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A Love Both Human and Divine

Some reflections on the divine and human dimensions of married love, during this Year of the Family in the Church that ends next June 26th.

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Barely a year after Saint Josemaría departed for heaven, Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo, in an *In memoriam* ceremony at the University of Navarra, described his qualities as an instrument of God: “Two very deep convictions defined

the human and supernatural personality of Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer: an ever renewed and true humility – the strong realization that every gift comes from God – and, at the same time, a clear awareness of his vocation.”

The founder of the Work stressed the gratuity of God’s gifts in a homily about the Christian vocation: “Before God called us, there was nothing more than personal wretchedness. Let us realize that the lights shining in our soul (faith), the love wherewith we love (charity), and the desire sustaining us (hope) are all free gifts from God” (*Christ is Passing By*, 3). Everything we are and have is the work of God.

Before attempting to understand human love better, we need to put it in the right perspective. Everything good in our life is a gift we have received from God – including the

ability to love. Therefore, as Saint Josemaria said in his homily on the campus of the University of Navarra in October 1967, human love “is very dear to me ... I am referring to the noble love between a man and a woman, to courtship and marriage. I want to say once again that this holy human love is not something merely to be permitted or tolerated alongside the true activities of the spirit ... Love which leads to marriage and family can also be a marvelous divine way, a vocation, a path for a complete dedication to our God. What I have told you about doing things perfectly, about putting love into the little duties of each day, about discovering that ‘divine something’ contained in these details, finds a special place in that vital sphere in which human love is present.” And he added: “I have entrusted your love to Holy Mary, Mother of Fair Love.”

Holy human love... If it isn't holy, love is incomplete, weak, impoverished, mutilated, also humanly, because it doesn't know its origin and its end. Neither human love nor marriage have been invented by us men. Only God is its author. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says (no. 1604): "God who created man out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created the human being man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves us. It is good, very good, in the Creator's eyes. And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful..." Hence the measure of Christian love is found not in man's heart but in God's heart.

When a married couple seeks to develop their love to its full potential, they need to strive to learn to love each other (within all their human limitations) with a love that resembles the qualities of divine love – that it be a true image of God’s way of loving. Then any monotony, stagnation or routine in their married life can be overcome. *More* love is always possible. No matter what the circumstances and obstacles are that arise over the years, both from within and from without.

As Saint Josemaría insisted in a get-together with thousands of married couples in São Paulo, Brazil in June 1974. “Love each other very much. The love of Christian spouses (especially if they are children of God in Opus Dei) is like wine, which improves over the years and grows in value. But your love is much more important than the best wine in the

world. It is a splendid treasure that God has wanted to grant you. Take good care of it. Don't throw it away! Guard it!"

Saint Josemaría was a master in the difficult art of loving because he taught us to always set our sights on God's love: "a small act, done for Love, is worth so much!" And he often suggested to married couples simple but eloquent ways to express their love. Thus, when a woman asked how to keep her love for her husband enkindled, the founder of Opus Dei, besides mentioning supernatural considerations, also pointed to a small practical and daily detail: that she should try to take special care of preparing the food when she knew her husband was going to arrive home especially tired.

Learning how to love is essential for a truly human life. "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being

that is incomprehensible for himself; his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

God’s plan for marriage is tailored to the measure of his own Love, and not to our human limitations. Delving into the depths and broadening the horizons of human love is an adventure without borders. To do so, we need to ask God for help, since He is the only One who truly knows the possibilities and weaknesses of the human heart. We need to ask Him at every step, in the intimacy of our dialogue with Him, what He expects of us.

All the depictions of noble human love in the world’s great prose and poetry are sparks from the fire of

divine Love. Hence they often reveal a longing for the infinite in the human heart, while showing how easy it is to lose sight of the right path and fall into a degrading love. The only true love is that which comes from Love. The rest, at best, are pseudo-loves, no matter how loudly they are proclaimed today. Saint Augustine places our love in the right perspective: “How is it, Lord, that I seek you? Because in seeking you, my God, I am seeking a happy life. Make me look for you so that my soul may live, because my body lives from my soul and my soul lives from you.”

Ultimately love, like God himself, is a mystery. Why have I fallen in love with this woman (or this man)? Why should I give part of my life to someone with these limitations? How is it possible that I love this poor creature, with a love stronger than my love for myself and my own

happiness? This is only possible if human love is united to divine love. We need to understand and accept that human love, even with all its limitations, is not an obstacle to reaching God. Quite the contrary: it is the opportunity to draw closer to Him. As the founder of Opus Dei said when speaking about Christian marriage: matrimony is “a sacred sign that sanctifies, an action of Jesus, who comes into the souls of those who marry and invites them to follow Him, transforming their married life into a divine path on earth.”

It was God who said, when creating man and woman and foreseeing all upright human love: “I want you to exist... it is very good that you exist” (cf. *Gen 1:31*) By its very nature and irreversibly, human love can only be a “replica,” a “repetition” of God’s love. We know we will never fully achieve this, but the sincere

struggle to make it a reality in Christian marriage brings with it happiness for the spouses, and a merciful look from God who rewards even the glass of water that we give someone in his name.

Loving the other spouse as God loves him or her. Here is a task inspiring enough to fill our whole life and the thousand lives we might have. As the founder of Opus Dei frequently remarked in the final period of his earthly life: “Truly, our time to love, to give, to make amends is short.”

One of the qualities of God’s love is its all-embracing nature. God loves us as we are. He doesn’t reject any aspect of our personality. Although we may have dirty faces and disheveled hearts, He continues to love each person with a love of predilection. He accepts us as we are, although He wants us to be better. Hence Saint Josemaría so often

insisted on the need to love the defects of one's spouse, when these are not an offense to God; and if they are, we should try to help them change with our example and affection. "Despite these weaknesses, you will help remedy the great deficiencies of others, as long as you strive to correspond to God's grace. By realizing that you are just as weak as others – capable of all human errors and horrors – you will be more understanding, more gentle." Nothing should surprise or scare us, since all of us are creatures of flesh and blood.

Human love is woven of deeds that can be seen, heard and touched. It is both intuitive and rational, creative and anticipating the other person's needs.

If we truly want to live by love, if we want to help overcome the theoretical and practical confusions

that can arise when making this fundamental vocation of the human being a reality, we need to learn to love truly in our own lives.

(Adapted from chapter 7 of *Como las manos de Dios*, by Antonio Vázquez, Palabra ed.)

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