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The Silence of a Contemplative Soul: The Time of Afternoon and Night

The custom of focusing our time of work in the afternoon and our time of night can help us gather our senses and engage in a wordless dialogue with the Lord.

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News of John the Baptist's death had just reached Jesus. Hurt and grieving, He sought to withdraw *to a deserted*

place by himself (Mt 14:13). Yet, seeing the great crowd following Him, his heart was moved with compassion. He decided to set aside his plans. In addition to healing the sick, He performed the miracle of the loaves and fish to ensure no one went home hungry. Only at the end of the day, after bidding the last person farewell, did He find the moment of intimacy with his Father that He longed for. The evangelist tells us that even when night fell, *He was there alone (Mt 14:23).*

This example from Jesus reminds us “that we need to pause, to experience moments of intimacy with God, ‘detaching ourselves’ from the everyday commotion in order to listen, to go to the “root” that sustains and nourishes life.”^[1] This recollection is not merely about our need for rest after a busy day, but rather our desire to enter into an exclusive dialogue with the Father.

Saint Josemaría likewise felt the need for this “blessed solitude”^[2] to nourish his spiritual life. For this reason, he established the custom within Opus Dei of dedicating time in the evening and during the afternoon work period for recollection. These moments are meant to “gather our senses and faculties – often scattered by the day’s various activities – and focus them on an intimate dialogue with the Divine Guest who dwells in the sanctuary of our heart.”^[3]

In the afternoon, this dialogue turns to offering the work completed out of love for the Lord and others. At night, the conversation focuses on reviewing the day with God and rekindling the desire to receive Him in Communion the following morning.

Of course, how these practices are lived out depends on each person’s

circumstances: the rhythm of home life, their place of residence, and the nature of their work. At times, like Jesus, we might need to interrupt this recollection to meet others' needs: a child who requires special attention, a friend who needs to vent or be consoled, a work trip with colleagues, or a neighbor looking for support. External silence is not always achievable.

But, like any other person in love, we can always cultivate our desire for intimate dialogue with the Lord. We strive to feel accompanied by Him amid our daily tasks and in every encounter with the people He places in our path. "We children of God have to be contemplatives," Saint Josemaría said, "people who, in the midst of the din of the throng, know how to find silence of soul in a lasting conversation with Our Lord, people who know how to look at him as they look at a Father, as they look

at a Friend, whom they love madly.”^[4] —

Prayer and work: one and the same reality

In one of his letters, the founder of Opus Dei wrote: “An essential part of this work — the sanctification of ordinary work — which God has entrusted to us is the good execution of the work itself: its human perfection, the diligent fulfillment of all professional and social duties.”^[5] —

For this reason, when speaking about the custom of dedicating time to afternoon work, Saint Josemaría advised avoiding a scattering of efforts across a multitude of small activities. Instead, he encouraged embracing mortifications that “facilitate the intense, faithful, complete, and loving fulfillment of our ordinary work.”^[6] — The priority of this practice is, therefore, to create the conditions for performing good

work, which is the first step toward sanctifying it and offering it to the Lord. “Those who are pious, with a piety devoid of affectation, carry out their professional duty perfectly, since they know that their work is a prayer raised to God.”^[7] —

In this regard, the effort to embrace silence can be an invaluable ally for living the spirit of afternoon work and carrying out our responsibilities with professionalism. Silence, at times, will not necessarily mean the absence of external noise, as this may not always be possible. Instead, it refers to carrying out our tasks with the peace and focus that each role requires. “Often, we finish one task only to immediately pick up our phone to do something else. We live in constant motion, and this doesn’t help—it leads to superficiality. Silence deepens the heart.”^[8] —

Multitasking, rushing, and the constant search for distractions

create inner noise that makes it harder to work well, and therefore to sanctify that work. On the other hand, focusing our full attention on the task at hand, aware of the Lord's loving gaze upon us in every moment, helps us bring Him glory through our work.

A contemplative spirit, which means a desire to turn our entire day into prayer, does not distance us from our responsibilities. Rather, it moves us to perform each specific task well, out of love for God and service to others. In this way, an activity that might otherwise go unnoticed takes on a divine, eternal meaning as it becomes a dialogue with the Lord. Saint Josemaría often said he did not distinguish “between prayer and work: everything is contemplation and apostolate.”^[9] Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, reflecting on this idea, remarked that our founder, “does not know when he is praying or when he

is working, because for him the two are on the same level and blend into one.”^[10] —

Living the time of afternoon work in this way becomes, so to speak, excellent training for extending a contemplative spirit throughout the entire day. In this way, our work “doesn’t take our minds off God but reinforces our desire to do everything for Him, to live for Him, with Him and in Him.”^[11] — Even when this time is not dedicated to work — perhaps because our workday is finished, we are on a break, or we’re enjoying a day of rest — we can approach any activity with an interior silence and contemplative spirit. This prepares our hearts for our time of prayer later in the day, enabling us to come before God with calm minds and hearts already focused on Him, because we have already turned toward Him over the last few hours.

