

Unity of Life in Professional Work

“Any honorable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul develops a unity of life, which is both simple and strong.” A new article in the series on sanctifying work.

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“Any honorable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul develops a unity of life, which is both simple and strong.”[1]

Work, prayer, apostolate: three words that perhaps before signified three separate areas for us but are now fused together like the notes of a chord, forming in the end a single harmonious musical score.

Perhaps when we started out in our professional work all we could hear was the isolated and monotonous sound of our own work, lacking in grace. But when we discover how to transform our work into prayer that is raised up to heaven and into apostolate that makes the earth fruitful, the notes combine and begin to acquire rhythm and harmony. If we cease trying to create and compose, we can easily slip back into solo notes. But as soon as we let the Holy Spirit govern our professional life and direct the orchestra, the music flows forth again, producing a wonderful symphony of love for God and mankind—of prayer and apostolate—in our daily work. Every

single faculty of our being, our will, intellect and affections, play their part skilfully, resulting in the simple and strong unity of life that pleases God and draws others to him.

In our professional endeavor, three aspects need to be considered carefully in order to attain the harmony of unity of life: a right intention, sound principles and behavior that is consistent with both.

A right intention

Unity of life in our professional work depends first of all on our rectitude of intention, on a clear and firm decision to work for love of God and not out of ambition or other forms of selfishness, seeking the glory of God and not human glory or personal satisfaction.

No one can serve two masters.[2] We cannot compromise, having in our heart “one candle lit to Saint Michael

and another to the devil.”[3] Our intention has to be transparent. But despite our desire to work for God’s glory, we all find that it is easy to lose the rectitude of our will in specific actions, and that often side by side with an upright intention we can discover other motives that are less noble.[4] For that very reason, St. Josemaría advised us to constantly purify our will and rectify our intention. “To rectify. A little each day. This must be your constant concern if you really want to become a saint.”[5]

Whoever works with a right intention always tries to work well. That person doesn’t work one way when others are watching and another way when no one is around. They know that God is always watching, and therefore try to fulfil their duties perfectly to please Him. They are orderly, hard-working, refined in the way they live poverty,

even when nobody notices or when they have to go against the grain. On grey days, when the cloud of monotony looms low, a child of God tries to place the finishing touches out of love, thus converting work into prayer.

Moments of success or failure can test the mettle of our intention, tempting us to fall into vanity or discouragement. St. Josemaría taught us to be prepared for these situations that could turn our thoughts towards ourselves and sully our intention.

“You must be careful: don’t let your professional success or failure—which will certainly come—make you forget, even for a moment, what the true aim of your work is: the glory of God!”[6]

To strengthen our rectitude of intention, the pillar of our unity of life, we need to seek God’s presence in our work. We will offer our work

up as we begin it, renew our offering as often as possible, and give thanks when finishing it. And we will try to ensure that the practices of piety, especially the Holy Mass, overflow into a continuous conversation with God throughout the day. “Forgetting about God” in our work is a sign of a weak unity of life and not simply of a tendency to become distracted. When someone is truly in love, they don’t forget the person they love.

Sound principles

Rectitude of intention is essential for unity of life, but we can never forget that our will needs to be guided by reason enlightened by faith. There are people who fail to live in accord with their Christianity on a day to day basis not as a result of bad intention, but because they lack sound knowledge. When people don’t seek to form their conscience, and fail to get to know the moral

implications of each profession in depth, they are in danger of accepting as their norm what they see others doing. Thus, acting with seeming “good will,” they can fall into mistaken behavior or commit grave injustices. And because they don’t know how to weigh up matters prudently, they can fail to do the good that ought to be done. The lack of sound principles is an obstacle to achieving unity of life.

A person with principles does the right thing without falling into extremes or settling for mediocrity. At times not knowing what is the right thing to do can cause someone to think that the alternative to a defect is the opposite defect: e.g., to avoid being rigid, it is necessary to be weak, or so as not to be aggressive, one ought to be “soft.” In practice, such people have not understood the nature of virtue properly. The mean—*in medio virtus*—does not involve

doing things by halves or not aspiring to great heights. Rather it is the summit between two defects.[7] It is possible to be energetic and gentle at the same time, to be both understanding and demanding in one's duties, to be truthful and circumspect, cheerful without being naïve. *So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*,[8] our Lord said.

The principles we need to attain unity of life are *Christian* principles, not merely human ones. Their guiding light is not just right reason but reason enlightened by a living faith that in turn is informed by charity. Only then do the human virtues become Christian virtues. A child of God has no need to cultivate two types of virtues, some human and others Christian, some informed by charity and others not, since this would lead to double standards. He or she should not be satisfied with practising only human justice in

certain areas of work—e.g., fulfilling the letter of the law—and in other areas Christian justice, sweetened by charity. Rather they have to strive to live always and in everything the justice of Christ. “Consider especially the counsels and warnings with which he prepared the handful of men who were to become his Apostles, his messengers from one end of the earth to the other. What is the key to his teaching? Is it not the new commandment of charity? It was Love that enabled them to make their way through that corrupt pagan world...When justice alone is done, don’t be surprised if people are hurt. The dignity of man, who is a son of God, requires much more. Charity must penetrate and accompany justice because it sweetens and deifies everything: ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:16)....

