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The Others and I: Verses of the Same Poem

A new article in the series on forging a strong Christian personality. “No human life is ever isolated. It is bound up with other lives. No man or woman is a single verse; we all make up one divine poem which God writes with the cooperation of our freedom.”

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And God saw that it was good.[1]

Against the background of this refrain that resonates throughout the entire first account of the creation of the world, we are presented with the contrast of the second account. This second narrative “evokes God’s thoughts, even his emotion, as he gazes at Adam, observing him alone in the Garden. He is free, he is a lord... but he is alone. And God sees that this ‘is not good.’”[2] The loneliness of man is like a piece that fails to fit into the design of creation. When God finally presents Eve to Adam, as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh,[3] Adam is freed from a strange melancholy that he himself could not explain. Now he is truly able to say with God that “everything is good.” Strengthened in his vocation upon meeting *others like himself*, the world ceases to be for him an inhospitable place.

Living alongside others develops our personality, but the reality is much richer than this. We need others, and they need us. They are never superfluous; they are the “land” to which we always belong and from which God calls us to receive and welcome everyone. Because we have a history, a family, a neighborhood, a culture, each of us is a “home,” a place of welcome, and can create a home wherever we go. Because we have a home, we can view the world as a home, as our own home and, at the same time, as “our common home.”^[4] Affection for our roots, the serene cultivation of our way of being, enables us to love and to be loved, to welcome and to be welcomed.

With others and for others

One of the key experiences in our life is the concern others have shown us. Someone has cared for us, has raised

us. Each of us has been “received” by others. No one grows up alone. And no one is really alone, even though some people’s lives seem to develop this way. The breakdown of the family and the resulting abandonment in which many children live, does not make this basic anthropological principle a beautiful but useless idea. Not a few people who have grown up in a hostile environment and been damaged by a lack of love, are for that very reason especially sensitive to the need for affection and can become a welcoming “haven” for others. Whoever has suffered much can love much.

“No human life is ever isolated. It is bound up with other lives. No man or woman is a single verse; we all make up one divine poem which God writes with the cooperation of our freedom.”[5] Others are not simply objects near us, like a stone by the

side of the road. They belong to us and we belong to them, more intimately than we can imagine. We will understand this fully in heaven, although on earth we can catch a glimpse of it, in striving to live close to God and to those around us.

This mutual belonging to one another has two very important implications: others depend on me, and I can and should depend on them. To love and to let oneself be loved: the path to maturity that is always open to us passes through incorporating into our own life these two aspects of our “being with others and for others.”[6]

Adolescence is the first moment when this challenge comes clearly to the fore. Up to this time the parents have formed the heart of the person who now begins to walk on his or her own. Although everything has a remedy, this previous work by

parents determines in good measure how young people look on the world and what captures their attention.

Adolescent readily tend to choose role models different from their own parents, as they begin to sense the need to assert themselves. Their feelings here tend to be somewhat ambivalent. Alongside the perception of their dependence on their parents, they sense a thirst for emancipation, and therefore love for their parents goes hand in hand with a certain rejection of their own home. They are just starting out in life, but want to be convinced that their situation is secure. They want to be different, but also to belong to a group. It's a difficult moment for young people and also for parents. But underlying these at times exaggerated attempts to assert oneself, lies the need to broaden one's self-identity.

Infancy is marked by the tendency to refer everything to one's own "I" or "ego." With the gradual arrival of maturity, the "I" expands and opens up to others. One begins to perceive that others have needs, and to feel the personal responsibility to help them. *Others exist*, each with his or her own concerns and aspirations. A clear sign of immaturity is precisely the inability to confront this new demand in life. Over-protective parents, a badly understood affection, an excessive zeal to protect their child from life's difficulties and challenges, can lead to this personality defect. Later on, when the child grows up, this can result in negligent fathers or mothers who live for their own work and interests, and who fail to take an interest in the upbringing of their own children; in property owners who show no interest in their neighborhood community, and who always seem to be in conflict with those around

them; in unhappy persons who accumulate grievances in order to convince themselves that conflicts are always due to others.

Gifts are for serving others

We belong to others. This conviction, purified of servility or naiveté, is a clear sign of maturity. It means that in a certain sense *my time is not my own*, because the others need me. Rest, entertainment, cultural and professional formation then acquire a broader perspective. The border between what is mine and what belongs to others becomes less sharp, without neglecting our own responsibility or infringing on others' freedom. This is how a Christian should always view the world. "If the Lord has given you some natural quality or skill, you should not just enjoy it yourself or show off about it; you should use it

charitably in the service of your neighbor.”[7]

Egotism disconnects us from reality. It makes us forget that everything in our life is a gift. *What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*[8] If everything we have is a gift, even more so are other people. Nevertheless at times we live as if they didn't exist, or we submit them in subtle ways to our own judgement or interests. Rather than receiving them, we appropriate them.

