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"Thank Him For Everything, Because Everything Is Good"

"Make it a habit to raise your heart to God, in acts of thanksgiving, many times a day." A new article on Christian life.

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A life lived wisely means grasping what is essential, appreciating what is worthwhile, being alert against evil, rising above what is irrelevant. *If riches are desirable in life, what is*

richer than Wisdom, who produces all things? (Wis 8:5). Wisdom has no price, and everyone wants to possess it. It is a knowledge that cannot be reduced to scholarship. Rather it is the ability to “savour” what is good, to “taste” it. The Greek term *sophia* found in the Wisdom books was translated in Latin by *sapientia*, which is related to the English term “savour.” The original meaning of *sapientia* was a “good palate,” a good sense of smell. The wise man “savours” what is good. In an ancient prayer we ask God, *da nobis recta sapere*, “grant that we may savour what is right.”[1]

Sacred Scripture presents wisdom as being readily attainable: *Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. He who rises early to seek her will have*

*no difficulty, for he will find her sitting at his gates (Wis 6:12-14). Even so, to acquire this “connatural” knowledge we have to seek it, to desire it, to rise early in search of it. Doing so with patience, with the insistence of the Psalmist: *Oh God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my flesh faints for thee as in a dry and weary land where no water is (Ps 63:1).**

This search is the work of a lifetime, and hence wisdom grows as the years go by. As the Pope has often said, echoing the Book of Sirach (cf. *Sir 8:9*), wisdom belongs to the aged, who are “the store of the wisdom of our people.”^[2] It is true that age can sometimes bring disadvantages such as the hardening of certain character defects, a reluctance to accept one’s own limitations, or difficulties in understanding young people. But despite all this, the elderly often possess the capacity to appreciate, to “savour” what is truly important.

And this, in the end, is what true wisdom is.

Saint Josemaría, when talking to a group of faithful of the Work, once made reference to this type of knowledge that is gained over the years. “In thirty years’ time you’ll look back and you will be astonished. And you will feel impelled to spend the rest of your life giving thanks, giving thanks...”[3] As the years go by, we will be left, above all, with reasons to be grateful. The sharp points of problems and difficulties that worried us greatly in the past become softened. We will see them with other eyes, maybe even with a bit of humour. We gain the perspective needed to see how God has been leading us, how He has made use of our efforts and even of our mistakes. Those who lived with Blessed Alvaro remember how he would often say with simplicity: “Thanks be to God.” The conviction

that we only have reasons to be grateful contains an essential element of true wisdom. The wisdom that God increases in the souls of those who seek Him, and who can say, even before growing old, *I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts (Ps 119:100).*

Everything is good

In 1937, amid the privations and worries in his hiding place in the Honduran Legation, Saint Josemaría wrote to faithful of the Work who were scattered throughout Madrid: “Take heart! Try to ensure that everyone is cheerful: everything is for the good, everything is good.”^[4] Another letter written a month later to those in Valencia has the same advice: “Take heart. Strive to recover your joy, if very naturally you have become sad. Everything is for the good.”^[5]

Everything is good, everything is for the good. These words are grounded in two verses from Sacred Scripture. One is the crescendo of God's joy in creating that comes to a climax with the final verse: *all that He had made ... was very good (Gen 1:31)*. The other is Saint Paul's maxim, *in everything God works for good with those who love him (Rom 8:28)*, which Saint Josemaría condensed into the aspiration *omnia in bonum!* Years before, at Christmas 1931, those two threads from Scripture were woven together in a note that later became a point in *The Way*. Everything is good; everything is for the good. Both gratitude for what is good, and the hope that God will draw good out of what seems bad.

“Make it a habit to raise your heart to God, in acts of thanksgiving, many times a day. Because He gives you this and that... Because someone has despised you... Because you don't

have what you need, or because you do have it.

“And because He made his Mother, who is also your Mother, so beautiful. Because He created the sun and the moon and this animal or that plant. Because He made that man eloquent and left you slow of speech...

