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Building on Rock: The Plan of Life (II)

The road we travel with God involves both times of prosperity and moments of greater difficulty of tiredness. Fidelity to a plan of life is not about "perfect execution," but rather remaining in God's love and finding our rest in Him.

03/07/2025

Jesus had an insider's view of manual labor, and maybe even of building, during his years in Nazareth. Saint Matthew hints at this

when, in the final passages of the Sermon on the Mount, he recounts a comparison Jesus used to explain how to internalize his teachings. Jesus speaks of two types of builders: one who builds his house on sand and another who chooses to build on rock (cf. *Mt* 7:24-27). The houses may seem similar, since both are built upon Jesus' words, but time will reveal how much weaker one is compared to the other. When difficulties arise — when the rain falls, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat against the house — it becomes clear that having a merely abstract, theoretical understanding of the Christian life is not enough. Stopping there would be like building on sand. That is why we need to remain close to Jesus, maintaining a constant relationship with Him: getting used to listening to Him attentively in prayer and developing stable, lasting habits that help us put his words into practice.

Thus we will learn to live from Him not only in times of peace, but also when our faith and convictions are put to the test.

Saint Josemaría expressed something similar when he used the image of a path, an early memory, to illustrate the interior life: “One of my most vivid childhood memories is of seeing, up in the mountains near my home, those signposts they planted alongside the hill paths. I was struck by those tall posts usually painted red. It was explained to me then that when the snow fell, covering up everything, paths, seeded fields and pastures thickets, boulders and ravines, the poles stood out as sure reference points, so that everyone would always know where the road went.” In Christian life, he went on, something similar happens: “There are times of spring and summer, but there are also winters, days without sun and nights bereft of moonlight.

We can't afford to let our friendship with Jesus depend on our moods, on our ups and downs.” And it is precisely in those times of difficulty, he concluded, that a spiritual plan of life is most necessary, because those habits, “firmly rooted and adjusted to one's special circumstances, will serve as the red posts always marking out the way for us, until the time comes when Our Lord decides to make the sun shine again. Then the snows melt and our hearts beat fast once more, burning with a fire that never really went out. It was merely hidden in the embers, beneath the ashes produced by a time of trial, or by our own poor efforts or lack of sacrifice.”^[1] —

Growing through crises

It is entirely normal to go through moments of crisis, whether great or small, throughout life.^[2] — For example, young people often set out with great

enthusiasm and lofty ideals, throwing themselves into new endeavors without much reflection. Then, as they gain experience, they may become discouraged when they realize how difficult it is to change the world... Or to change themselves. They may be surprised at how easily their once-strong emotions, which they may have believed to be a guarantee of their convictions, fade in new circumstances. Other stages of life, such as reaching maturity or retirement, naturally prompt the person to look back at the road traveled thus far. At these turning points, failures and disappointments can come to the forefront, leading us to dwell on what could have been but never was. It can become difficult to accept our own history, and our ability to see and give thanks for so many good things may become clouded. In these times, people may seek consolation in what Saint Josemaría called “mystical wishful

thinking’...: If only I hadn’t married, if only I did not have this job, if only I had better health, or was younger, or had more time!”^[3] —

These and other similar crises are not, or should not be, moments without God. Even then — indeed, especially then — the Lord remains close to us and continues to give Himself without measure. For this reason, crises are important opportunities to grow in our relationship with God, who can make the desert bloom and bring fruit from dry land (cf. *Is* 35:1). Youthful idealism can be purified and elevated by grace, but it needs to mature in order to become truly supernatural. Setbacks and disappointments should not turn us into cynical “realists,” because merely recognizing our natural limitations is far from the whole truth about ourselves and about human history. These difficult

moments are, in fact, opportunities for growth; opportunities for the Lord to expand our hearts. A French writer expresses it eloquently: “There are places in the human heart that do not even exist until pain enters them, and only then do they come to be.”^[4] —

Just as human love is built and deepened by spending time together (and even suffering together!), so too our love for God is strengthened and renewed by frequent encounters with Him, leading us “to become one with Christ in the Bread and in the Word, in the Sacred Host and in prayer,”^[5] — in its various forms: silent adoration, confident dialogue, examinations of conscience, vocal prayer, and more. These and similar habits are not a tedious checklist of things to do; rather, they are moments of *encounter* that awaken, enliven, and enrich our relationship with God. And nourished by this

relationship, our connections with others also grow stronger and deeper.

