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Very Human, Very Divine (XII): What Really Matters

The challenge of being poor in spirit while living in the middle of the world.

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Midnight is approaching. Several hours ago the noise of the crowds on the streets has died down and people have returned home. Now silence reigns. The slow steps of a young

Nazarene woman, visibly pregnant, is the only sound heard. She holds onto her husband's arm as she walks. Tired out from their long journey, they are seeking in the darkness the stable offered to them to spend the night. God's Son is about to be born on earth. The One who can do everything has arranged for this to happen in a place almost without shelter. "The divine Word is an infant, which literally means 'unable to speak.' And the divine Word became 'unable to speak' ... Who would have expected this? To experience Christmas is to allow oneself to be shaken by its surprising newness. The Birth of Jesus does not offer reassuring coziness by the fireside, but rather the divine shivering which shakes history."^[1] —

Although over time the memory of the stable in Bethlehem has taken on the aura of a warm and welcoming place, quite likely it wasn't as warm

as we imagine it to be. What was God trying to tell us with his choice of this scene that we represent each year in our homes? That night, Joseph and Mary shared in the treasure of poverty. Jesus' parents were freed from anything that could overshadow the true wealth they were about to receive. Being able to choose any place, any creaturely comfort, the Creator chose to be deprived of everything to show us what really matters.

The Kingdom belongs to the poor

“We insure everything, except good weather and true love.” This sign is found at the entrance to an insurance company in a city where the weather changes frequently. If we cannot be sure of what the weather is going to be like tomorrow, how can we guarantee the affection of another person in the future. No amount of money can force someone

to love us sincerely. We could even become a bit nervous thinking about this, since we can't attain here the security we experience in other areas of our life. But we have to decide to live with this "margin of error." The preoccupation to be in complete control blocks any attempt to love and to be loved; it makes it impossible to attain the simple but strong happiness of those who freely give and receive. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3)*: This is how Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord offers happiness, on earth and in heaven, to those who place their security and wealth in God.

The virtue of poverty—which is not the same as the material poverty that the Church encourages us to try to alleviate—is part of temperance. It is the disposition that moderates, that puts in the right place our relationship with the good things

God has created. The poor in heart possess and enjoy material things without being possessed by them; they refuse to place their security in the accumulation of goods. They fight the tendency we all have to live as though our happiness depended above all on what we possess. Jesus warns us strongly: *Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation!* (Lk 6:24).

After speaking with all kinds of people over many years, Saint Josemaría said: “When a man tries to build his happiness exclusively around the things of this world, and in this I have witnessed some real tragedies, he perverts their proper use and destroys the order so wisely established by the Creator. As a consequence the heart is left sad and unsatisfied. It starts following paths which lead to everlasting unhappiness.”^[2] — The virtue of poverty enables us to grasp how

fleeting material “securities” are, and how superficial are consolations that fail to reach the depths of our heart. Poverty of spirit enables us, in the end, to truly enjoy the world, since it connects our heart with what is simple—with people, with God, with everything that can be the object of contemplation, and that thus satisfies our heart’s deepest desires.

During his visit in 1980 to a poor district in Rio de Janeiro, Saint John Paul II asked. “Isn’t the real meaning of ‘poor in spirit’ a ‘person open to others,’ that is, to God and one’s neighbor? Isn’t it true that this beatitude about the ‘poor in spirit’ contains at the same time a warning and an accusation? ‘Woe to you’: this expression can sound severe and threatening, especially on the lips of that Christ who usually spoke so kindly and gently.”^[3] —

Sin has distorted our desire for possessions, and as a result our relationship with created goods can easily become deformed. The yearning to possess is perhaps intensified by a culture in which economic value—reflected in one's social status and image in the eyes of others—has sometimes become the ultimate source of value. Our culture tends to instill the belief that prosperity and comfort are the keys to happiness. And yet, we all realize that a person's true joy is measured more accurately by the depth and authenticity of their relationships with others. This is the wealth of the poor in heart. In contrast, the loneliness of someone who lives surrounded by luxury can often be seen as a dramatic poverty.