“Thank Him for everything, because everything is good.”[6]

The sequence of reasons to be grateful here follows no particular order. Since everything is good, the first thing that comes to mind, and the next, and the next... are all reasons for gratitude. “Because He created the sun and the moon and this animal or that plant.” Wherever we happen to look, Saint Josemaría seems to be telling us, we will only find reasons to be grateful. We see reflected here an overflowing admiration for God’s goodness: an

astonishment that recalls Saint Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures," where everything also becomes a reason for thanking God. "Praise to you, my Lord, for Sister Moon and for the stars ... Praise to you, my Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air, and fair and stormy, all weather's moods ... Praise to you, my Lord, for those who grant pardon for love of you." [7]

"Because He gives you this and that." How many gifts God gives us, and how easily we get used to them! Health is a good example here. It has been defined as "life lived in the silence of the organs": we usually take it for granted until our body starts to call attention to itself. Maybe only then, when we no longer have it, do we truly value what we once had. Gratitude here consists partly in "being alert": listening carefully in order to perceive the silent, discreet way in which God gives us so many things. "God's mercy accompanies us

daily. To be able to perceive His mercy it suffices to have a mind that is alert. We are excessively inclined to notice only the daily effort and fatigue... If, however, we open our hearts, we can be constantly aware of how good God is to us, of how He thinks of us precisely in little things, thus helping us to achieve important ones.”[8]

We would belittle this thankfulness if we thought it simply meant paying back a debt of gratitude. It is much more: precisely because it consists in “savouring” the good, thanking God means “enjoying with Him” the good things He gives us, for we always enjoy things more when accompanied by people we love. Even the most prosaic things can then be a cause for enjoyment: for not taking ourselves too seriously, for discovering the joy of living “amid the little things of life, as a response to the loving invitation of God our

Father: *my child, treat yourselves well according to your means ... do not deprive yourself of the day's enjoyment* (Sir 14:11, 14). What tender paternal love echoes in these words!"[9]

All things are for the good

Remembering to be grateful for the good things God gives us is already a challenge. So what about less pleasant things? "Because someone has despised you": because you have been treated coldly or with indifference, because you have been humiliated, because your efforts have not been appreciated...

"Because you don't have what you need or because you do have it."

What is surprising here is how calmly "having" and "not having" are placed on the same footing. Is it really possible to be grateful to God for the lack of health, or of work or tranquillity? To thank God because

we haven't enough time (how often this makes us suffer!); because we haven't enough courage, or strength, or ideas; or because this or that has turned out badly... Well, yes: even then, Saint Josemaría tells us, give thanks to God.

This attitude reminds us of the difficulties that Saint Josemaría was coping with when he wrote those letters from the Honduran Legation, and the suffering which gave rise to a note that is the source of this point in *The Way*.^[10] The invitation to be grateful for difficulties, which is even more explicit some pages later, originates in a note from five days before. "Paradoxes of a little soul. When Jesus sends you what the world calls good luck, feel sorrow in your heart at the thought of His goodness and your wickedness. When Jesus sends you what people consider bad luck, rejoice in your heart, for He always gives you what

is best. This is the beautiful moment to love the Cross.”[11]

Despite its closeness in time, this consideration is placed in a different chapter in *The Way*, one of two chapters about spiritual childhood. This gives us the key to understanding the spiritual climate of his readiness to thank God “for everything, because everything is good.” Gratitude is a sign of the wisdom that comes with age and closeness to God; but it only comes when there is an attitude of “hope-filled abandonment”[12] in God’s hands. Saint Josemaría discovered it through the path of spiritual childhood. “Have you seen the gratitude of little children? Imitate them, saying to Jesus when things are favourable and when they aren’t, ‘How good you are! How good!’”[13]

Thanking God for difficulties is certainly not something that comes

spontaneously. In practice, it may even seem like putting on an act, or even being naïve, as if we were denying reality, and seeking consolation in a fairy-tale.

Nevertheless, being grateful in these situations doesn't mean closing our eyes to reality, but *seeing more deeply*. We feel reluctant to be grateful because we are aware of the loss, the setback, the damage we have suffered. Our outlook is still too earthbound, as happens with a child who thinks it's the end of the world because his toy has got broken, because he has fallen over, or because he wants to go on playing. At the time it's a big drama, but soon everything is fine again. "In our interior life, it does all of us good to be ... like those tiny tots who seem to be made of rubber and who even enjoy falling down because they get up again right away and are once more running around, and also because they know their parents will

always be there to console them, whenever they need them.”[14]

The gratitude that Saint Josemaría talks about isn't a “magic cloak” to cover over the unpleasant things in life; rather it means raising our eyes to look at God our Father who is smiling at us. This leads to trust, to abandoning ourselves in God, thus putting the setback in the right perspective, even though it continues hurting. To thank God when something hurts us means to *accept* it. “The best way to show your gratitude to God and people is to accept everything with joy.”[15] Certainly, our first reaction isn't a cry of joy; probably just the opposite. Even so, even though our heart rebels, we need to strive to be grateful: “Lord, it's impossible, it can't be... but thank you.” We need to accept God's will: “I wanted to have more time, more strength; I wanted that person to be nicer to me; I didn't

want to have this difficulty, this defect. But you know best.” We will ask God to arrange things as seems best to us, but with the serene assurance that He knows what He is doing and draws good out of what we can only see as bad.

