

From Heart to Heart: Evangelizing in a Time of Change (II)

This is the mission the Lord entrusts to us: to help others come into contact with Someone who is alive; to let our daily lives show that Christ is real and that He can truly dwell in our history, our relationships, and even our weaknesses.

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One of Jesus' shortest parables has all the vividness of a childhood memory: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until it was all leavened" (Mt 13:33). In the 1st-century Nazareth, there were no bakeries; housewives usually took care of the entire bread-making process, from grinding the grain to kneading the flour, mixing it with yeast, and finally baking the dough. This is what our Lady did, and the child Jesus' eyes did not miss a single thing.^[1]

Twenty centuries later, on the other side of the Mediterranean, a boy of the same age enjoyed that ritual during the summer holidays: "It still gives me pleasure to recall the whole ceremony. There was a real ritual involved in preparing the leaven well: a small lump of leavened dough, kept from the previous batch, was added to water and sifted flour;

it was then mixed and kneaded and covered with a cloth and, protected in that way, it was allowed to stand until it had risen as much as it would. It was then cut into portions and placed in the oven, and eventually out came marvellous, spongy bread. Because the leaven had been properly conserved and prepared, it allowed itself to be dispersed – to disappear – in the midst of that mass, that *multitude*, giving it quality and goodness.”^[2]—

Like yeast

The Kingdom of God is like yeast. Very little yeast is needed to transform the dough; it is enough for that small amount to be truly alive, vibrant, and well mixed, to the point of becoming indistinguishable from the rest.^[3] Thus begins a discreet, apparently gentle and yet unstoppable process: the fermentation that allows the bread to

be produced. “Our hearts should be filled with joy when we consider that what we are is just this: the leaven that transforms the dough (...) to reach all hearts, carrying out in all of them the great work of transforming them into wholesome bread, so that it be the peace – the joy and the peace – of all families, of all peoples: *iustitia, et pax, et gaudium in Spiritu Sancto*, justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”^[4] —

Over the years, Saint Josemaría would often refer to this parable of Jesus,^[5] because he saw in it a very eloquent image to describe the apostolic dynamism of Opus Dei: Christians perfectly mixed with the mass of the world, called to vivify it, like yeast, from within.^[6] In this sense, although the secularized world may sometimes appear as a hostile environment, it is actually the natural medium for the charism of Opus Dei. And vice versa: the Work,

as one more actor in the great family of the Church, specifically responds to the need to embody the Christian message in all spheres of life in a secularized world.

Saint Josemaría understood early on that the Work did not come to solve a circumstantial problem of society or the Church,^[7] because the world will always need a divine breath to renew it from its very core. At the same time, this gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church does not come by chance at a time of transition from a society of Christendom to a world of apostolic mission. In an era in which Christianity is no longer at the center of cultural and institutional life, the clearest and most credible voice we can offer is that of our concrete lives, lived with Christ, alongside others. It is a time for authentic conversations, approachable faces, and open hearts. It is a time for an apostolate that requires the presence of Jesus,

through his disciples, in every corner of the world.

Witnesses before teachers

The contemporary man, wrote Saint Paul VI, “listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”^[8] This is an apostolate that stems from how we live, more than from what we know. The crucial thing, before brilliant answers or arguments, is a life inhabited by Christ and the value – or rather, the simplicity – of letting it shine through. Saint Josemaría once described it like this: “In reality, it is enough to let others come close to you,”^[9] to carry Christ’s fire in our hearts and walk with others – the etymological origin of the word *converse* – along the path of life.

There is a hidden hunger in many people’s hearts: hunger for meaning, beauty, and truth, which is often not

expressed in religious terms. It is felt, rather, in the fatigue of the day, doubts, anxieties, and weaknesses. That is where we can gently step in, not as teachers, but as fellow travellers. With humility, which is “walking in truth,”^[10] we will tell them what sustains us, what gives us peace, where we find strength, what makes us hope. We will share our inner life, our search, our intimate friendship with the Lord, showing also – perhaps, above all – our vulnerability, because that is where grace can be seen more clearly.

“If we act in this way, we give those around us the example of a simple and normal life which is consistent, even though it has all the limitations and defects which are part and parcel of the human condition. And when they see that we live the same life as they do, they will ask us: Why are you so happy? How do you manage to overcome selfishness and

comfort-seeking? Who has taught you to understand others, to live well and to spend yourself in the service of others? Then we must disclose to them the divine secret of christian existence. We must speak to them about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary. The time has come for us to use our poor words to communicate the depth of God's love which grace has poured into our souls.”^[11]

From heart to heart

Saint Josemaría saw friendship as the best path for an apostle to tread; he realized the strength of interpersonal relationships forged one by one. The apostolate of “friendship and trust”^[12] involves wanting the good of the other, wanting the good *that is* the other; building authentic relationships, speaking from the heart. “When I speak to you about ‘apostolate of friendship,’ I mean a *personal* friendship, self-sacrificing

and sincere friendship: face to face, heart to heart.”^[13]

In 2019, the Father wrote us a long letter to remind us that friendship is not just one of many aspects of an ordinary Christian’s apostolate: it is at the core of their mission.

