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Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom (with audio)

A homily given by St Josemaría on March 15, 1961

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We have just read in this holy Mass a text from Saint John's Gospel: the scene of the miraculous cure of the man born blind. I imagine that all of us have once again been moved by the power and mercy of God, who cannot look indifferently upon human misfortune. But I should like to fix our attention on other considerations. Specifically, let us try, to see that, when there is love of God, a Christian cannot be indifferent to the lot of other men. He must show respect in his dealings with all men. For he knows that when love shrinks, there arises the danger of thoughtlessly, mercilessly invading the conscience of others.

“And Jesus saw,” says the holy Gospel, “as he passed on his way, a man who had been blind from his birth.”¹ Jesus is passing by. How often have I marveled at this simple way of describing divine mercy! Jesus is headed somewhere, yet he is not too

busy to spot human suffering. Consider, on the other hand, how different was the reaction of his disciples. They ask him: “Master, was this man guilty of sin, or was it his parents, that he should have been born blind?”²

Judging on impulse We cannot be surprised that many persons, even those who think themselves Christians, act in the same way. Their first impulse is to think badly of someone or something. They don’t need any proof; they take it for granted. And they don’t keep it to themselves, they air their snap judgments to the winds.

Trying to be benevolent about it, we could call the disciples’ behavior shortsighted. Then as now, for little has changed, there were others, the Pharisees, who consistently adopted this attitude. Remember how Jesus Christ denounced them? “When John

came, he would neither eat nor drink, and they say of him that he is possessed. When the Son of Man came, he ate and drank with them, and of him they said, Here is a glutton; he loves wine; he is a friend of publicans and sinners.”³

Jesus suffered a campaign of slurs on his name, defamation of his irreproachable conduct, biting and wounding criticism. It is not unusual for some people to accord the same treatment to those who wish to follow the Master while fully conscious of their natural shortcomings and personal mistakes which, given human weakness, are so common and even inevitable. But our experience of human limitations cannot lead us to condone sins and injustices against the good name of anyone, even though their authors try to cover their tracks by just “wondering” aloud. Jesus says that if the father of the family has been

labeled Beelzebub, members of the household cannot expect to fare any better.⁴ But he also adds that “whoever calls his brother a fool shall be in danger of hell fire.”⁵

Where does this unjust, carping attitude come from? It almost seems as though some people are now wearing glasses that disfigure their vision. In principle, they reject the possibility of a virtuous life or, at least, the constant effort to do the right thing. Everything they take in is colored by their own previous deformation. For them, even the most noble and unselfish actions are only hypocritical contortions designed to appear good. “When they clearly discover goodness,” writes Saint Gregory the Great, “they scrutinize it in the hope of finding hidden defects.”⁶

When such a deformation has become almost second nature it is

difficult to help people to see that it is both more human and more truthful to think well of others. Saint Augustine recommends the following rule of thumb: “Try to acquire the virtues you believe lacking in your brothers. Then you will no longer see their defects, for you will no longer have them yourselves.”⁷ Some would find this way of acting naïve. They are wiser, more “realistic.”

Setting their prejudices up as criteria, they are quick to criticize anybody and slow to listen.

Afterward perhaps, out of “openmindedness” or “fair play,” they extend to the accused the possibility of defending himself. Flying in the face of the most elementary justice and morality—for he who accuses must bear the burden of proof—they “grant” the innocent party the “privilege” of proving himself blameless.

I must confess that these thoughts are not borrowed from textbooks on law or moral theology. They are based on the experience of many people who have borne these blows. Time and again, over a number of years, they, like many others, have served as a bull's-eye for the target practice of those who specialize in gossip, defamation, and calumny. The grace of God and a nature little given to recrimination have spared them from the slightest trace of bitterness. "To me it is a very small thing to be judged by you,"⁸ they could say with Saint Paul. Using a more common expression, they could have added that the whole thing was just a storm in a teacup. And that's the truth.

Nonetheless, I can't deny that I am saddened by those who unjustly attack the integrity of others, for the slanderer destroys himself. And I suffer, too, for all those who, in the

face of arbitrary and outrageous accusations, do not know where to turn. They are frightened. They do not believe it is possible, they wonder if the whole thing is not a nightmare.

Several days ago we read in the epistle of the holy Mass the story of Susanna, that chaste woman so falsely accused of wrongdoing by two lustful old men. “Susanna groaned deeply; There is no escape for me, she said, either way. It is death if I consent, and if I refuse I shall be at your mercy.”⁹ How often does the trickery of those moved by envy and intrigue force many noble Christians into the same corner? They are offered only one choice: offend God or ruin their reputation. The only acceptable and upright solution is, at the same time, highly painful. Yet they must decide: “Let me rather fall into your power through no act of

mine, than commit sin in the Lord's sight."¹⁰

Right to privacy

Let us return to the scene of the curing of the blind man. Jesus Christ answered his disciples by pointing out that the blind man's misfortune is not the result of sin, but an occasion to manifest God's power. And with marvelous simplicity, he decides to give the blind man his sight.

