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Meditations: Monday of the Twenty-First Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 21st week of Ordinary Time.

- Spreading the faith by example
- When formalism arises
- Holiness is flexible

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THE SCRIBES and Pharisees were known to be zealous practitioners of

the Law. However, some of them limited themselves to preaching to others and didn't put what they taught into practice. That is why Jesus, on several occasions, pointed to their hypocrisy, with a reproach filled with pain for their souls, while seeking to help them change their attitude: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the Kingdom of Heaven to men! For you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in" (*Mt 23:13*).

In a certain sense, every Christian has in common with the scribes and Pharisees the mission to teach, that is, to transmit the faith within their own family and among their friends. We are all leaders in some way, and are expected to be able to guide others with sensitivity and full respect for their freedom. And this entails, first of all, offering a consistent witness. "Words have

strength when they are accompanied by deeds,”^[1] St. Anthony of Padua said. Christians are called “to make their daily life a witness to faith, hope and charity – a simple and normal witness, without need for ostentatious displays. The coherence of their life makes clear the constant presence of the Church in the world, since all Catholics are themselves the Church, being full members in their own right of the one People of God.”^[2]

Spreading the faith by one’s example doesn’t mean that Christians have to be perfect. Those around us are probably aware of some of our defects, the small or large inconsistencies between what we claim to teach and what we really are. The decisive factor, however, is not to lead a faultless life, since this is impossible. In fact, these inconsistencies, when humbly acknowledged and fought against

with sincere effort and God's grace, can be an example to those around us. They see that the Christian ideal doesn't mean being perfect, but rather striving to become more and more like Christ. They see that it is possible to be close to God even with these defects, since He is always ready to show us his love. After all, holiness is not something that is achieved overnight, but rather a goal that we strive for throughout our life.

“WOE to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (*Mt* 23:23). Jesus denounces those who attach too much importance to minor things and lose sight of what is

essential. Indeed, some scribes and Pharisees had adopted many human precepts that had nothing to do with the divine law. This led them to create a meticulous casuistry about what could and could not be done. By doing so, they revealed their pride and self-sufficiency; they probably thought that to gain eternal life it would be enough simply to follow these rules. They forgot that salvation is not something we can humanly earn by our actions, but that it is always a gift from God.

The problem Jesus highlights is not so much the existence of these human precepts, for they might have had their meaning. Rather it is the fact that what is essential – the Law given by God – is neglected. Some of the Jewish authorities fulfilled perfectly the norms they themselves had established. But they forgot to practice justice, charity and mercy towards their brothers and sisters.

Love for God and for others had fallen into second place: the important thing was to carry out the legal provisions to the letter.

This attitude of some Pharisees and scribes can also be found today. “In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time.”^[3] —

We can ask our Lord, first of all, to teach us to live his law with our hearts, seeking to please Him in all that we do. “Give ‘all’ the glory to God. ‘Squeeze’ out each one of your actions with your will aided by grace, so that there remains in them nothing that smacks of human pride, of self-complacency.”^[4] — Thus we will be able to transmit a law that is not self-referential nor based only on external practices, but that seeks

above all the authentic good of others: “The Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love for our brothers and sisters.”^[5] —

IN THE 1960s a large number of students lived in Villa Tevere, which at that time was the site of the Roman College of the Holy Cross, where many members of the Work received formation. On one occasion, they were told not to sit on some decorative chests near the dining room in order not to damage them. A few days later, when they arrived at that part of the house, they found St. Josemaría sitting on one of the chests, tapping it with his heel while looking at them with an amused smile. He explained to them that this indication had been given as a

specific small way to live poverty because there were so many people living there, but that there was nothing wrong with someone sitting on a chest from time to time if he felt like it. And he concluded: “We are not obsessive about living poverty, nor about order, nor about small things, my children. We do everything out of love for God!”^[6] —

Sometimes being meticulous, even in matters related to the spiritual life, may seek to soothe one’s own conscience rather than to please God. Thus our interaction with our Lord can easily end up becoming a formality. St. Josemaría said that “Sanctity has the flexibility of agile muscles. Whoever wishes to be a saint should know how to behave so that while he does something that involves a mortification for him, he omits doing something else – as long as this does not offend God – which he would also find difficult, and

thanks God for this comfort. If we Christians were to act otherwise we would run the risk of becoming stiff and lifeless, like a rag doll. Sanctity is not rigid like cardboard; it knows how to smile, to give way to others and to hope. It is life – a supernatural life.”^[7] —

St. Francis de Sales, at the very beginning of his correspondence with the person who would one day become St. Jane de Chantal, warned her against a possible lack of freedom that she could fall into, opposed to her truly being a loving daughter of God. “A soul that has become attached to the exercise of meditation, if an interruption occurs, you will see it leave with sorrow, anxiety and astonishment. A soul that has true freedom will go out with a calm face and a kind heart to attend to the annoying person who has bothered it. Because it is the same for them either to serve God by

meditating, or to serve Him by putting up with one's neighbor; both things are God's will, but putting up with one's neighbor is necessary at this moment."^[8] We can ask the Virgin Mary to help us draw close to her Son with a heart free of formalities and filled with an authentic and simple love.

^[1] Saint Anthony of Padua, *Sermons*, I, 226.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 53.

^[3] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 95.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 784.

^[5] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 265.

^[6] From St. Josemaría, quoted in Pilar Urbano, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Plaza & Janés, Barcelona 1995, p. 225.

^[7] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 156.

^[8] St. Francis de Sales, *Letter to the Baroness de Chantal*, 14 October 1604.

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