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Pleasing God

"We need to be afraid of offending God, and not responding fully to his Love. The perfectionist, in contrast, is afraid of not doing things well enough, and therefore of God becoming angry." A new article on Christian life.

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In the midst of the Spanish civil war, after several months spent hiding in various places, Saint Josemaría decided to leave Madrid. He had to reach a place where his life was not

in constant danger, where he could begin carrying out again his apostolic mission. With a group of his spiritual sons, he crossed the Pyrenees on a dangerous journey and managed to reach Andorra. After passing through Lourdes, he made his way to Pamplona, where the bishop welcomed him and offered him lodging. There, shortly after arriving, during Christmas time 1937, he made a retreat alone. Struggling to pray, he wrote: "Meditation: a lot of coldness. At first, the only clear sensation was the childish desire 'to make my Father-God happy when he has to judge me.' Then, a strong jolt: 'Jesus, say something to me!' repeated many times, full of sorrow for my inner coldness. And an invocation to my Mother in heaven, 'Mama!' And to the guardian angels, and to my children who are already enjoying God. And then, lots of tears and crying... and prayer. Resolutions: 'to

be faithful to the schedule, in ordinary life.”[1]

These are intimate notes in which he ardently records his deep feelings and affections, the state of his soul: coldness, tears, burning desires... He seeks refuge in his Loves: God the Father, Jesus, Mary. And surprisingly, amid the great external tribulation that he was going through at that time, he made a resolution that might seem insignificant: to be faithful to the schedule, in ordinary life. This is undoubtedly one of Saint Josemaría's great qualities: combining a deep and ardent relationship with God, with fidelity in the daily struggle in ordinary things that might seem insignificant.

A risk for those who want to please God

Pleasing someone is the opposite of saddening him, disappointing him. Since we want to love God and please

Him, it's only natural that we are afraid of disappointing Him. But fear can sometimes stir up in our mind and heart exactly what we are trying to avoid. Moreover, fear is a negative feeling, which can't be the basis for a fulfilled life. Maybe that is why "in the Sacred Scriptures the expression 'do not be afraid' is repeated 365 times with different variations, as if to tell us that the Lord wants us to be free from fear, every day of the year."[2]

In his first pastoral letter, the Father warned us of a certain type of fear. He encouraged us to "express the ideal of Christian life without confusing it with perfectionism, and teach people how to live with and accept their own weakness and that of others; practicing, with all its consequences, a daily attitude of hopeful abandonment to God's will, grounded on divine filiation."[3] A holy person is afraid of offending

God, and not responding fully to his Love. The perfectionist, in contrast, is afraid of not doing things well enough, and therefore of God becoming angry. Sanctity is not the same as perfectionism, although sometimes we can confuse them.

How often we become angry on seeing that we have let ourselves be carried away once again by our passions, that we have sinned again, that we are weak in fulfilling the simplest resolutions. We get angry, and think that God must be disappointed; we lose hope that He still loves us, that we can truly share in his life. Sadness sinks into our heart. On these occasions, we need to remember that sadness is an ally of the enemy, and doesn't bring us closer to God but rather distances us from Him. We confuse our anger and temper tantrum with what we think is God's disappointment in us. But all this stems not from our Love for

Him, but from our wounded ego, our unaccepted fragility.

When we read Christ's words in the Gospel, "Be perfect," we want to follow this advice, to ground our life on it, but we run the risk of understanding it as: "Do everything perfectly." We can even think that, if we don't do everything with perfection, we fail to please God; we are not true disciples. But Jesus immediately clarifies the meaning of his words: *Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48)*. It is about the perfection that God offers us by making us sharers in his divine nature: the perfection of eternal Love, of the greatest Love, of "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars,"^[4] the same Love that has created us as free beings and has saved us *while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8)*. For us, being perfect means living as God's children, aware of the value we have in his

eyes, without ever losing the hope and joy that stems from sensing we are children of such a good Father.

Faced with the danger of perfectionism, we should remember that pleasing God doesn't lie in our hands, but in His. *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us (1 Jn 4:10)*. Therefore we should never try to tell God how He has to react to our life. We are creatures, and hence we must learn to respect his freedom, without imposing on Him why or why not He is supposed to love us. In fact, He has shown us his Love, and therefore the first thing He expects from us is that we let Him love us, in his own way.

God loves us freely

Why is it so hard for us to understand God's logic? Don't we have abundant examples of how far God the Father is willing to go to make us happy? Didn't Jesus gird

himself with a towel and wash the apostles' feet?

As Saint Paul wrote, God did not spare his own Son in order to make it possible for us to enjoy happiness forever (see *Rom* 8:32). He wanted to love us with the greatest possible Love, to the ultimate extreme.

However we can still sometimes think that God will only love us as long as we “live up to it” or “measure up.” It is certainly paradoxical. Does a young child need to become “worthy” of its parents' love?

Perhaps we are actually seeking ourselves in our eagerness to prove we are “deserving.” Perhaps it is our own insecurity we confront here, our need to find stable, fixed reference points, seeking them in our deeds, in our ideas, in our perception of reality.

