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Salt and Light, Example and Doctrine

An article on the need in today's world for the hope Christ brings. "We must learn to read events with the objectivity of faith, in order to sow optimism with the salt of example and the light of good doctrine."

08/18/2010

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer

good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.[1]

Words alone are not enough to teach Christ's doctrine. We must first show others the salt of our example in order to illumine them with the light of the word.

What converted the first Christians was not a novel teaching, but the life of those who put it into practice. What first attracted them was the salt, the life, the holiness, the behavior informed by charity. Afterwards, drawn by that joy and peace, they opened themselves to the light of doctrine in order to enter

into the mystery of grace that animates Christian life.

This way of attracting people to the light of Christ continues being effective. The salt of Christian behavior needs to be present in order to forestall the corruption of pessimism, the lack of hope. The presence of persons who are cheerful and optimistic, and capable of giving a reason for their joy, allows many others to live with the active hope of reaching a happiness true to the aspirations of the human heart, without falling into the temptation of being content with less.

But quite a few persons who grasp the attractiveness of Christ's teachings also think that *nobody today lives like that*, or that it is an unattainable ideal.

Reminding people of the universal call to holiness involves more than insisting that all of us can and must

be saints. It is much more important to show that in fact, in this day and age and given current circumstances, a normal person, with the same defects and weaknesses as anyone else, can live his or her baptismal vocation in an integral way, even in a pagan society.

How important it is that there be men and women who in their ordinary lives, with Christ's peace and joy, foster the hope of attaining a life that is happy here on earth, amid both suffering and joy, with a happiness that will be complete in heaven!

From the beginning of Christianity, the holiness of numerous men and women has been salt and light for so many environments. The majority of these persons have not even been aware of the magnitude of the mark they have left, but they have contributed decisively to preserving

entire generations from the corruption of pessimism.

Opus Dei is one of God's instruments for extending the hope of Christ's Good News. Sowing hope is a fundamental part of the Church's mission, and therefore of our apostolic mission. God has wanted the Work so that its members be effective salt and light. St. Josemaria said: "Following the Master's wishes, you are to be salt and light, while being fully immersed in this world of ours, sharing in all human activities. Light that illumines the hearts and minds of men. Salt that gives flavor and preserves from corruption. That is why if you lack apostolic zeal you will become insipid and useless. You will be letting other people down and your life will be absurd." [2]

The Salt of Example

You are the salt. These words of Christ appear within the Sermon on

the Mount, immediately following the Beatitudes. Poverty, meekness, hunger and thirst for justice, mercy, cleanness of heart, peace, patience in persecutions, and joy—characteristics of those our Lord calls blessed—are, as it were, the unfolding of charity, and truly identify Christ's disciples.

Ordinary life offers an infinity of situations that put our Christian identity to the test, our being signs of hope. When we are determined to be faithful to the truth without fearing the consequences, and we resist the pressure to act superficially; when we make the firm resolution to place peace in the family before self love, forgetting past offenses and with a heart open to understanding and forgiveness; when we personally renounce comforts in order to win a greater freedom of heart; when we struggle bravely to live a clean life,

and we know how to rectify and begin again...then we are salt.

Certainly this way of living is not all that common, and can produce a first reaction of surprise in some people, or even misunderstanding. It doesn't matter—in fact, it can even be a sign that the salt has not become insipid. Often this first impression, when smoothed over by the balm of charity, friendly dealings and sincere affection, will be the beginning of a conversion.

The important thing is to live with our eyes set on God, trusting in his fatherly providence, with no fear of human judgments or false scandals, without discouragement or bitterness. At times we will see that some people, “when they discover what is clearly good, will scrutinize and examine it to try to find something bad hidden behind it.”[3] Or they will twist things in such a

way that even deeds of justice and charity, the desire to serve others and foster their good, will cause them “to take offense.”[4]

The urgency of the apostolate doesn't leave us time to worry about these attitudes. As St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians, nothing should detain us, since we are ready if necessary to live *as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*[5]

Nevertheless, the usual thing is that integral Christian behavior will also give rise to questions in well-intentioned people, since the new life it gives testimony to requires an explanation. The witness of so many Christian families living their faith

amid the sorrows and joys of this life leads many persons to ask what is the source of this peace and joy, what is the reason for such self-denial, why such desires to serve even without tangible rewards.