Thereupon begins that poor man's happiness, but also his anguish. People simply will not leave him alone. First it is his "neighbors and those who had been accustomed to see him begging."¹¹ The Gospel doesn't say that they even bothered to rejoice; they couldn't bring themselves to believe it, in spite of the fact that the once blind man claimed that he was the man who before couldn't see and now does.

Rather than let him enjoy in peace his new-found fortune, they drag him to the Pharisees, who again inquire how this could have come about. And once again he replies: “He put clay on my eyes; and then I washed, and now I can see.”¹²

And the Pharisees seek to show that what has happened—a great favor and miracle—didn’t happen. Some of them turn to petty, hypocritical, illogical arguments—this man has cured on the Sabbath and, since working on the Sabbath is unlawful, they deny the wonder. Others start taking what today we would call a poll. They first approach the parents of the blind man: “Is this your son, who, you say, was born blind? How then does he now see?”¹³ Fearing the authorities, his parents give an answer that is technically correct: “We can tell you that this is our son, and that he was blind when he was born. We cannot tell how he is able

to see now. We have no means of knowing who opened his eyes for him. Ask the man himself; he is of age. Let him tell you his own story.”¹⁴

Those taking the poll cannot believe, because they have chosen not to believe. “So once more they summoned the man who had been blind and said to him.... ‘This man’—Jesus Christ—to our knowledge, is a sinner.”¹⁵

In a few words Saint John’s account illustrates in a typical way an unscrupulous assault upon a basic natural right of all men, that of being treated with respect.

This way of acting is not a thing of the past. It would be no trouble at all to point out present-day cases of aggressive curiosity which pries morbidly into the private lives of others. A minimum of justice demands that, even when actual wrongdoing is suspected, an

investigation of this sort be carried out with caution and moderation, lest mere possibility be converted into certainty. It is clear that an unhealthy curiosity to perform autopsies on actions that are not illicit but positively good should be ranked under the heading of perversion.

Faced with traders in suspicion who prey on the intimacy of others, we must defend the dignity of every person, his right to peace. All honest men, Christians or not, agree on the need for this defense, for a common value is at stake: the legitimate right to be oneself, to avoid ostentation, to keep within the family its joys, sorrows, and difficulties. We are defending, no less, the right to do good without publicity, to help the disadvantaged out of pure love, without feeling obliged to publicize one's efforts to serve others, much less to bare the intimacy of one's soul

to the indiscreet and twisted gaze of persons who know nothing and want to know nothing of disinterested generosity, except to mock it mercilessly.

But how difficult it is to be free of this meddlesome sleuthing! The means invented to prevent man from being left alone have multiplied. I am referring not only to the technical means, but also to accepted forms of argument, which are so cunning that one endangers his reputation if he but answers them. Thus, for example, a familiar way of arguing assumes that everyone acts from motives that leave something to be desired. Following this gratuitous train of thought, one is obliged to pronounce a mea culpa over his own actions, to indulge in self-criticism. And if someone does not sling a ton of mud upon himself, his critics immediately assume that, in addition

to being a devious villain, he is also hypocritical and arrogant.

On other occasions, a different procedure is followed. The writer or speaker, with libelous intent, “admits” that you are an upright individual, but, he says, other people won’t be willing to admit this and they might argue that you are a thief. Now how do you prove that you are not a thief? Another example: “You are always claiming that your conduct is clean, noble, and upright. Would you mind examining the matter again to see if, on the contrary, it might not be dirty, twisted, and ignoble?”

I haven’t pulled these examples out of the hat. I am absolutely convinced that any person or moderately well-known institution could greatly add to the list. A mistaken idea has arisen in certain environments that grants to the public or the media or

whatever they wish to call it the right to know and to judge the most intimate details of the lives of others.

May I mention something close to my heart? For more than thirty years I have said and written in thousands of different ways that Opus Dei does not seek any worldly or political aims, that it only and exclusively seeks to foster—among all races, all social conditions, all countries—the knowledge and practice of the saving teachings of Christ. It only wants to contribute to there being more love of God on earth and, therefore, more peace and justice among all men, children of a common Father.

Many thousands and millions of people throughout the world have understood this. Some apparently have not, for a variety of reasons. If my heart goes out more to those who understand, still I honor and love the others too, for their dignity is worthy

of respect and esteem, just as all of them are likewise called to the glory of being children of God.

But there will always be a partisan minority who are ignorant of what I and so many of us love. They would like us to explain Opus Dei in their terms, which are exclusively political, foreign to supernatural realities, attuned only to power plays and pressure groups. If they do not receive an explanation that suits their erroneous and twisted taste they continue to allege that here you have deception and sinister designs.

Let me assure you that, when I am faced with such situations, I become neither sad nor concerned. I should add that I would almost be amused, if I could legitimately overlook the fact that they have committed an injustice and a sin, which cries out to Heaven for redress. I am from a region of Spain known for its

frankness, and even humanly speaking I place great store on sincerity. I instinctively react against anything that resembles deceit. When accused, I have always tried to tell the truth, without pride or disdain, even if those who vilified me were uncouth, arrogant, hostile, bereft of a minimum of humanity.