Hearts open to God

“I love Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit and our Lady with the same heart with which I love my parents and my friends.”^[6] Spiritual life is fundamentally a relationship of love, and for this reason, the beauty and challenges of human love help us come to a better understanding of its dynamics.

In marriage, for instance, the commitment between the spouses may get weaker because the husband and wife have drifted apart. This is a constant risk in any close relationship: for the couple to fail to mature together, as each person's life takes on new dimensions that are not shared with the other or integrated into their common journey. Something similar can happen in our

spiritual lives. God does not change, but we do; and we need to share with Him, in an intimate and continuous dialogue, everything that happens to us and dwells within us, from professional successes or disappointments to our hobbies and family matters: living all things “with a heart open to God, so that work, even in illness and suffering, in difficulty too, is open to God.”^[7] —

Thus, as our lives unfold, our Lord can reveal new dimensions of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ to us (cf. *Col* 2:3). That is the wisdom acquired in the silence of prayer, in moments of thanksgiving after communion, and in contemplating Jesus’ words and life in the Gospels. “The disciples of Emmaus, on their mysterious journey in the company of the risen Christ, experienced a moment of anguish, confusion, despair and disappointment. Yet, beyond and in

spite of this, something was happening deep within them: *Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road? (Lk 24:32).*”^[8] —

We need to let ourselves be helped, and also to help others, so that our spiritual life is not reduced to merely “pushing forward.” As the Father reminds us, “formation that we receive throughout our whole life, without disregarding its necessary demands, tends to a large degree to *open up new horizons.*”^[9] — Our spiritual reading, and the texts and resources we use to nourish and enrich our faith, should be well chosen to help us deepen our experience of God, offering new perspectives and speaking to the needs of our hearts, which vary from person to person and from moment to moment. The Holy Spirit will make use of these efforts (always modest in

comparison to his gifts) to carry out his work in us.

But let us pause to consider another analogy with human love. Just as we saw that one enemy of a relationship is that the couple stops seeing each other regularly, another equally powerful danger is that, even when they are together, they do not truly communicate: they are present in body but not in soul; they do not open their hearts or listen with genuine interest. In such cases, spending time together can become a burden, and conversely, avoiding that time can seem like a relief. Something similar can happen in the spiritual life if one adheres to a plan merely to fulfill an obligation. Saint Josemaría spoke of this kind of routine as “the real sepulchre of piety.”^[10] —

Faced with this risk, it is encouraging to remember that we are called to

“begin and begin again” many times along the way.^[11] Just as couples who still love each other, even after many years, have opportunities to say “thank you” and “I’m sorry” for many little things, we too will often need to resume a habit we have begun to neglect, put more thought and love into our spiritual reading, or rediscover the value of certain traditional prayers before or after Mass if we realize we are easily distracted.

Thus, we understand why fidelity to a plan of life does not consist in striving for “perfect execution,” as if we were soloists in a chamber choir or athletes in an Olympic gymnastics competition. Rather, it is about remaining in God's love (cf. *Jn* 15:9); discovering and rediscovering the only solid foundation upon which we can build our lives. We find the joy and peace that our hearts long for in that firm rock: “Rest in divine

filiation. God is a Father — your Father! — full of warmth and infinite love. Call him Father frequently and tell him, when you are alone, that you love him, that you love him very much!, and that you feel proud and strong because you are his son.”^[12] —

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 151.

^[2] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Letter 2*, no. 22, on the “crisis of the 40s,” or more generally, R. Guardini, *Las etapas de la vida*, Madrid, Palabra, 2022.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 88; cf. *The Way*, Critical-historical edition, commentary on no. 832; J. Peña, “Mística ojalatera y realismo en la santidad de la vida ordinaria,” *Anuario Filosófico*, 2002 (35), 629-654.

^[4] L. Bloy, Lettre, 25-04-1873, *Lettres de jeunesse*, 1870-1893, Paris, Édouard-Joseph, 1920.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 118.

^[6] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 166.

^[7] Pope Francis, Audience, 21-VI-2017.

^[8] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Dilexit nos*, no. 7.

^[9] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 11.

^[10] *Friends of God*, no. 150.

^[11] Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 292; *The Forge*, no. 384.

^[12] *The Forge*, no. 331.

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