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Insights to the impossible mission for the Christian

All Christians are made one body with Christ through Baptism and participate in his redemptive mission. Each and every one therefore must actively work to pass on to all men and women the gospel Jesus preached.

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Light, Salt and Leaven

Mission impossible. No other expression can summarize the command given to a small group of people on the Mount of Olives, early one spring morning at the dawn of the Christian era: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Christ's last words had all the appearance of insanity. Neither rich nor learned nor influential, how were those simple people from this lost corner of the Roman empire supposed to carry to the whole world the message of a recently executed man?

Within the span of three hundred years, a large part of the Roman world had converted to the Christian way of life. The doctrine of the Crucified One had conquered the persecutions of the powerful, the

contempt of the learned, and the hedonist's resistance to moral demands. Christianity is today the world's greatest spiritual force. Only God's grace can explain it. But his grace has worked through men and women who lived up to the mission they received.

Christ did not speak of this mission as a mere possibility. He gave his disciples an imperative command. Thus we read in St Mark: "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk. 16:15-16). And similarly in St Matthew: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you

always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt. 28:19-20).

Such words bring to mind Christ's prayer to the Father during the Last Supper: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:18). The Second Vatican Council, in commenting on these words, stated: "The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth" (*Lumen Gentium*, 17).

Everyone's task

Whenever there is talk of the Church's mission, people often mistakenly assume that this responsibility lies with the clergy. But the mission that Christ entrusts to his disciples must be carried out by all the members of the Church. Everyone, each according to his or her own condition, has to join in this

common endeavor (c.f. *Lumen Gentium*, 30). The Council reminded us that "the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate... In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying and ruling in his name and power. But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2). All Christians are made one body with Christ through Baptism and participate in his redemptive mission. Each and every one therefore must actively work to pass on to all men and women the gospel Jesus preached.

Although the apostolic dimension of the Christian vocation has always

been present in the Church, it seemed for a long time that the saving mission had been entrusted to only a few. The rest of the faithful, the vast majority, had but a passive role to play. The Second Vatican Council has returned to the beginnings, emphasizing that the universal call to apostolate is not just a possibility but a real duty: "On all Christians therefore is laid the pre-eminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all people throughout the world" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3).

Where only lay people can reach

Do lay people as such have a specific role within the Church's mission?

The Second Vatican Council has already given exact guidelines.

Ordinary faithful, says the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, "are called there by God that by

exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). And further on: "the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth" (*Lumen Gentium*, 33). For example, the Church is present in a hospital not only in the chaplain. She is there, too, in the Christian faithful who, as doctors and nurses, work to give the patients good professional services and personal attention. In a neighborhood, the church building will always be an indispensable point of reference, but the only way to reach those who do not attend its

services is through Christian families.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, taking into account work done in the 1987 Synod of Bishops, explores this doctrine more deeply. Referring to the laity's mission, the Pope warned of two dangers: "the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world" (*Christifideles Laici*, 2). Against these two extremes, the Pope remarked that what distinguishes lay men and women is their "secular character", since God calls them to "sanctify themselves in

marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession and in the various activities of society" (*Christifideles Laici*, 15).

The Synod tried in this way to avoid the double risk pointed out by the Pope. By encouraging the mission of lay people in temporal affairs, it side-steps the temptation to retreat into the Church so as to escape from a hostile or indifferent society. By calling for a strong unity of faith and life, the bishops seek to avoid the loss of Christian identity. To be salt for the earth, one must be in the world. But this salt must never become insipid.

The specific mission of lay people is thus clear - to bring Christ's message to all earthly concerns: one's family, professional occupation, social activities... and, with the help of grace, to transform them into an encounter with God.

The first Christians

However, all this is not something new that took shape only after Vatican II. The Christians of the first hour, those who knew Christ and the Apostles personally or who belonged to the generations immediately following, were strongly conscious of their mission in the world.

Tertullian, for instance, writes: "We live as other men and women. We share your forum, meat market, baths, shops, factories, inns, market days and the rest of your business enterprises. We are sailors like yourselves; we serve in the army; we engage in farming and trading; in addition, we place the products of our labor at your service" (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 42).

And we can still read in a venerable document from Christian antiquity: "Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either

country, speech or customs; the fact is they nowhere settle in cities of their own; they use no peculiar language; they cultivate no eccentric mode of life... While they dwell in both Greek and non-Greek cities, as each one's lot was cast, and conform to the customs of the country in dress, food and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary" (Epistle to Diognetus, 5). While remaining where they were, the first Christians had notably changed their behavior, as the same document says further on: "They marry like others and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring... They find themselves in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their private lives rise above the laws... In a word, what the soul is in

the body, that the Christians are in the world" (Epistle to Diognetus, 5 and 6).