A salve for our eyes

To my mind frequently comes the reply of the man born blind who was asked by the Pharisees for the umpteenth time how the miracle had taken place: “I have told you already, and you would not listen to me. Why must you hear it over again? Would you too become his disciples?”¹⁶

The sin of the Pharisees did not consist in not seeing God in Christ, but in voluntarily shutting themselves up within themselves, in not letting Jesus, who is the light, open their eyes.¹⁷ This closed-

mindfulness immediately affects our relations with others. The Pharisee, who believes himself to be light and does not let God open his eyes, will treat his neighbor unjustly, pridefully: "I thank you, God, that I am not like the rest of men, who steal and cheat and commit adultery, or like this publican here."¹⁸ Thus does he pray. And they hurl insults upon the once blind man, who persists in his truthful account of the miraculous cure: "What, they answered, are we to have lessons from you, all steeped in sin from your birth? And they cast him out from their presence."¹⁹

Among those who do not know Christ, there are many honest persons who have respect for others and know how to conduct themselves properly and are sincere, cordial and refined. If neither they nor we prevent Christ from curing our blindness, if we let our Lord

apply the clay which, in his hands, becomes a cleansing salve, we shall come to know earthly realities and we shall look upon the divine realities with new vision, with the light of faith. Our outlook will have become Christian.

This is the vocation of a Christian. We are called to the fullness of charity which “is patient, is kind. Charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last.”²⁰

The charity of Christ is not merely a benevolent sentiment for our neighbor; it is not limited to a penchant for philanthropy. Poured out in our soul by God, charity transforms from within our mind

and will. It provides the supernatural foundation for friendship and the joy of doing what is right

Contemplate the scene of the cure of the paralytic, as told to us in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter and John were going up to the temple, and on their way they came across a man seated at the gate. It turns out he had been lame from birth. Everything resembles the cure of the blind man. But now the disciples no longer think that the misfortune is due to the paralytic's sins or to the faults of his parents. And they say to him: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk."²¹ Before they poured out scorn, now mercy. Before they had judged contemptuously, now they cure miraculously in the name of the Lord.

Christ is always passing by! Christ continues to pass through the streets and squares of the world, in the

person of his Apostles and disciples. And I fervently beg him to pass through the souls of you who are listening to me now.

Respect and charity

At the beginning we were surprised at the attitude of Jesus' disciples toward the man born blind. They were consistent with that unfortunate saying: "Think badly and you'll be right." Afterward, as they come to know the Master better, and realize what it means to be a Christian, their thoughts are gradually tempered by understanding.

"In any man, writes Saint Thomas Aquinas, "there is an aspect under which others can consider him superior to themselves, according to the Apostle's words, 'Each of you must have the humility to think others better men than himself' (Phil 2:3). It is in this spirit that all men

should honor one another.”²²

Humility is the virtue that teaches us that the signs of respect for others—for their good name, their good faith, their privacy—are not external conventions, but the first signs of charity and justice.

Christian charity cannot be limited to giving things or money to the needy. It seeks, above all, to respect and understand each person for what he is, in his intrinsic dignity as a man and child of God. Consequently, those who impugn the reputation and honor of others show that they are ignorant of some truths of our Christian faith and, in any case, lacking in an authentic love of God. “The charity by which we love God and our neighbor is the same virtue, for God is the reason for our loving our neighbor, and we love God when we love our neighbor with charity.”²³

I hope we will be able to derive some very practical consequences from this conversation with God. Let us especially resolve not to judge others, not to doubt their good will, to drown evil in an abundance of good, sowing loyal friendship, justice, and peace all around us.

And let us resolve never to become sad if our upright conduct is misunderstood by others; if the good which, with the continuous help of our Lord, we try to accomplish is misinterpreted by others, who delight in unjustly guessing at our motives and accuse us of wicked designs and deceitful behavior.

Let us forgive always, with a smile on our lips. Let us speak clearly, without hard feelings, when in conscience we think we ought to speak. And let us leave everything in the hands of our Father God, with a divine silence —“Jesus was silent”²⁴—if we are

confronted with personal attacks, no matter how brutal and shameful they might be. Let us concern ourselves only with doing good deeds. God will see to it that they “shine before men.”²⁵

References

1. *Jn 9:1*.

2. *Jn 9:2*.

3. *Mt 11: 18–19*.

4. See *Mt 10: 24*.

5. *Mt 5:22*.

6. *Moralia*, 6, 22 (PL 75, 750).

7. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 30, 2, 7 (PL 36, 243).

8. *1 Cor 4:3*: Mihi pro minimo est, ut a vobis judicer.

9. *Dan 13: 21*.

10. Dan 13: 22.

11. Jn 9:8.

12. Jn 9: 15.

13. Jn 9: 19.

14. Jn 9: 20.

15. Jn 9: 24.

16. Jn 9: 27.

17. See Jn 9: 39–41.

18. Lk 8–11.

19. Jn 9: 34.

20. 1 Cor 13: 4–7.

21. Acts 3: 6.

22. Summa theologiae, II–II, q. 103, a. 2–3.

23. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*

24. Mt 26: 63.

25. Mt 5: 16

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