“Each person tends to install himself in a very comfortable corner, and the others can fend for themselves.”[9] The tendency to make the world revolve around our own ego is a sign of immaturity that we have to strive to overcome bit by bit, serenely. We will then come to see our life not in the light of our own private success,

but as a contribution to everyone's happiness. Thus we will discover, and re-discover, that true fulfilment is never just "self-fulfilment." "We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves in our own comforts. Such a life is nothing else than a slow suicide . . . I am a 'mission' on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing." [10]

In any group of people, those who want to help others can always find ample space for doing so. Daily life constantly presents new and unforeseen challenges. Families and societies go forward thanks to these gratuitous efforts. These generous people, perhaps surrounded by the apathy of those who prefer not to complicate their lives, realize how

much they owe to others for their bodily and spiritual growth. They know that they are called to the same self-giving that truly liberates a person: fathers and mothers who raise families, children who help their parents, students who help their fellow students, workers who confront problems that no one else wants to deal with. “When you have finished your work, do your brother’s, helping him, for Christ, so tactfully and naturally that no one—not even he—will realize you are doing more than in justice you ought. This, indeed, is virtue befitting a son of God.”[11]

This generosity is clearly far removed from the “servility” of those who undertake all sorts of tasks, without helping others to be demanding on themselves, as well as from the naiveté of those who let their good intentions be taken advantage of. Serving does not

always mean doing things. It implies above all helping others to grow, and this also leads to leaving space for each one's personal responsibility.

Being close to others

Today's world tends to seek technical solutions for almost every problem, and overlooks at times the human warmth provided by mutual help. Nevertheless, when faced with situations that shake our sense of security, for example, a natural disaster or major accident, solidarity spontaneously surfaces, a sense of community often hidden under the demands of daily life. Once again things that unite people come to the fore, as though awakening from an enchantment. People focus once again on what is essential. The same happens on a smaller scale in personal misfortunes like the death or illness of a loved one; or in daily interactions that for various reasons

suddenly affect us more deeply: for instance, when someone makes us realize, even in a subtle way, the “bitterness of indifference,”[12] the coldness that freezes the soul. Or on the contrary, when we sense the warmth of a sincere interest in ourselves... Then the soul awakens to what is really important, the need to welcome others.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.[13] We all are in some way strangers and pilgrims, and we hope that others will welcome us: that they will comfort us, that they will listen to us, that they will look us in the eye. Maturity means acquiring this sensitivity towards others, and sometimes requires overlooking another person's lack of sensitivity for other people, even though this makes us suffer. At times it could be appropriate to advise the person who errs in this way, and help them see their lack of tact. At other times, the

best strategy could be the “contagion” of our own example; refined example sooner or later awakens the sensitivity of even the roughest people.

This sensitivity also leads people to undertake initiatives that make an impact on the immediate surroundings. For example, “showing concern for a common place (a building, a fountain, an abandoned monument, a landscape, a square), and striving to protect, restore, improve or beautify it as something belonging to everyone. Around these community actions, relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges. Thus, a community frees itself from the indifference induced by consumerism . . . In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common

home which God has entrusted to us.”[14]

The maturity that this closeness to others entails is not the same as the facility for relationships found in loquacious or extroverted persons. It is a matter above all of knowing how to *be present* with others: to observe, listen, welcome, to learn from everyone. Especially nowadays, when communication technology allows us to relate to many people, rediscovering the meaning of a genuine personal *presence* with others is all the more necessary. A smartphone allows us to contact someone immediately, but doesn't bring us closer to them.

In the virtual world, we can decide who are our “neighbors” and “friends.” And paradoxically this can make us lose sight of the people life has placed alongside us. Even though a common sight today, it is still

disturbing to see a group of people together who, instead of talking with one another, are “managing” their respective text messages. Virtual communication then absorbs real communication. Almost without realizing it, our life becomes focused on seeing if someone has remembered us, instead of realizing that *this person alongside me needs me!* And the best thing I can give that person is my closeness to them.

Opting for this personal presence, in which we open ourselves to direct contact with others, to reality without filters, strengthens our humanity. It awakens us once again to what is truly important. Thinking about others, praying for them, leads us to live for them. “This is the only way to live the life of Jesus Christ and to become one and the same with Him.”[15]

[1] Cf. *Gen* 1:10,12,18,21,25. Verse 31 adds, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

[2] Pope Francis, Audience, 22 April 2015. Cf. *Gen* 2:18.

[3] Cf. *Gen* 2:23.

[4] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 13.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing by*, no. 111.

[6] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 271.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 422.

[8] *1 Cor* 4:7.

[9] Saint Josemaria, notes from a family gathering, 21 October 1973.

[10] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 272-273.

[11] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 440.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 11 March 1940, no. 7.

[13] *Mt* 25:35.

[14] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 232.

[15] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 14th Station.

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