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Reaching the Entire Person: Role of the Emotions

In the Christian life, the intellect, will and emotions need to grow together, helping one another to advance. Hence the importance of guiding our feelings.

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Certainly, Jesus Christ is the love of our life: not the greatest among others, but the one who gives meaning to all our other loves, and to

the interests, dreams, ambitions, jobs and initiatives that fill our days and our heart. Hence in our spiritual life we need to preserve the centrality of the Person of Jesus Christ.[1] He is the path to enter into communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit. In Him is revealed the mystery of "who man is"[2] and what we are called to. To walk with Christ means to grow in self-knowledge, and to enter more deeply into our own personal mystery. To allow Jesus to be the centre of our life leads, among other things, to rediscovering with new light the anthropological and Christian value of the various ascetical means; reaching the person in all of his or her integrity: intellect, will, heart, relations with others.[3]

The person we have to reach is first of all our own self, and then all those with whom we come in contact through our friendship and apostolate. The formation that we

receive and that we impart should reach the intellect, the will and the emotions, with none of these elements being neglected or simply "subordinated" to the others. Here we will concentrate primarily on forming each person's emotional life, taking as given the need for solid intellectual formation as the foundation. The consideration of the importance of integral formation will allow us to "rediscover" the great truth contained in St Josemaría's identification of "fidelity" with "happiness."[4]

Being formed in accord with Christ's heart

Some people, when they think of formation, tend to consider it as knowledge. Thus, a person who has received good doctrinal, ascetical and professional information is considered to have good formation. But more than that is required. To

reach the person in all of his or her integrity requires viewing formation as a way of being. Good professionals know the body of information and techniques required by their profession, but they have acquired something else as well. They have developed habits – ways of being – that enable them to apply that knowledge and those techniques successfully: habits of attention to others, concentration in work, punctuality, coping with successes and failures, perseverance, etc.

Similarly, being a good Christian doesn't simply mean knowing – at a level appropriate to one's situation in the Church and in society – the Church's teaching on the sacraments or on prayer, or on general and professional moral norms. The goal is much higher: immersing ourselves in the mystery of Christ so as to grasp it in all its breadth and depth (cf. Eph 3:18), letting his Life enter into ours,

and being able to say with St Paul, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20). Thus it means being “alter Christus, ipse Christus,”[5] allowing grace to transform us gradually so as to configure us to Him.

Letting grace act is not something merely passive; it doesn’t mean simply not placing obstacles in the way, since the Holy Spirit doesn’t transform us into Christ without our free, voluntary cooperation. But neither is that enough. To give ourselves to our Lord, to give Him our life, is not simply to give Him our decisions, our actions; it is also to give Him our heart, our feelings, our spontaneity. To do so, we need to have a good intellectual and doctrinal formation that shapes our mind and influences our decisions, but this doctrine also has to sink in deeply and reach our heart. And this requires struggle, it requires time. In

other words, it requires acquiring virtues, which is precisely what formation consists in.

It is not uncommon to meet people who fear that insisting on the virtues may end up leading to "voluntarism," to giving primacy to a person's will-power. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps at the root of that confusion is an erroneous idea of virtue, which is seen as simply a supplement to will-power, enabling the person who possesses it to fulfil the moral law even when it goes against their own inclination. This is quite a widespread idea and does in fact stem from voluntarism. Virtue is thus regarded as the capacity to go against the flow of one's own inclinations when the moral law so requires.

There is of course some truth in this. But it is an incomplete vision, in which virtues are turned into cold

qualities that would lead to rejecting in practice one's own inclinations, interests and affections, and that would inevitably result in turning indifference into an ideal: as though the interior life and self-giving consisted in reaching the point where one doesn't feel attracted by anything that might impede one's own future decisions.

To regard formation in that way would make it impossible to reach the person in his or her integrity. The intellect, will and emotions would not be growing together, helping one another to advance. Rather one of these faculties would dominate and stifle the others. The correct development of the interior life, in contrast, requires integration, and certainly doesn't lead to a diminishing or loss of our interests and emotions. Its aim is not that we aren't affected by what happens, that we shouldn't care about what is

important, that we shouldn't be hurt by what is hurtful, that we shouldn't be concerned about what is concerning, that we shouldn't be attracted by what is attractive. Quite the opposite. The interior life expands the heart and fills it with a great love, enabling us to view our emotions in a broader context that provides the means for tackling feelings that give rise to difficulties, and helps capture the positive and transcendent meaning of those that are pleasant.