But all we have to do is look at God, who is our Father, and rest in his

Love. In the Baptism of Jesus and in his Transfiguration, the voice of God the Father tells us that he is pleased with his Son. We too have been baptized and, through his Passion, we share intimately in his life, his merits, his grace. As a result, God the Father can look at us pleased, delighted. The Eucharist transmits to us, among other things, a very clear message about God's feelings for us: his hunger to be close to each of us, his readiness to wait for us for as long as necessary, his yearning for intimacy and for a love that responds to his own love for us.

The struggle of a soul in love

Discovering the Love God has for us is the greatest motive we could find for loving. Similarly “the primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him.”[5]

These are not abstract ideas. We see this in such human examples as the demoniac at Gerasa, who after being freed by Jesus and seeing his fellow citizens reject the Master *begged him that he might be with him (Mk 5:18)*. We see it also in Bartimaeus, who after being cured of his blindness *followed him on the way (Mk 10:52)*. We see it finally in Peter, who only after discovering the depth of Jesus' Love, his forgiveness and trust after betraying Him, can follow his call: *Follow me (Jn 21:19)*. The discovery of God's Love is the most powerful motive for our Christian life. That is where our struggle stems from.

Saint Josemaría encouraged us to consider this from the perspective of our divine filiation: "Children... How they seek to behave worthily in the presence of their parents. And the children of kings, in the presence of their father the king, how they seek to uphold the royal dignity! And you?"

Don't you realize that you are always in the presence of the great King, your Father-God?" [6] God's presence doesn't fill his children with fear. Not even when they fall. He himself has wanted to tell us in the clearest possible way that, even when we fall, He is waiting for us. Like the father in the parable, he is eager to come to meet us as soon as we let him, and to give us a hug and cover us with kisses (see *Lk 15:20*).

Faced with the possible fear of saddening God, we can ask ourselves: does this fear unite me with God, and make me think more about Him? Or does it focus my attention on myself: on my expectations, on my struggle, on my achievements? Does it lead me to ask God for forgiveness in Confession, and to be filled with joy when I know that He forgives me, or does it lead me to lose hope? Does it help me to start over joyfully, or does it shut me

in my sadness, in my feelings of helplessness, in the frustration that is born of a struggle based on my own strength... and on the results that I “achieve”?

Mary's smile

An event in Saint Josemaría's life can help us understand this better. It is one of the notes about his interior life that he wrote down to make the task of his spiritual director easier. Although it is a bit long, it is worth quoting it entirely:

“As always happens when I've asked this with humility, regardless of what time I've gone to bed, this morning I woke out of a deep sleep, as if I had been called, totally sure it was time for me to get up. And sure enough, it was a quarter to six. Last night, also as usual, I had asked the Lord to give me strength to overcome my laziness at wake-up time, because (I confess this to my shame) something so small

is enormously hard for me and there are plenty of days when, in spite of that supernatural call, I stay in bed a while longer. Today, when I saw what time it was, I prayed, I struggled... and I stayed in bed. Finally, at six-fifteen according to my alarm clock (which has been broken for some time), I got up. Full of humiliation, I prostrated myself on the floor, acknowledging my fault, and then—with a *Serviam!* [‘I will serve!’]—got dressed and started my meditation. And then, somewhere between six-thirty and a quarter to seven, I saw, for quite some time, that the face of my Lady of the Kisses was filled with happiness, with joy. I looked very carefully. I believed she was smiling, because it had that effect on me, even though her lips hadn’t moved. Very calmly, I said to my Mother a lot of sweet things.”[7]

His effort to fulfill his resolution has perhaps been a struggle for us too at

times: getting up punctually. And he did not succeed in it. It was something that humiliated him. Nevertheless he doesn't confuse his anger and humiliation with the magnanimity of God's heart. And he saw our Lady smile at him, after this failure. Isn't it true that we tend to think that God is happy with us when—and at times, only when—we do things well? Why do we mistake our personal satisfaction with the smile of God, with his tenderness and affection? Do we react in the same way when we get up once again after another fall?

We have often asked our Lady to speak well of us to our Lord—*ut loquaris pro nobis bona*. Sometimes we may even have tried to imagine those conversations between Mary and her Son. In our prayer, we can enter into that intimacy and try to contemplate the love of Mary and of Jesus for each one of us.

“To seek Mary’s smile is not an act of devotional or outmoded sentimentality, but rather the proper expression of the living and profoundly human relationship which binds us to her whom Christ gave us as our Mother. To wish to contemplate our Lady’s smile does not mean letting oneself be led by an uncontrolled imagination.”[8]

Benedict XVI spoke these words in Lourdes, about the young Bernadette. In Mary's first appearance, before presenting herself as the Immaculate Conception, our Lady simply smiled at her. “Mary first showed Bernadette her smile, as if it were the most appropriate entrance way to the revelation of her mystery.”[9]

We too want to see this smile and live in its joy. Our mistakes—no matter how bad—can never erase it. If we get up once again, we can seek

Mary's look and be enkindled anew with her joy.

[1] "*The Way*": *Critical-Historical Edition*, prepared by Pedro Rodríguez, commentary on no. 746, p. 880.

[2] Pope Francis, *Message for the 33rd World Youth Day*, 25 March 2018.

[3] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

[4] Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, "Paradiso," Canto 33.

[5] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 264.

[6] *The Way*, no. 265.

[7] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol 1, Princeton, 2001, p. 361.

[8] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 15 September 2008.

[9] *Ibid.*

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