A harmony that each person must find

In 1968, during an interview about the place of women in society, a woman journalist asked Saint Josemaría about the virtue of poverty—specifically about how to live it well in one’s own home and how to transmit it to others. His answer begins with a very forceful statement: “Those who do not love and practise the virtue of poverty do not have Christ’s spirit. This holds true for everyone. For the hermit who retires to the desert; and for the ordinary Christian who lives among his fellow men.”^[4] Both the hermit and the person living in the middle of the world are called to live the virtue of poverty with an authentic Christian spirit. But while it is easy to see how someone who “retires to the desert” can be detached from material possessions, how can someone who lives amid the world’s goods truly be poor? What model can one follow?

Saint Josemaría goes on to identify two aspects of our relationship with material things: two apparently contrary poles that need to be reconciled. On the one hand, the need for a “true poverty, which is noticed and felt and made up of specific things. This poverty should be a profession of faith in God and a sign that the heart is not satisfied with created things and aspires to the Creator.” On the other hand, the importance of the naturalness with which a Christian should be “one more among his fellow men and women, sharing their way of life, their joys and happiness, working with them, loving the world and all the good things that exist in it; using all created things to solve the problems of human life.”^[5] We see clearly here the challenge of being poor in spirit in the middle of the world: being detached from material possessions while loving them as gifts from God to be shared with our

fellow men and women. But the question remains: where do we find guidance for this endeavor?

If we look at Christ's life in the Gospels, we do not see Him doing without material goods. Rather we see Him, while being neither rich nor poor, using these goods in a balanced, virtuous, perfect way. Jesus was known in his village because He earned his living with his work alongside his father (cf. *Mt* 13:55). He had a good tunic (cf. *Jn* 19:23), and sometimes attended lavish social gatherings. Some people even accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard (cf. *Mt* 11:19). He invited well off people—Matthew, Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea and others—to open their hearts to the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Jesus clearly shows a special love, both in his daily activity and in his preaching, for those who materially had nothing. He points to the

example of the poor widow and her relationship with God, in contrast to the rich (cf. *Lk* 21:1-4). He tells a parable about the poor man Lazarus being received in Abraham's bosom, while the rich man who was his neighbor remains outside (cf. *Lk* 16:19-23). He says clearly that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God* (*Mt* 19:24). He advises his disciples when sending them out on their mission not to take anything superfluous with them (cf. *Lk* 10:4-11). And He himself is born in another person's stable, and will be buried in another person's tomb. Jesus lives free from material ties and, at the same time, enjoys created goods. It is not a question of a balance, an unstable compromise between two extremes, but of a beautiful harmony—the harmony we see in Jesus.

But there are no universal recipes: “Achieving the synthesis between these two aspects is to a great extent a personal matter. It requires interior life, which will help us assess in every circumstance what God is asking of us. Therefore I don’t want to give fixed rules.”^[6] — The danger in fact exists of naively thinking we can draw up a list of rules to be sure we are living a specific virtue. But this approach overlooks the indispensable role of prudence, without which the other virtues cannot exist. Therefore “we find out what is superfluous not so much by theoretical rules as by that interior voice which tells us we are being led by selfishness or undue love of comfort.”^[7] —

“What really matters,” Saint Josemaría said elsewhere, “is not whether you have this or lack that, but whether you are living according to the truth taught us by our

Christian faith, which tells us that created goods are only a means.”^[8] —
For example, regarding dressing well, he gave some advice that can be applied to other areas of daily life: “You should dress in accordance with the demands of your social standing, your family background, your work... as your companions do, but to please God: eager to present a genuine and attractive image of true Christian living.”^[9] — Finally, he provided frequent suggestions that each one can apply to their own circumstances: do not create needs for yourself; make what you have last; freely do without something for a while; give the best to others; accept discomforts with joy; don’t complain if you lack something... and so many other little things that each one can discover in their own life of prayer.