“Charity, which is like a generous overflowing of justice, demands first

of all the fulfilment of one's duty. The way to start is to be just; the next step is to do what is most equitable...; but in order to love, great refinement is required, and much thoughtfulness, and respect, and kindness in rich measure. In other words, it involves following the Apostle's advice: 'carry one another's burdens, and thus you will fulfil the law of Christ' (*Gal 6:2*)... This requires the integrity of being able to submit our own wills to that of our divine model, working for all men, and fighting for their eternal happiness and well-being. I know of no better way to be just than that of a life of self-surrender and service.”[9] This is what it means to have *Christian principles*, an essential light for unity of life.

All this requires formation, and especially time dedicated to studying doctrine. It would be rash to rely on one's "intuition," and fail to put the effort required to attain a sound

intellectual grounding. However, theoretical knowledge alone is not enough. Christian unity of life requires doctrine assimilated through prayer.

Daring

As well as knowledge and love, unity of life requires putting these into practice, because “love is deeds and not sweet words.”[10] *That they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*,[11] says our Lord. We should examine ourselves frankly, as St. Josemaría advised: “Is Christianity spreading to those around you? Consider this every day.”[12]

When there is unity of life, it is only natural that those around us notice it. A person who hides his Christian beliefs out of fear of being “pigeonholed” would lose unity of life. They would fail to be salt or light and their works would be

supernaturally sterile. The Lord says to each of us: *dabo te in lucem gentium, ut sit salus mea usque ad extremum terrae.*[13] I will place you as a light before the people, so that my salvation can reach the ends of the earth.

We have to have “the courage always to act in public in accordance with our holy faith.”[14] Our Lord warned: *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory.*[15] Jesus also encourages us with a wonderful promise: *So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.*[16] There is no room for ambiguity. We cannot be afraid to speak of God. We do so both with our words, since Christ himself commanded us to *go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation,*[17] and with our

example: *faith working through love*.
[18]

It is only natural that those alongside us see our faith expressed in deeds. With even greater reason should this be true when materialism and hedonism hold sway around us. If one's faith takes a long time to be noticed, this would be a sign of double standards rather than naturalness. This unfortunately is what happens to those who relegate their faith to the "private sphere." This attitude, if not stemming from mere cowardice, could be the result of thinking that one's faith should not play a role in one's professional conduct. Thus it would reflect not a lay mentality but a "laicist" one, which tries to eliminate God from society and also often dispenses with the moral law. This is the exact opposite of the ideal of placing Christ at the pinnacle of all human activities. We have been called to this

high goal, and it is good that many of those around us know it. Moreover, while our primary apostolate is that of “friendship and trust”[19] with our colleagues, one to one, this does not exclude the possibility that at times it will be good or even necessary—an imperative of our unity of life—to speak out in the public forum and defend Christian morality. Obstacles may abound, but faith gives us the strength we need to defend the truth and help those around us to discover it.

In practice, however, we know from experience that even when we avoid extremes, it is easy to allow oneself to be influenced by a laicist mentality and to be convinced, for example, that in some professional spheres it is preferable never to speak of God because it would be “out of place” or could cause surprise, or because others might think that our position on professional issues is “influenced

by our religion.” That is when the temptation presents itself to hide our Christian condition, precisely when we need to display it.

“Nonsectarianism. Neutrality. Old myths that always try to seem new.

Have you ever stopped to think how absurd it is to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a university, a professional association, a cultural society, or Parliament, like a man leaving his hat at the door?”[20] St. Josemaría is not inviting us to make a show of our Catholicism, or to act in a way that is not compatible with a lay mentality. What he wants is that each of us, in our particular circumstances, consider carefully the external and clear demands of unity of life in our work and social life.

“You have to have the courage (which at times will be considerable, given the circumstances of the times) to make your faith present, to make

it tangible even. Let others see your good works and the motive behind them, even when at times you may be criticised and attacked, since there will always be some who will misunderstand your motives.”[21]

Unity of life is a gift from God, and at the same time a conquest that demands personal struggle. This unity is forged in one’s work by dint of specific decisions to act facing God and with apostolic desires. With God’s grace we have to aspire to love God with our whole being: *ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente, ex tota virtute*,[22] with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

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[1] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 10. Any references without an

author indicated below as from St. Josemaria.

[2] *Mt* 6:24.

[3] *The Way*, no. 724.

[4] Cf. *The Way*, no. 788.

[5] *The Way*, no. 290.

[6] *The Forge*, no. 704.

[7] Cf. *Friends of God*, no. 83.

[8] *Mt* 10:16.

[9] *Friends of God*, no. 172-173.

[10] Cf. *The Way*, no. 933.

[11] *Mt* 5:16.

[12] *The Forge*, no. 856.

[13] *Is* 49:6.

[14] *Furrow*, no. 46.

[15] *Lk* 9:26.

[16] *Mt* 10:32.

[17] *Mk* 16:15.

[18] *Gal* 5:6.

[19] *The Forge*, no. 192.

[20] *The Way*, no. 353.

[21] *Instruction*, 8 December 1941, 13.

[22] *Mk* 12:30.