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To Know Him and To Know Yourself (XII): Souls of Liturgical Prayer

Saint Josemaria found in the words and actions of the Church's liturgy an abundant source for personal prayer.

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In April 1936 social tensions are increasing in Spain. But the DYA Academy is trying to keep up its peaceful atmosphere of study. Amid these strange days, a resident writes

his parents telling them that the day before, led by their teacher, they had practiced some liturgical songs in an atmosphere he remembers as being very joyful.[1] We might wonder why 30 university students were spending Sunday night practicing songs for the liturgy.

The answer can be found in Saint Josemaría's decision, a few months earlier, to include in the Academy's plan of formation some classes on Gregorian chant. Although as a young parish priest in Perdiguera, Saint Josemaría regularly celebrated a sung Mass, that decision didn't reflect a personal interest. Nor was it due to a scholarly interest, a result of the development of the Liturgical Movement in Spain. Rather that decision was the result of his pastoral experience, motivated only by the desire to help those young people become "souls of prayer."

It is interesting to recall that the three publications Saint Josemaría was working on during those years were all aimed at facilitating dialogue with God. The first focused on personal meditation, the second fostered popular piety, while the third (which never saw the light of day) was meant to encourage readers to immerse themselves in liturgical prayer. The fruit of the first initiative was *Consideraciones espirituales*, which would later give rise to his well-known work *The Way*. The second initiative resulted in his short work *Holy Rosary*, while the third was to be entitled *Devociones litúrgicas [Liturgical Devotions]*. Although the publication of this last work was announced for 1939, for various reasons it never came to fruition. However the prologue, prepared by Bishop Felix Bilbao of Tortosa, is still preserved. Entitled *Pray and pray well!*, this unpublished text encourages readers to deepen in

their love for the Church's liturgy, led by the author of the book, in order to attain an "effective, warm and solid prayer that unites them intimately with God."[2]

Giving voice to the Church's prayer

For Saint Josemaría, the liturgy was not simply a set of rules aimed at giving solemnity to certain ceremonies. He suffered when the way of celebrating the sacraments and other liturgical actions was not truly at the service of the people's encounter with God and with the other members of the Church. Once, after attending a liturgical celebration, he wrote: "Lots of clergy: the Archbishop, the chapter of canons, the curates, cantors, servers and acolytes... Magnificent ornaments: silk, gold, silver, precious stones, lace and velvet... Music , choir, art... And... without people! Splendid rites, without people."[3]

His concern for the *people* in the liturgy was deeply theological. In liturgical actions, the Trinity interacts with the entire Church and not just with one of its parts. It is not by chance that most of the reflections Saint Josemaría dedicated in *The Way* to the liturgy are found in the chapter entitled *The Church*. For the founder of Opus Dei, the liturgy is a privileged place to experience the ecclesial dimension of Christian prayer. There we sense that we are all united in addressing God.

Liturgical prayer, always personal, opens up horizons that go beyond individual circumstances. If in personal meditation we are the speaking subject, in the liturgy the subject is the entire Church. If in our dialogue alone with God it is we who speak as members of the Church, in liturgical prayer it is the Church who speaks through us.

Thus learning to say the *we* of liturgical prayers is a great school to complement the various dimensions of our relationship with God. There we discover that we are a member of this great family that is the Church. Saint Josemaría advised us: “Your prayer should be liturgical. I would like to see you using the psalms and prayers from the missal, rather than private prayers of your own choice.”[4]

Learning to pray liturgically requires the humility to receive from others the words that we will say. It also requires a recollected heart that recognizes and values the relationships uniting all Christians. Hence it can be helpful to remember that we are praying together with those who are with us at that moment and also with those who are absent; with Christians from our own country, from neighboring countries, from the whole world... We are also

united in our prayer with those who have gone before us and are being purified or are already enjoying the glory of heaven. Liturgical prayer is not an anonymous formula; it is “filled with faces and names.”[5] We unite ourselves with all those who are part of our life and who, like us, live “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” sharing in the life of the Trinity.

Embodying the Church’s prayer

We know that, for Saint Josemaría, the sanctification of work did not mean simply saying some prayers *during* our work, but above all turning into prayer the very action of doing our work for the glory of God, striving to do it as well as possible, knowing that our Heavenly Father is watching us with love. Similarly, liturgical prayer does not mean primarily saying prayers *during* the liturgical actions, but rather carrying

out these ritual actions *digne, attente ac devote*, with the dignity, attention and devotion they deserve, being present in what is done. They are not just occasions for making individual acts of faith, hope and love, but actions *through which* the entire Church expresses its faith, hope and love.

Saint Josemaría gave great importance to *learning how to be present* in the various acts of worship, to the “good manners” of piety. The dignity liturgical prayer requires is closely connected with one’s bodily comportment, since what we want to carry out is to a certain extent first expressed there. The celebration of Holy Mass, going to Confession, Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, etc., involve various bodily actions, since they are prayer in action. Liturgical prayer, therefore, also involves praying with our body. Moreover, it means

learning to embody, here and now, the prayer of the Church. And although often it is the priest who has the mission of lending his voice and hands to Christ the Head, it is the assembly that gives voice and visibility to the entire Mystical Body of Christ. The realization that the prayer of the saints and the souls in purgatory is seen and heard through us can encourage us to care for the “good manners” of piety.