Loving the world and solidarity

Saint Josemaría experienced real material poverty at various times in his life.^[10] In addition, he tried to live personally some customs to strengthen his spirit of poverty, although he didn't consider them applicable to all the faithful in the Work. Moreover, he was aware that God was calling him to spread a spirit of holiness in the middle of the world, not outside it. Therefore, even when other people might be called to a radical abandonment of material possessions as a testimony to the supreme wealth found in God, he was convinced that a specific characteristic of ordinary Christians in the middle of the world should be to give “explicit witness of love for the world” and of “solidarity with their fellow men and women.”^[11]

In the summer of 1974 he had a get-together with married couples in Lima. This encounter was a surprise, since the founder of Opus Dei had

been ill the previous days. “Father, I want my family to live comfortably,” one of those present said, as a prelude to asking how to personally live poverty in that situation. “It’s one thing to live with certain material comforts, and another thing to show off your luxury,” Saint Josemaría replied. “Moreover, you have a duty to provide your loved ones with these comforts ... Act as good husband, as a good father, and be generous with your wife and children. And then, don’t flaunt your luxury; be a bit tough on yourself and try to assist others.”^[12] Here we see guidelines for being poor in spirit in the middle of the world, while being grateful for the goods that God has given us: generosity without luxury, being demanding on ourselves personally in living this virtue, helping those in need.

On another occasion, Saint Josemaría held up the example of an elderly

woman he knew, who lived the virtue of poverty very well despite being quite well off: “This lady of whom I have just been speaking lived in an ancestral mansion. But she spent next to nothing on herself. On the other hand, she paid her servants very well and gave the rest of her money to the needy, while depriving herself of almost everything.”^[13] —

The virtue of poverty lived in the middle of the world entails a true concern for those in need. “Prayer to God and solidarity with the poor and suffering are inseparable,” Pope Francis said. “In order to perform an act of worship acceptable to the Lord, we have to recognize that each person, even the poorest and most contemptible, is made in the image of God ... Encountering the poor and those in need constantly challenges us and forces us to think: How can we help to eliminate or at least

alleviate their marginalization and suffering? How can we help them in their spiritual poverty?”^[14] These questions are especially relevant for Christians who want to bring Christ to professional environments, where so much can be done to help others. Saint Josemaría insisted: “We have the obligation to try to ensure that every day there are fewer poor people in the world ... Wealth comes from work, my children, from specialization, from professional advancement, and Opus Dei is founded on work.”^[15]

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“Set very little store on what you have given, since you receive so much,”^[16] says Saint Teresa of Avila. The virtue of poverty enables us to be happy in any circumstance—also when we lack what is necessary. Being poor in spirit means that we do not put our trust in the goods we can

control, but in God and, through Him, in others. “Being free to love: that is the meaning of our spirit of poverty, austerity and detachment.”^[17] Entering into that freedom, where we are concerned only about what is truly necessary (cf. *Lk* 10:42), what really matters, is keeping the best part, which will not be taken from us.

^[1] Francis, Audience, 19 December 2018.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 118.

^[3] Saint John Paul II, Speech, 2 July 1980.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 110.

^[5] *Ibid.*

^[6] *Ibid.*

^[7] *Ibid.*, no. 111.

[8] *Friends of God*, no. 118.

[9] *Ibid.*, no. 122.

[10] Some specific examples include the bankruptcy of his father's business when he was a teenager, the harsh years of the Spanish civil war, and the material hardships when he arrived in Rome.

[11] *Conversations*, no. 110.

[12] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family reunion, 25 July 1974.

[13] *Friends of God*, no. 123.

[14] Francis, Message, 15 November 2020.

[15] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family reunion, 24 April 1967.

[16] Saint Teresa of Avila, *Way of Perfection*, 33, 2.

^[17] _____ Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz,
Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no.
8.

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