Then mental prayer becomes a continuation of the dialogue we have maintained with the Lord throughout the day, especially during the more intense period of work in the afternoon. Thanks to these moments of meditation, “we will be able to turn our whole day into a continuous praise of God, in a natural way and without any outward display. Just as people in love are always thinking about each other, we will be aware of God's presence.”^[12]

A silence to savor

The DYA Residence had been active for two years when Saint Josemaría, bearing the full weight of formative activities for young people, asked some of his children to assist him in this task. To help prepare them, he wrote an instruction summarizing key ideas to inspire their apostolic work with the St. Raphael boys.

Among the features he deemed important to foster in the residence was a love for silence: “Our students must remember that their silence means prayer, work, and the rest of others. After the evening commentary, there will be a greater silence until after the next day’s Mass.”^[13] For Saint Josemaría, this silence was not primarily a matter of discipline or order but a breathing space for prayer and the following day’s Mass: “We savor it, and it becomes indispensable.”^[14]

Often, we feel the need to raise our voices to be heard, believing it is the only way to capture attention or make our point more compelling. God, however, works in the opposite way. *While gentle silence enveloped all things, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven*, the Book of Wisdom recounts (18:14-15). It was in the quiet of the stable, not the busyness of the inn, that God became

a child. In contrast to a lifestyle dominated by constant stimulation, Jesus invites us to seek silence and distance ourselves from noise.

At times, we may end a day upset or unsettled, struggling to make sense of a situation as we go to bed. On other occasions, we come to the evening satisfied with how things have gone or filled with joy. These moments can be brought to the Lord in nighttime prayer, revisiting the emotions that have stirred our hearts with Him. Troubles and confusion from earlier in the day can be transformed into a melody when considered alongside the other “notes” of the day. Joys, too, take on a fuller meaning: they are not isolated moments but part of a song of self-giving. And this melody is not something we impose based on our expectations, but a harmony we discover by listening to God’s voice in the silence.

A philosopher once remarked, “All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”^[15] The nighttime is an opportunity to enter the deepest room of our inner selves—the place “where great secrets pass between God and the soul.”^[16] In doing so, we step away from superficiality, opening “an inner space in our very depths to enable God to dwell there, so that his word will remain within us and love for him take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life.”^[17]

This habit can help us grow in our desire to live closely with Jesus, the treasure for which we have sold all we had (cf. *Mt* 13:44). The heart needs solitude to be purified and nourished by the only passion that truly frees it. We express this desire in prayer and the next day's Mass. Just as we become excited when something long-awaited draws near,

the night is a chance to renew our longing for this double encounter with God. It is a longing deeper than mere passing enthusiasm; it is a grace that shapes our lives. For Saint Josemaría, this period was indispensable: it was a time to nurture the ideal that gave meaning to his life, the call God had placed in his heart. It is a time to foster Jesus' own attitude at the end of a busy day, when He yearned to be alone with his Father.

Jesus would have learned to value these moments of silence at home in Nazareth. Indeed, not a single word of Saint Joseph is recorded in the Gospel: he was a man who prioritized listening. Through his attentiveness, he recognized God's voice in the angel's message (cf. *Mt* 1:20-24). Mary pondered all that happened in her heart; both the

wonder surrounding her Son's birth (cf. *Lk 2:19*) and the incomprehension she felt at his reply when they found Him in the temple (cf. *Lk 2:51*). She needed time to savor these events, to discover the melody God was weaving through her joys and her uncertainties.

Jesus, too, began his public ministry only after thirty years of silence and hidden life—a time of work and contemplation in which He *grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men* (*Lk 2:52*).

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[1] Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 7-III-2012.

[2] Cf. *The Way*, no. 304.

[3] Don Javier, *Family Letters* (IV), 1-IX-1997, no. 222.

[4] *The Forge*, no. 738.

[5] St. Josemaría, *Letter 24*, no. 18.

[6] St. Josemaría, *Crónica*, 1967, pg. 788.

[7] *The Forge*, n. 739.

[8] Pope Francis, Audience, 15-XII-2021.

[9] *Instruction 19-III-1934*, note 35.

[10] Don Álvaro, commentary on *Instrucción 8-XII-1941*, note 38.

[11] *In Dialogue with the Lord*, no. 190.

[12] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 119.

[13] *Instruction 9-I-1935*, no. 169.

[14] *Ibid*, note 115.

[15] Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 139.

[16] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, I, no. 14.

^[17] Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 7-III-2012.

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