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Work and Contemplation (II)

The second part of an article on how to turn our work and daily activities into contemplative prayer, following the teachings of St. Josemaría.

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Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and

listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." [1]

The figures of Martha and Mary have often been used throughout history to represent two different forms of life, the contemplative life and the active life, with the first being seen as the more perfect, in keeping with our Lord's words: *Mary has chosen the good portion.*

Usually these concepts have been applied to the religious vocation, understanding by contemplative life, in broad terms, living apart from the world in order to dedicate oneself to

prayer, and by active life efforts such as teaching Christian doctrine, caring for the sick, and other works of mercy.

Viewed from this perspective, for centuries the possibility to be a contemplative “in the midst of activity” has been recognized. The classical meaning of this expression, however, is not that it is possible for the ordinary faithful to be contemplatives in their professional, family and social activities, but rather that this is possible through the apostolic activities and works of mercy on the path of the religious vocation.

St. Josemaría drew new meaning from our Lord's words to Martha and showed that there is no opposition between contemplation and carrying out, as perfectly as possible, our professional work and daily duties.

In a previous editorial we have considered the meaning of Christian contemplation: the simple prayer of many souls who, with loving docility to the Holy Spirit and seeking identification with Christ in everything, are led by the Paraclete to penetrate the depths of God's intimate life, his works and designs, with a wisdom that expands their hearts and minds ever more fully. It is a prayer in which "words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long." [2]

We now want to examine three possible "modes" of contemplation: in periods dedicated exclusively to prayer; while working at a task or doing something that doesn't require total concentration; and finally, in

the case of work that absorb all of one's attention. These three channels together make up the life of contemplation, whereby amid daily activities the soul dwells both "in heaven and on earth," as St. Josemaría used to say.

In the prayer and acts of piety

Contemplation has to be sought first of all in the acts of piety that adorn each day, especially the periods dedicated exclusively to mental prayer.

“ Et in meditatione mea exardescit ignis —'And in my meditation a fire shall flame out.' That is why you go to pray: to become a bonfire, a living flame giving heat and light.” [3] Well done mental prayer is, as it were, a “boiler” that spreads heat to all the other moments of the day.

Daily fidelity to mental prayer is what enables a person to become a

contemplative soul in the middle of the world throughout the day. This requires struggling to maintain a spirit of recollection in the periods dedicated to prayer; assiduous dialogue with our Lord, at times by meditating on a passage from Scripture or a book that helps to focus our mind and heart on God; fighting to overcome distractions; the humility to begin again and again, relying not on our own strength but on God's grace.

St. Josemaría taught us to seek contemplation in the periods dedicated to mental prayer: to contemplate Christ's life, to look steadily at him in the Eucharist, to converse with the three Divine Persons through our Lord's Most Holy Humanity, to go to Jesus through Mary.... In the mental prayer we cannot settle for just reciting vocal prayers, although perhaps we may have to make use of them for an

extended period, but always seeing them as the door that opens the path to contemplation.

Also on a human plane, when friends meet, their conversation normally starts with some conventional phrases. But this can't be the extent of their dialogue. Their conversation has to become more personal, until eventually words become superfluous because of a deep mutual understanding and familiarity. This is even more true with God. "We start with vocal prayers...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." [4]

While working or in any activity

Contemplation is not restricted to times dedicated to mental prayer. It

can be a reality throughout the day, in ordinary activities, while doing the things that need to be done but that don't require total concentration, or during a break in our work.

We can contemplate God while walking along the street, while fulfilling family and social duties, while doing something we find easy, or during an interval in our work, or simply while waiting....

Just as aspirations, during our mental prayer, can be a pathway to contemplation, so too in the midst of other occupations the search for God's presence leads to contemplative life, as God made St. Josemaría experience. "I can't understand it: I know someone who is cold (in spite of his faith, which is unbounded) when close to the divine fire of the Tabernacle. And yet later, in the street, amid the noise of cars

and trams and people—even reading a newspaper!—he is carried away by a mad love for God." [5]

This reality is entirely God's gift, but we will receive it only if we truly want it and don't hinder it through our actions. We can refuse it by failing to keep our senses recollected, or by allowing ourselves to be overcome by curiosity, or immersing ourselves in a torrent of useless thoughts and daydreams that lead us to become distracted and spiritually drained. In a word, when our head and heart "are not in" what we are doing. [6] Contemplative life requires interior mortification, denying ourselves for the love of God, so that he can reign in our hearts and be the focus of all our thoughts and affections.