These are some of the questions that can run through the minds of our colleagues and acquaintances, although at first perhaps they don't vocalize them. Our friendship will be what wins their trust; it will be the channel through which many people, challenged by the testimony of good example, will be receptive to good doctrine. Sowing friendship is essential to our way of being in the middle of the world.

Friendship is the bridge between example and doctrine, between salt and light. As St. Josemaria said: "Live your ordinary life; work at your job, trying to fulfil the duties of your state in life, doing your job, your

professional work properly, improving, getting better each day. Be loyal; be understanding with others and demanding on yourself. Be mortified and cheerful. This will be your apostolate. Then, though you won't see why, because you're very aware of your own wretchedness, you will find that people come to you. Then you can talk to them, quite simply and naturally—on your way home from work for instance, or in a family gathering, on a bus, walking down the street, anywhere. You will chat about the sort of longings that everyone feels deep down in his soul, even though some people may not want to pay attention to them: they will come to understand them better, when they begin to look for God in earnest.”[6]

The Light of Good Doctrine

When souls are moved by good example, and begin to want to

change—or at least to know more fully the reasons for our Christian hope—then we have to speak to them with the gift of tongues, with a solid knowledge of doctrine, with affection, patience and serenity. As St. Peter exhorted, we must *always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence, and keeping your conscience clear.*[7] Let us never forget that a good part of our apostolate consists in making virtue loveable, fleeing from any bitter zeal.

Sacred Scripture gives us numerous examples of this. Jesus never tired of explaining his way of acting, even with persons who sought to twist his words. He did so with simplicity and imagination, adapting what he said to his listeners in such a way that the most sublime truths could reach those with humble minds. He urged

everyone to convert, without taking away their freedom.

Jesus awakened dormant consciences with great delicacy, helping them to judge their own actions objectively. We see this with the Samaritan woman. First he gained her confidence by letting her see that, even though he was a Jew, he did not refuse to speak with Samaritans. He spoke to her about what interested her, since drawing water was part of her daily concerns. He brought light to her conscience little by little, with the skill of one who knows how to read souls. He asked her to call her husband, thereby causing her to reveal almost inadvertently something about her personal life: *I have no husband*. Finally our Lord's words bring her face to face with the light of the truth, showing her that she needs to convert: *You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you*

have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband.[8]

The same thing happened with those who accused the adulterous woman: *and as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. He did not have to say anything more. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest.*

[9] His valiant and merciful stance opened the heart of that poor woman to forgiveness and conversion: *neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.[10]*

To the woman in the midst of her domestic duties, our Lord spoke of fountains and water; to farmers he spoke of work in the fields; to fishermen, of ships and nets; to doctors of the law, of the Scriptures. What a marvelous challenge: to be attuned to the concerns and

problems of each age and place in order to make the truth of doctrine understandable, and present it in a lovable and appealing way, well suited to our contemporaries.

We can learn, for example, from John Paul II's experience. After so many years of service to the Church and souls, he pointed to the need to "understand the experiences of the people around us and the language they use to communicate." [11] We will give light if we know how to understand people, to love them, and if we strive to make ourselves understood, as Jesus Christ did. "Today much imagination is needed if we are to learn how to speak about the faith and about life's most important questions. It requires people who know how to love and how to think, because the imagination lives on love and on thought." [12]

The gift of tongues requires imagination, and imagination requires love and a deep and well-assimilated knowledge of the truth and of current circumstances. The apostolate of good doctrine is far different from a checklist of memorized answers.

On the contrary, when we get to know each soul deeply through prayer and friendship, when we thoroughly assimilate good doctrine through piety and study, we will be able to give the true reasons for our hope and illumine the minds and hearts of many people with the light of Christ.