The Gospels show us our Lord's sincere concern for his disciples' rest. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while" (Mk 6:31). We also see how his heart reacts before the suffering of his friends, like Martha and Mary (cf. Jn 11:1-44). We cannot suppose that in those moments Jesus was simply "acting," as though deep down, because of his union with his

Father, whatever happened around him was a matter of indifference to him. Saint Josemaría often spoke about loving the world passionately.[6] He encouraged people to place their heart in God and, through Him, in others, in the work we are engaged in, in our efforts in the apostolate. “Our Lord does not want us to be dry and rigid, like inert matter.”[7]

Availability, for example, is not the disposition of a person who is indifferent to doing this or that because he has succeeded in losing interest in everything, perhaps in order to avoid suffering when something is asked of him which he doesn’t like. Rather it is the noble disposition of one who is able at a particular moment to do without something that is good and attractive, in order to concentrate on something else in which God is awaiting us, because living for God is

our deepest desire. Such a person has a great heart, filled with interests and good ambitions that can be set aside whenever necessary, not because we reject them or try to avoid being affected by them, but because our interest in loving and serving God is much greater still. And not only is it greater; it is – it has been transformed into – what gives meaning to and embraces all other interests.

Rejoicing in practicing the virtues

Formation in the virtues requires struggle, overcoming one's own inclination when this is opposed to good acts. This is the part of truth that is contained in the reductionist, "voluntaristic" concept of virtue referred to earlier. But virtue doesn't consist in the capacity to oppose inclinations, but rather in the formation of our inclinations. The goal, then, is not that we should be

capable of habitually setting our feelings aside so as to let ourselves be guided by an external rule, but rather to form those feelings in such a way that we are capable of rejoicing in the good achieved. Virtue consists precisely in this rejoicing in the good, in the formation, we might say, of "good taste": [Blessed is the man whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night (Ps 1:2). Thus, virtue entails the formation of our feelings, and not the habit of systematically opposing them.

As long as virtue is unformed, our feelings and emotions can offer resistance to a good act, which needs to be overcome. But the aim is not simply to overcome the resistance, but rather to develop a "taste" for acting virtuously. When one possesses virtue, the good act may still be difficult, but it is performed with joy. Let us offer an example. To

get up on time in the morning – “the heroic minute”[8] – will probably always be difficult; perhaps the day will never come when, on hearing the alarm, we don’t feel inclined to spend a little more time in bed. But if we habitually strive to overcome laziness out of love for God, a moment comes when to do so brings us joy, while to give in to comfort displeases us and leaves a bad taste in our mouth. Likewise, for someone who is honest, to take a product from the supermarket without paying for it is not only something prohibited; it is also ugly and disagreeable, opposed to that person’s dispositions, to their heart. This shaping of our feelings so that we experience joy at the good and displeasure at evil is not a collateral consequence of virtue, but rather an essential component. Hence virtue enables us to enjoy the good.

This is not a merely theoretical idea. It is of great practical importance for us to know, when we struggle, that we are not simply getting accustomed to putting up with annoyances, but we are learning to enjoy the good, even if for the moment it means we have to go against the grain.

Forming virtues makes the faculties and affections learn to focus on what truly satisfies our deepest aspirations, while attributing secondary importance – always subordinate to what is most important – to those things that are simply means to an end. In the final analysis, to be formed in the virtues is to learn how to be happy, to rejoice at and with what is truly great; it is, in short, to prepare for Heaven.

If being formed means growing in virtues, and the virtues consist in a certain order in our affectivity, in our

feelings and emotions, we can conclude that all formation is the formation of affectivity. On reading this, someone may raise the objection that, in one's effort to acquire virtues, the aim is operative rather than affective, perhaps even adding that we apply the name of virtues precisely to operative habits. This is true. But if the virtues help us to do good, it is because they help us to feel correctly. The human being always moves towards the good. The moral problem is, ultimately, why it is that what is not good appears to us – it presents itself to our eyes – as good, in a specific situation. That this happens is due to the disorder in our tendencies, which leads us to exaggerate the value of the good towards which one of those tendencies is directed, so that this good is considered more desirable in the particular situation than another good with which it is conflict, but which in fact has greater objective

value because it corresponds to the person's overall good.

For example: in a given situation we may find ourselves torn between telling the truth or not. The natural tendency we have towards the truth presents it to us as a good. But we also have a natural tendency to want the esteem of others, which in this particular case, if we think the truth is going to end up making us look bad, will present lying as appropriate. These two tendencies enter into conflict. Which of them will prevail? It will depend on which of the two goods is more important for us, and in this assessment our affectivity plays a decisive role. If it is well ordered, it will help the reason to see that the truth is very precious and that the esteem of others is not desirable if it makes us forsake the truth. This love for the truth over other goods that also attract us is precisely what we call sincerity. But

if the desire to look good is stronger than the attraction of truth, it is easy for the reason to be deceived, and even though it knows that it isn't good, it judges that it is appropriate to lie. Although we know perfectly well that it is wrong to lie, we consider that in this specific situation it is appropriate to do so.

