile to the Holy Spirit allows

us to go forward with God's strength, and in the direction he suggests. As Saint Josemaria insists, we have "to fly" very high, "without the support of anything here on earth, relying on the voice and the inspiration of the Spirit."[24] Hence we see why "the Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer."[25] Recent Popes have often reminded us that if we want to fulfill the mission Christ entrusted to us with the same Spirit that moved him, there is no other way than prayer – continual, trusting conversation with the Paraclete.

Thus we will discover the Mediterranean of the living presence of God in our hearts, and set out into the deep, guided by the Holy Spirit, who is "light, fire, and driving wind which sets the flame alight and makes it capable of enkindling a great fire of love."[26]

[1] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 127.

[2] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 128.

[3] Pedro Rodriguez, *Critical-Historical Edition of The Way*, commenting on point no. 57; pp. 251-2.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 306.

[6] Rodriguez, *Critical-Historical Edition of The Way*, commenting on point no. 57.

[7] Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), no. 4.

[8] Cited in S. Rubin and F. Ambrogetti, *El Papa Francisco: Conversaciones con Jorge Bergoglio*, Barcelona 2013, p. 48.

[9] Saint John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 38.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 40.

[12] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 134.

[13] See Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

[14] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 127.

[15] Saint John Paul II, Address, 5 June 2004.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Pope Benedict XVI with Peter Seewald, *Last Testimony: In His Own Words*, 2016, pp. 234-5.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 130.

[20] Jacques Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, Scepter, New York, 2007, p. 52.

[21] Pope Francis, Apost. Ex. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 20.

[22] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017.

[23] Pope Francis, General Audience, 31 May 2017.

[24] *The Forge*, no. 994.

[25] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 262.

[26] *Friends of God*, no. 244.

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