Contemplation *in and through* ordinary activities

We know that in our prayer we can't be satisfied with reciting aspirations or just reading or meditating; rather we need to dialogue with God and seek to attain, with his grace, contemplation. So too in our work, which has to become prayer, it's not enough just to offer it at the start and give thanks at the end, or to try to renew the offering from time to time, united to the sacrifice of the Mass. All this is undoubtedly very pleasing to God. But a son or daughter of God has to be more daring and aim higher: to work like Jesus in Nazareth, united to him—so that, thanks to the supernatural love with which we work, we come to contemplate God who is Love. [7]

St Josemaría always taught that contemplation is possible not only *while* we are doing something, but also *by means of* the things God wants us to do, *in and through* the tasks themselves, even when

requiring total concentration. St. Josemaria insisted that, if we struggle, a moment will come when we won't be able to distinguish contemplation from action; these two words will end up meaning the same to us.

As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote:

“When of two things the first is the reason for the second, the attention of the soul to the second does not hinder or lessen its attention to the first. And since God is apprehended by the saints as the reason for all things that will be done or known by them, their efforts in perceiving sensible things or in contemplating or doing anything else will in no way hinder their contemplation of God, nor conversely.” [8] Thus if we want to receive the gift of contemplation, we need to make God the end of all our actions, doing them *not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts* . [9]

Since contemplation is, as it were, an anticipation of the beatific vision, the ultimate goal in our life, anything that forms part of God's will for us (including our work, and family and social duties) can be a channel for contemplation. In other words, given that any of these activities can be carried out for and with the love of God, they can also be a means of contemplation, which is nothing other than an especially intimate form of knowing and loving him.

We can contemplate God *in* the activities we carry out for love of him, because that love is a participation in the infinite Love which is the Holy Spirit, who *searches everything, even the depths of God* . [10] The soul that works out of love for God realizes (without becoming distracted) that it loves while working, with the love the Paraclete pours into the hearts of the children of God in Christ. [11] “We

see the hand of God, not only in the wonders of nature, but also in our experience of work and effort." [12]

We can also contemplate God *through* our work, because if it is done for love it will be done as perfectly as possible given the circumstances; it will reflect the divine perfections, like the work of Christ himself. Not necessarily because it is humanly successful, but because it is successful in God's eyes. It may in fact turn out badly, or be a failure from a human point of view, yet nevertheless be well done from God's point of view—done with an upright intention, a spirit of service, and the practice of virtue: in a word, both humanly and supernaturally perfect. Work done in this way is a means of contemplation. And thus we can see that contemplation is possible in and through activities that require total concentration

A Christian who works for love of God works in vital union with Christ. Our work thus becomes God's work, *operatio Dei*, and hence a means of contemplation. But for this to be true, it is not enough to be in the state of grace and for the work to be morally acceptable. It must also be informed by heroic charity, and carried out with heroic virtue, and in the divine manner the gifts of the Holy Spirit confer on those who are docile to his action.

Contemplation in daily life gives the soul a foretaste of definitive union with God in heaven. It leads us to work with ever greater love, enkindling the desire to see him not just through the activities we carry out, but face to face. "We begin to live as captives, as prisoners. And 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, our soul

longs to escape. It is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet. One begins to love Jesus, in a more effective way, with the sweet and gentle surprise of his encounter....It is a new mode of going about this earth, a mode that is divine, supernatural, marvellous. Remembering oft-repeated phrases of the Spanish Golden Age, we may like to taste for ourselves that truth: 'I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me!' (cf. Gal 2:20)." [13]

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[1] Lk 10:38-42

[2] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God* , 307

[3] St. Josemaría, *The Way* , 92

[4] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God* , 296

[5] St. Josemaría, *Intimate notes* , no. 673 (26 March 1932). Cited by Andres

Vazquez de Prada, in *The Founder of Opus Dei* , vol. 1, p. 320.

[6] St. Josemaría, cf. *The Way* 815.

[7] Cf. 1 Jn 4:8

[8] St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* ,
Suppl., q. 82, a. 3 ad 4

[9] 1 Thess 2:4

[10] 1 Cor 2:10

[11] Cf. Rom 5:5

[12] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By* , 48

[13] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God* ,
296-297