A well-ordered emotional life helps us do good because it helps us to grasp it as good beforehand. Hence the importance of forming our emotions correctly. How can this be done? Before we attempt to answer this problem, it is interesting to point out some things which are necessary in order to adequately tackle this topic.

The will and our feelings

We have just stated that a well-ordered affectivity helps us to act well. The reverse is also true: to act

well helps us to put order in our affectivity.

We know from experience (and it is good not to forget it if we want to avoid easily falling into frustration and discouragement) that we cannot directly control our feelings. If we fall prey to discouragement, we cannot resolve the problem simply by deciding to feel happy. The same applies if at a given moment, we want to feel more daring, or less timid, or if we don't want to feel afraid or ashamed, or to feel the sensible attraction of something we judge to be disordered. At other times, we would like to get along easily with someone we find off-putting for reasons that we recognise are trivial but that we don't manage to overcome, and we realise that simply trying to treat that person in a natural way doesn't resolve the difficulty.

In short, a voluntary decision to make our feelings correspond to our desires is not enough. However, the fact that the will doesn't directly control our feelings doesn't mean that it has no influence over them.

In ethics, the control that the will can exercise over the feelings is called "political," because it is similar to that which a ruler has over his subjects; he cannot control them directly, since they are free. But he can take certain measures – for example, reducing taxes – in the hope that these will produce specific results – for example, increased consumption or investment – through the free will of the citizens. We too can perform certain acts which we hope will give rise to specific feelings. For example, we can stop to consider the good that will be done by an apostolic undertaking for which we are seeking help, as a way of feeling

more daring when asking for a donation to help get that undertaking started. We can consider our divine filiation in the hope that a professional setback will have less of an impact on us at the level of our feelings. Again, we know that to imbibe a certain amount of alcohol can provoke a transitory state of euphoria; and that if we deliberately let our minds dwell on some bad treatment we may have received, we will provoke reactions of anger. These are a few examples of the influence – in each case indirect – that the will can exercise in the short term over our feelings.

Much more important, however, is the long-term influence that the will exercises over our affectivity, since this influence is precisely what allows it to give it form, to form it. Here we are talking about an influence that comes about even without the person seeking it. It

results from the fact that voluntary acts can cause changes not only in the world around us, but also and above all within us. These acts help produce a connatural affective affinity with the good that the will seeks. Explaining exactly how this comes about is beyond the scope of this article, but here we want to highlight two key points.

Wanting the good

The first is to note that the good towards which the will inclines—and by which this connatural affinity is produced—can be very different from what is perceived from the outside. Two people who carry out the same assignment can be doing two very different things. One may be totally absorbed in not appearing bad in the eyes of the person who has given him that assignment, while the other really wants to serve. This second person is forming a virtue

while the first isn't, since the good sought is ultimately that of not looking bad before someone with authority. It is true that this action can be a better step than simply refusing to do the task. But as long as it isn't followed by a series of further steps, that person would not be growing in virtue no matter how many times the action is repeated. Hence it is very important to rectify, to constantly purify our intention in order to little by little embrace the reasons for which it is really worthwhile doing something, and thus to shape our emotions with them.

We all have our own experience or that of others on how limiting oneself to respecting certain rules easily ends up becoming a burden. The example of the older son in the parable warns us of this danger (cf. *Lk* 15:29-30). While in contrast, sincerely seeking the good that these

rules are meant to foster brings freedom and joy. Ultimately, we could say that we need to shape not so much our *doing* as our *wanting*. Not only what I do is important, but also what I want when I do it. [9] Freedom, thus, is the decisive factor. It is not sufficient to do something; we have to want to do it. We have to do it "because we want to, which is the most supernatural reason," [10] because only thus we are growing in virtue, that is, we are learning to enjoy what is truly good. A mere fulfillment that leads to *cumplo y miento*, to fulfilling and lying, [11] doesn't lead to freedom, nor to love and joy. But when we understand why this way of acting is truly great and worthwhile, and let ourselves be guided by these reasons in our actions, then we foster our freedom, and strengthen our love and joy.