Friendship is not something we build or do; it just *is*. I *am* a friend, my arms are open, and my face is turned toward an encounter. “When a friendship is like that, loyal and sincere, there is no way it can be instrumentalized. Each friend simply wants to pass on to the other the good they experience in their own life. Normally we will do this without even realizing it, through our example, our joy and a desire to serve that is expressed in a thousand little ways. Nevertheless, ‘the importance of witness does not mean that our words are not needed. Why should we not speak of Jesus, why should we not tell others that He

gives us strength in life, that we enjoy talking with Him, that we benefit from meditating on his words?’ And then, naturally, friendship ends up in personal confidences, full of sensitive respect for freedom, as a necessary result of the genuine character of that friendship.”^[14]

This apostolic style does not make a lot of noise. It generally goes unnoticed in newspapers, congresses, and pastoral plans. But its discretion has nothing to do with secrecy: it stems from a deeper reality, the undeniable truth that an essential part of true history is forged in everyday life. One of the great authors of the 19th century intuited this: “The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a

hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”^[15]

This apostolic style, which the Church needs more and more, changes the world from within. It moves slowly, yes, but it reaches the deepest places. It touches the heart. And the heart that has been touched by grace may falter or stray, but it has been marked by fire. This is usually how true Christians are born: through heart-to-heart sharing. *Cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart, as the cardinal motto of St. John Henry Newman proclaimed. The Church was born with a few men and women transformed by their encounter with Jesus. It is often reborn today in the same way, through simple conversations between friends, sincere words and authentic gestures pointing to a living Presence.

This slow but powerful flow of life from one person to another will have to adapt its course to each circumstance. Just like in every age throughout history, we have the exciting task of seeking ways “to pass the Christian message on to all souls in accordance with the times, adapting it to people’s language, and understanding their mentality.”^[16]

The message will almost always be passed on personally, without any grand gestures or demonstrations. “Believe me, the apostolate of giving doctrine usually has to be, as it were, capillary, spreading from one to another, from each believer to his immediate companion. The children of God care about all souls, because every soul is important.”^[17]

The first Christians “did not have specific social or human programmes to carry out by virtue of their supernatural vocation. But they were permeated with a spirit, a way

of looking at life and the world, that could not fail to have consequences in the society in which they lived.”^[18] Ultimately, the mission the Lord entrusts to us is to be witnesses, not just teachers; to put others in contact with Someone living, more than a series of teachings and moral principles; to show that Christ is real and that He can live in our lives, relationships, and weaknesses. This contact with the living, risen Christ will lead both parties to ask, as they did on the morning of Pentecost, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37) What do I need to change in my life? Where can I learn more about God? How can I get to know Him better? And then it will be time to speak, teach, and guide.

Saint John Henry Newman, who is on the verge of being declared a Doctor of the Church as I write these lines, addressed the Lord thus: “Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as

You shine; so to shine as to be a light to others. The light, O Jesus, will be all from You; none of it will be mine. It will be You shining on others through me. Let me thus praise You the way You love best, by shining on those around me. Let me preach You without preaching, not by words, but by my example, by the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You.”^[19]

It is striking that someone who wrote and preached so much about faith would pray in this way. We can understand, then, that it is not a matter of remaining silent: the Lord wants us to be prepared to give a reason for our hope (cf. 1 Pt 3:15); but our words, like our deeds, will only be fruitful if our hearts burn with the fire of Christ (cf. Lk 24:32). Those who are apostles in this way may not see the fruits immediately, and they may never see spectacular

fruits. But neither did our Mother Mary and Saint John at the foot of the cross, nor Saint Paul in prison, nor many Christians throughout history. And yet they truly transformed the world. The Church is not reborn through mass movements, but through the quiet and patient action of the leaven, through the transmission of the life we carry within. That is the great responsibility that God places in our hands. The Church, and this part of the Church which is the Work, is each one of us. That is why Saint Josemaría asked the early members: “If I die, will you continue with the Work?”^[20]

^[1] Cf. F.M. Willam, *Vida de María, la Madre de Jesús*, Herder, Barcelona 1982, pg. 151.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Letter 1*, no. 5.

^[3] “[T]o be leaven, there is one necessary condition: to pass

unnoticed. Leaven does not produce any effect if it is not buried in the dough, if it is not mixed in to become one with it” (*Letter* 1, no. 5). “Only one thing can make us stand out: *that we don’t stand out*. Hence, for some people who are keen to draw attention or do ridiculous things, we are odd because we are not odd” (*Ibidem*, no. 8).

^[4] *Ibidem*, no. 5.

^[5] Cf. for example *Friends of God*, no. 257; *Letter* 29, nos. 7-8; *The Forge*, no. 973.

^[6] St. Josemaría, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, no. 12.

^[7] St. Josemaría, *Instruction, 19-III-1934*, nos. 6, 8, 14.

^[8] St. Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 41.

^[9] St. Josemaría, words from a gathering around 1958, as recorded in P. Rodríguez “*Omnia traham ad me ipsum: The meaning of Jn 12:32 in the spiritual experience of Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer,*” *Romana* 13 (1991/2), pg. 349.

^[10] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* 6, 10.

^[11] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 148.

^[12] This is how St. Josemaría used to refer to apostolate in the context of friendship that facilitates the mutual opening of hearts. See L. Flamarique, “Friendship,” in *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2013 (entry available on opusdei.org).

^[13] St. Josemaría, *The Furrow*, no. 191.

^[14] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 1-11-2019, no. 18. Cfr. Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, no. 176.

^[15] G. Eliot, *Middlemarch* (vol. II), Harper & Brothers, New York 1873, pg. 452.

^[16] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 6, no. 30.

^[17] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 943.

^[18] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 29, no. 22.

^[19] St. John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, Longmans Green & Co, New York/London 1907, p. 365.

^[20] S. Bernal, *Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Apuntes sobre la vida del Fundador del Opus Dei*, Madrid, Rialp 1980, 6th ed., p. 356.

Lorenzo De Vittori

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