To be grateful even for what seems bad to us (as we are told in a text that was also written in December 1931) means “to believe as children believe, to love as children love, to abandon ourselves as children abandon themselves.”^[16] This abandonment can be expressed in many different ways in our interior life, but it always reflects the conviction that in God’s eyes we are very small, and so are our concerns. And, in spite of this, that they are important to God, more than to anyone else in the world. This gives rise to the gratitude of *knowing we are loved*: thank you for being here at my side; thank you because this

matters to you. Amid God's apparent distance, we perceive His closeness. And we contemplate Him in the midst of ordinary life, because problems are part of ordinary life. Faced with adversity we realize the deepest reason for thanking God for both good and bad things: thank you, because I meet Love everywhere. The true reason for acts of thanksgiving, the source of all gratitude, is that God loves me, and that everything in my life is an opportunity to love and to know that I am loved.

Suffering because of what we don't have, because of people's coldness, or because of what we lack, or from the consequences of our own mistakes... are all opportunities to *remember*, to wake up to God's Love. We realize that, even though we find it hard to renounce something, to accept suffering or setbacks, what does it matter if we have God's Love? *Who*

shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Rom 8:35).

Hence it becomes possible for us to “thank Him for everything, because everything is good.” The Christian “madness” of being grateful for everything stems from divine filiation. Someone who realizes that they have a Father who loves them, truly needs nothing more. A good Father, above all, is to be thanked. This is the way Jesus loves His Father. Jesus is gratitude personified, since He has received everything from his Father. And to be a Christian is to enter into this love, into this gratitude: *Father, I thank thee for thou hearest me always* (cf. *Jn 11:41*).

Don't forget to give thanks

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits (Ps 103:2). In the Scriptures God frequently invites us to remember, since He knows how often we are forgetful, like children who play with their toys and fail to think about their father. God knows this, and understands it. But He draws us gently to Himself and whispers to us in a thousand ways: *remember*. To give thanks, then, is also a question of remembering. That is why the Holy Father often talks about “a grateful memory.”[17]

The readiness to give thanks for what annoys us, surprising though it may seem, in fact helps us to remember to thank God for pleasant things.

Moreover, everyday life gives us many opportunities to “remember”: stopping for a moment to say grace before and after meals; dedicating part of our thanksgiving after Mass or of our personal prayer to giving thanks for the ordinary things in our

daily life, discovering what is “extraordinary” about them: for our work, for a roof over our heads, for people who love us; giving thanks for others’ joys; seeing God’s gifts in all the people who assist us... We also experience moments when life seems especially beautiful: a striking sunset, an unexpected act of kindness, a pleasant surprise... And we discern, amid the apparent greyness of daily life, the brightness of God’s Love.

From ancient times, people have seen in the setting of the sun each evening an image of our life. Hence, if gratitude is part of the wisdom of someone who has lived a long life, how good it is to end each day by giving thanks. When we pause, in God’s presence, to consider how our day has gone, God will be “thankful” when we thank Him for so many gifts, *etiam ignotis*,^[18] including the ones we aren’t aware of; and also

when we ask for forgiveness, with a child's trust, for not thanking Him enough.

Carlos Ayxelà

[1] Prayer *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, Collect for the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit.

[2] Pope Francis, Audience, 4 March 2015.

[3] Notes from a family gathering, 21 January 1955, quoted in *Noticias*, August 1955, p. 53.

[4] Letter, 17 May 1937, quoted in *Critical-Historical edition of The Way*, commentary on no. 268.

[5] Letter, 15 June 1937, quoted in *Critical-Historical edition of The Way*, commentary on no. 268.

[6] *The Way*, no. 268. The original note was dated 28 December 1931.

[7] Saint Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of the Creatures.”

[8] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 15 April 2007.

[9] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 4.

[10] Cf. *Critical-Historical edition of The Way*, commentary on nos. 267 and 268.

[11] *The Way*, no. 873. The original note was dated 23 December 1931.

[12] The Father, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

[13] *The Way*, no. 894. The text comes from a note dated 23 December 1931.

[14] *Friends of God*, no. 146.

[15] Saint Teresa of Calcutta, *No Greater Love*, Novato (California) 2002, p. 33.

[16] *Holy Rosary*, “To the Reader”. This passage was part of the original text that Saint Josemaría wrote all in one go during the Novena of the Immaculate Conception in 1931.

[17] Cf. e.g. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 13; Homily, 18 June 2017; Homily, 12 December 2017.

[18] Saint Josemaría, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, London and New York, 2018, p. 135.

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