Long-term formation

The second point to consider is that attaining connatural affinity with the good in our emotions is often a slow process. If virtue consisted merely in the capacity to overcome the resistance in our feelings to doing what is right, we could acquire it in a much shorter time. But we know that a virtue has not yet been solidly formed as long as the good being sought doesn't have a positive echo in our emotions. [12] Hence we need to be patient in our struggle because it may take a long time, even years, to achieve certain worthwhile goals. The difficulty we may experience in pursuing the good during this time shouldn't be interpreted as a failure or as a sign that our struggle is not sincere or decisive enough. We are dealing here with a progression in which every step may be so small that it isn't easy to realize that progress is being made. Only after time has gone by can we look back

and realize that we have travelled further than we had thought.

If, for example, we want to overcome our angry reactions, we will begin by making the effort to limit the external manifestations. Perhaps at first it may seem that we are not getting anywhere. But if we persist, the times when we control ourselves —perhaps very few at the beginning —will become more and more frequent, and after some time— perhaps a long time—we will gain habitual self-control. Still this is not enough, since our goal is not to repress the external manifestations but to shape our internal reaction, to become more gentle and peaceful. And then this calmer reaction will become engrained in our way of being. The struggle therefore may be longer, but who can deny that it will be more attractive, more liberating and more exciting? Its goal is to attain interior peace in seeking and

doing God's will, and not merely to "violently" suppress emotional reactions.

Pope Francis in explaining his principle that *time is greater than space*, [13] points out that "giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes *rather than possessing spaces*." [14] In the interior life it is worthwhile to start realistic and generous processes. And we need to be ready to wait as long as required for them to produce fruit. "This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation." [15] We need to try to ensure that the awareness of our limitations doesn't paralyze our desire to reach the fullness God

offers us. Just as we want to prevent this noble ambition from naively making us forget that we are limited.

To aim high in our formation, to strive not only to *carry out* good acts, but *to be* good, to have a good heart, will enable us to distinguish a virtuous act from what we might call an act that conforms to a virtue. The latter would be an act that corresponds to a virtue and contributes step by step to attaining it, but that since it does not yet stem from a mature habit, often still requires overcoming feelings that pull in the opposite direction. In contrast, a virtuous act is one that brings joy in accomplishing the good even when this requires effort. That is the goal.

An integral formation that shapes our emotional reactions is a slow process. Those who seek it won't fall into the naive attempt to submit

one's feelings to the will, suppressing emotions one doesn't like or trying to stir up those one wants to have. We come to understand that our struggle should be centered rather on the free decisions by which, in striving to fulfill God's will, we respond to these feelings, accepting or rejecting the behavior they suggest to us. For it is these decisions that—indirectly and in the long run—lead to forming the intimate world within us from which these feelings stem.

An interior world

As we grow in virtue, we not only carry out a good act with greater naturalness and joy, but we also become better able to identify what this good act is. "In order to 'prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (*Rom* 12:2), knowledge of God's law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient. What is essential is a

sort of 'connaturality' between man and the true good (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2). Such a connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself." [16]

This is due in large part to the fact that our emotional response is the first voice we hear when evaluating the suitability of a particular way of acting. Even before our reason considers whether it is right or not to do something pleasurable, we have already sensed its appeal. Virtue, by making the good attractive to our feelings, endows the voice of our affective response with a certain moral evaluation (that is, a reference to the person's overall good) of this act. Thus, for example, even though we are attracted by the possibility of looking good in another person's eyes, we grasp how unpleasant it is to lie.

In an implicit but clear way, we find this expressed in a very brief point of *The Way*: *"Why should you look around you, if you carry 'your world' within you?"* [17] Saint Josemaria is contrasting looking at the exterior world with a person's interior world. And it is this relationship that determines the value of the external look, which will be seen as appropriate or not according to one's interior world. There is no need then to suppress as inappropriate this external look, since right from the start the interior world—"my world"—rejects it. Saint Josemaria is telling us that if our interior world is rich, we will not only avoid what can do us harm, but it won't even be a danger because we will find it repugnant. We will see it not only as bad, but also—and even beforehand—as ugly, unappealing, unfitting, out of place… Of course, it may be attractive in some way, but it is easy to reject that attraction because it

destroys the beauty and harmony of our interior world. In contrast, if we don't "carry our world within us," avoiding that exterior look will entail considerable effort.

Realism

All this shows how growth in the virtues makes us ever more realistic in our approach to life. Some people have the idea—normally not expressed—that living according to the virtues implies closing one's eyes to reality. And this for a very noble reason, because by acting in this way we turn our back on part of this world hoping for a reward in the next. On the contrary, living as Christ did, imitating his virtues, opens us to the real world and prevents our feelings from deceiving us when evaluating and deciding how to respond to it.