Besides dignity, liturgical prayer requires that it be carried out attentively. Hence, in addition to concentrating on the words we are saying, it is important to “put ourselves into” the moment we are living in the deepest possible way. We need to clearly realize who we are with, and why and for what purpose. This clear awareness requires a previous formation, which can always be improved. Saint Josemaría said: “Slowly. Consider

what you are saying, to whom it is being said and by whom. For that hurried talk, without time for reflection, is just empty noise. And with Saint Teresa, I will tell you that, however much you move your lips, I do not call it prayer.”[6]

Encounter with each Person of the Trinity

Despite the inevitable distractions due to our fragility, in liturgical prayer we participate in the mysterious but real encounter of the whole Church with the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Therefore our prayer is enriched by learning to distinguish when we are addressing the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The liturgy usually places us face to face with God the Father, although He is often addressed simply as “God” or “Lord.” He is the origin of all the blessings the Trinity bestows on the world, and to Him return,

through his Son, all the praises that creatures are capable of expressing.

What we say to the Father we say *through* Jesus, who is not so much *in front of* us as *with* us. The Word has become incarnate to bring us to the Father. And therefore discovering his presence at our side, as a brother who knows and is not ashamed of our weakness, fills us with consolation and daring. Moreover liturgical prayer, as the public prayer of the Church, is born from the prayer of Jesus. Not only is it a continuation of his prayer when He was on this earth, but it is an expression, today and now, of his intercession for us in heaven (cf. *Heb* 7:25). Sometimes we also address prayers directly to Jesus, seeing the Son as our Saviour. Hence liturgical prayer is a marvelous way to be in harmony with Christ's priestly heart.

The prayer addressed to the Father through the Son is carried out in the Holy Spirit. Being aware in liturgical prayer of the presence of the third Person of the Trinity is a great gift from God. It is easy for us to overlook the “Great Unknown,” as Saint Josemaría sometimes would call Him, like the light or air around us. However we know that without light we would be unable to see and without air we couldn’t breathe. The Holy Spirit acts in a similar way in the liturgical dialogue. Although we usually don’t address Him directly, we know that He dwells in us and, with unspeakable groanings, moves us to address the Father with the words Jesus taught us. Hence his action is manifested indirectly. More than in the words we say, or to whom we say them, the Spirit manifests Himself in how we say them. He is present in the sighs that become a song and in the silences that allow God to work in our heart.

Just as the presence of the wind is perceived by the objects it sets in motion, so we can glimpse the presence of the Holy Spirit when we experience the effects of his action. For example, one of the first effects of his action is the awareness that we are praying as daughters and sons of God in the Church. We also experience his action when He makes the Word of God resonate within us not as a human word but as the Word of the Father addressed to each of us. Above all, the Holy Spirit is manifested in the tenderness and generosity with which the Father and the Son pour themselves out on each of us when in the liturgical celebration they forgive us, enlighten us, strengthen us, or bestow on us a special gift.

Finally, the action of the Holy Spirit is so intimate and necessary that it is He who makes it possible for the liturgical action to be true

contemplation of the Trinity. He enables us to see the entire Church and Jesus himself present, when our senses tell us otherwise. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us that the soul of liturgical prayer is not the formal fulfillment of a series of words or external movements, but the love with which we sincerely strive to serve and let ourselves be served. The Holy Spirit helps us to share in his personal mystery when we learn to rejoice in a God who lowers Himself to serve us, so that later we can serve others.

I have lived the Gospel

It shouldn't surprise us that one of the most frequently used terms in Scripture and Tradition to refer to liturgical actions is "service." Discovering this dimension of service in liturgical prayer has many consequences for our interior life. Not only because those who serve

out of love do not put themselves at the center, but also because seeing the liturgy as service is the key to transforming it into life. Although it might seem paradoxical, in many liturgical prayers we find the exhortation to *imitate* in our ordinary life what we have just celebrated. This invitation doesn't mean we should extend liturgical language to our family and professional relationships. Rather it means turning into a "program" for our own life what the rite has enabled us to contemplate and live. [7] That is why Saint Josemaría, when contemplating God's action in his daily life, sometimes exclaimed: "Truly, I have lived the Gospel of the day." [8]

To *live* the liturgy of the day and thus transform our daily life into service, into a "Mass" that lasts twenty-four hours, we need to reflect on our personal circumstances in the light

of what we have celebrated. Saint Josemaría used to take notes of the words or expressions that struck him during the celebration of Mass or in the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. So much so that one day he wrote: “I will not make a note of any psalm, since I would have to note all of them, as there is nothing but marvels in them, which the soul sees when God is being served.”[9] It is true that liturgical prayer is a source of personal prayer, but it is equally true that without careful reflection it is very difficult to *personally assimilate* the riches of liturgical prayer.

It is in the silence of our personal prayer that the words of the liturgy take on an intimate and personal force for us. Mary’s example is very enlightening here. Our Lady teaches us that, in order to put into action the *fiat*, the “let it be done unto me” of the liturgy, to transform it into

service, we need to dedicate time to personally pondering all these things in our heart (cf. *Lk* 2:19).

Juan Rego

[1] Cf. “Un estudiante en la Residencia DYA. Cartas de Emiliano Amann a su familia (1935-1936),” in *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 2, 2008, p. 343.

[2] General Archive of the Prelature, 77-5-3.

[3] *Intimate notes*, no. 1590, 26 October 1938; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 528, p. 695.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 86.

[5] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 274.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 85.

[7] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 88.

[8] *Notebook IV*, no. 416, 26 November 1931; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 86, p. 280.

[9] *Notebook V*, no. 681, 3 April 1932; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 86, p. 279.

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