Christ's teaching must also illumine the different spheres of human activity. Each one's doctrinal formation should be integrated with his or her professional training so that, without compromising the legitimate autonomy and laws

proper to created realities and society,[13] we can shed light on the intrinsic ordering to God that gives transcendent meaning to all human endeavors. Therefore it is especially necessary to have a solid grasp of the topics of Catholic doctrine that are particularly relevant to one's professional field.

Furthermore, a number of fundamental ethical questions hold special importance for today's world: for example, issues related to marriage and the family, education, bio-ethics, and ecology.

Each of us needs to know how to speak about these topics, and provide understandable explanations to those around us. Many of these questions pertain to natural law and are accessible to reason, though they have also been revealed by God and safeguarded by the Church. The explanations we give can't always be

based on the Church's authority, especially when people claim not to have any faith, or when they have very little formation.

On the contrary, we have to strive to show that the Church is an expert in humanity, by making clear the profound coherence between what she teaches and the truth about the human person. "It is important that special efforts be made to explain properly the reasons for the Church's position, stressing that it is not a case of imposing on non-believers a vision based on faith, but of interpreting and defending the values rooted in the very nature of the human person. In this way charity will necessarily become service to culture, politics, the economy, and the family, so that the fundamental principles upon which depend the destiny of human beings and the future of civilization will be everywhere respected." [14]

Today it is very important to show that the demands of the moral law are not in themselves *religious values*. Since they are grounded in the truth of the human person, “they do not of themselves require that those who defend them make a profession of the Christian faith, even though the Church’s teaching confirms and safeguards them always and everywhere, in her disinterested service to the truth about man and the common good of civil society.”[15]

Disinterested service to the truth leads us to work towards fostering a more human society, one that is more in accord with the natural law. This task becomes even more urgent when whole sectors of society decide to behave in open opposition to the natural law. In these cases Christians, using all licit means at their disposal and acting with no less cleverness and sagacity than those who sow

evil,[16] have the right and duty to prevent institutions from facilitating, rather than the path towards God, the path towards evil and the condemnation of souls.[17]

What we can never do is to remain silent or turn our backs on this situation, shutting ourselves up in an ivory tower. Each of us has to be a coherent Catholic in all the circumstances of our life, without human respects: not only at home, but also in all our social and public activities. Those who have received the truth without any merit on their own part have the obligation, by their exemplary life and opportune words, to always be a witness to the truth, a witness to Christ.

The world stands in great need of a strong dose of hope. We must learn to read events with the objectivity of faith, in order to sow optimism with

the salt of example and the light of good doctrine.

“If we look at today’s world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God our Father and Lord, in his goodness and mercy...God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs...Christian hope sustains us in committing ourselves fully to the new evangelization and to the worldwide mission, and leads us to pray as Jesus taught us: ‘Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6:10).’”[18] God will raise up a sufficient number of vocations to guarantee the triumph of truth, goodness and justice in the life of each nation, for the good of all mankind.

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Footnotes:

[1] *Mt* 5: 13-16

[2] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, 22

[3] St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, 6, 22

[4] Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39,7

[5] *2 Cor* 6: 1-10

[6] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 273

[7] *1 Pet* 3:15-17

[8] *Jn* 4:16, 18

[9] *Jn* 8:7, 9

[10] *Jn* 8:11

[11] John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, p. 105

[12] *Ibid*, p. 107

[13] Cf. Vatican II, Past. Const.
Gaudium et spes, no. 36

[14] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter
Novo millennio ineunte, January 6,
2001, no. 51

[15] Congregation for the Doctrine of
the Faith, *Doctrinal note on some
questions relating to the commitment
and conduct of Catholics in political
life*, November 24, 2002, III, no. 5

[16] Cf. *Lk* 16:8

[17] Cf. Vatican II, Past. Const.
Gaudium et spes, no. 25

[18] John Paul II, Enc.Letter
Redemptoris missio, no. 86