For example, poverty doesn't mean failing to appreciate the value of

material goods in light of eternal life. Rather only a person who lives with detachment truly appreciates material goods in the proper way. They aren't seen as evil, nor are they given an importance they don't have. On the other hand, a person who makes no effort to live this way will end up giving them a greater value than what they really have, and this will affect that person's decisions. He will not be a realist even though he may appear to others as an authentic man of the world, who knows how to behave in wordly settings. A temperate person knows how to enjoy a good meal; while a person who lacks this virtue will give this pleasure an importance it objectively lacks. Something similar could be said about any other virtue. As Jesus told Nicodemus: *He who does what is true comes to the light* (*Jn* 3:21).

A "virtuous" circle

In the end, guiding our feelings by developing the virtues leads to purifying our sight. It is like taking our glasses and cleaning off the stains that original sin and our personal sins have left on them and that make it difficult for us to see the world as it really is. “Let us say it plainly: the unredeemed state of the world consists precisely in the failure to understand the meaning of creation, in the failure to recognize truth; as a result, the rule of pragmatism is imposed, by which the strong arm of the powerful becomes the god of this world.” [18]

A well-ordered affectivity helps our reason to *understand creation, to recognize the truth*, to identify what is truly good for us. Correct judgement on the part of our reason facilitates free choice. The good act that results from this choice helps to “connaturalize” us with the good we seek, and consequently to put order

into our emotional responses. This produces an authentic “virtuous circle” that leads us to realize that we are progressively freer, masters of our own acts and hence able to truly give ourselves to God, since only a person who possesses himself can give himself.

Formation is integral only when it reaches all these levels. In other words, there is only true formation when the various faculties that intervene in human acts—reason, will, emotions—are integrated. These faculties shouldn’t fight with one another but rather work together. If we fail to properly mold our feelings, that is, if the virtues are understood as only an added force for our will that enables it to override our feelings, the moral norms and the struggle to try to live them will be repressive and will fail to lead to an authentic unity of life. For we would always feel within us powerful forces

that try to pull us in the opposite direction and produce instability. We are well acquainted with this instability, since it is where we start from. But we are able to overcome it little by little, as we guide these forces progressively towards harmony. Then the moment will come when "because I want to," which is the "most supernatural reason," comes to mean because I like it, because it attracts me, because it accords with my way of being, because it fits with the interior world that I have formed for myself. And ultimately, because I have learned to make my own the sentiments of Christ Jesus.

Thus we make progress towards the attractive and exalted goal that Saint Paul sets out for us: *Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus (Phil* 2:5). And we realize that thus we are putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. *Rom* 13:14). "Christ's

life is our life … a Christian should live as Christ lived, making the affections of Christ his own, so that he can exclaim with Saint Paul: *non vivo ego, vivit vero in me Christus* (*Gal* 2:10), it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.**”** [19] Fidelity consists precisely in this, in living, wanting, and feeling in accord with Christ—not because we “disguise ourselves” as Christ, but because this becomes our own way of being. Then in following God’s will, in being faithful, we are deeply free, because we do what we want, what we like, what we “feel like” doing. Deeply free and deeply faithful. Deeply faithful and deeply happy.

Reference

[1] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, 8.

[2] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes (7 December 1965), 22.

[3] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, 8.

[4] In Spanish: “fidelidad” and “felicidad.” Cf. Saint Josemaria, Furrow, 84: “Your steadfastness in faith, purity and the way God has marked out for you is the measure of your happiness on earth.” Cf. also, for example, Instruction, May1935/14 September 1950, 60; Instruction 8 December 1941, 61; Saint Josemaria, Friends of God, 189.

[5] Saint Josemaria, Christ is Passing By, 96.

[6] Suffice it to mention, by way of example, the title of the homily

Passionately Loving the World, in Conversations, 113-123.

[7] Friends of God, 183.

[8] Saint Josemaria, The Way, 206.

[9] In reality, from a moral standpoint, *what I do* is precisely *what I want when I do it*. But for our purposes here there is no need to pause to explain why this is so.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 17.

[11] Cf. Don Alvaro, *Letter*, September 1995, in *Family Letters I*, 8.

[12] It should be clear from the what has been said previously that this doesn't mean that the good requires no effort or, what amounts to the same, that evil no longer holds any attraction.

[13] Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelium gaudium*, 222-225.

[14] *Ibid*., 223. Italics in the original.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 6 August 1993, 64. The text referred to is St Thomas Aquinas' Suma de Teología, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

[17] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 184.

[18] Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. II, 7, 3.

[19] *Christ is Passing By*, 103.

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