This attitude, their fervent apostolic activity, resulted in the Christian faith spreading astoundingly in a brief space of time. Doubtless, those brothers and sisters of ours had God's grace. But, in addition, we know that their response was always heroic: not only when facing torture but also in every moment of their lives. It is not a surprise that Tertullian could write: "We were born yesterday and already fill the earth: cities, islands, towns, villages, the army, the imperial palace, the senate, the Forum. Only your temples we have left for you" (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 1).

The spirit of Opus Dei

Allow me to change tack slightly. The universal call to sanctity and apostolate, so clear in the first

Christians and recalled by the latest Council (*c.f. Christifideles Laici*, 16), is one of the basic principles informing the spirit of the Prelature of Opus Dei. Since 1928, its founder, Blessed Josemaria Escriva, never ceased saying that sanctity and apostolate were a right and duty for each baptized person. For instance, he wrote in 1934: "Your duty is to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you. Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: 'Be perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect'" (*The Way*, 291). And again, on our apostolic mission: "Through the world still echoes that divine cry: 'I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and what will I but that it be kindled?' And you see: it has nearly all died out... Don't you want to spread the blaze?" (*The Way*, 801)

Monsignor Escriva can well be considered a pioneer of the Second

Vatican Council. Cardinal Poletti clearly asserted this when introducing the beatification process of Opus Dei's founder: "Because he proclaimed the universal call to holiness ever since he founded Opus Dei in 1928, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer has been unanimously acknowledged as a forerunner of the Council precisely in what constitutes the basic nucleus of its teaching" (Decree of Introduction of the Cause of Beatification of the Servant of God Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer y Albás).

Word and example

In an increasingly materialistic society, the Christian's task is similar to that of Christ's first disciples: to pass on the Good News by example and word. In this life we never know the effects of our behavior on those around us ? the good example or scandal we have given. The first and

essential obligation for any Christian is to act in harmony with the Faith, consistent with his professed beliefs. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16).

However, example is not enough. "An apostolate of this kind does not consist only in the witness of one's way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening and encouraging them to a more fervent life" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6).

This charge is not addressed to "specialist" apostles. The Council reminded everyone of the obligation that each lay person has to do apostolate on his or her own initiative. "The individual apostolate, flowing generously from its source in a truly Christian life, is the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate, even of the organized type, and it admits of no substitute. Regardless of status, all lay persons (including those who have no opportunity or possibility for collaboration in associations) are called to this type of apostolate and obliged to engage in it. This type of apostolate is useful at all times and places, but in certain circumstances it is the only one appropriate and feasible" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 16).

The occasions for apostolate are continuous. One's entire life should be constantly apostolic. Nevertheless,

I would like to consider two areas that are the axes of most people's lives: work and family.

Through professional work

Professional work is one of the places where friendships are born and develop. Possibilities for apostolate here might seem to be restricted to a few persons, but we should not forget that deep, trusting relationships spring up with those who work at our side, enabling us frequently to help them in decisive and lasting ways. Some jobs (I am thinking, for example, of teaching or working in the mass media) offer an opportunity to reach hundreds and even thousands of persons. However, it would be a mistake to think that only these professions can be occasions for apostolate. On the contrary, all Christians, in whatever job or circumstance, should help

those around them find the Christian meaning of life.

Ordinarily, there will be no need for great eloquence and sermons. It will be enough to practice what Opus Dei's founder called "the apostolate of friendship and confidence", which he described in this way: "Those words whispered at the proper time into the ear of your wavering friend; that helpful conversation you manage to start at the right moment; the ready advice that improves his studies; and the discreet indiscretion by which you open for him unsuspected horizons for his zeal - all that is the 'apostolate of friendship' (The Way, 973).

Apostolic zeal is shown in real concern for others, which normally finds an outlet in personal conversation between two friends. "A Christian's apostolate - and I'm talking about an ordinary Christian

living as just one more man or woman among equals - is a great work of teaching. Through real, personal, loyal friendship, you create in others a hunger for God and you help them to discover new horizons. Naturally, simply: with the example of your faith lived to the full, with a loving word full of the force of divine truth" (Josemaria Escriva, Christ Is Passing By, 149).

This apostolic effort is not limited to individuals. With a spirit of freedom and responsibility, Christians ought to see to it that the whole spectrum of social structures and institutions help all men and women draw closer to God. The Council saw this infusion of a Christian spirit into the temporal order as the characteristic mission of the lay faithful. In his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, the Pope calls on Christians who work in the fields of science, technology, medicine, politics, economics and

culture (*c.f. Christifideles Laici* 38, 42-44), and asks them not to shrink from their responsibility to build a more humane, and therefore a more Christian, world.

The inspiration and principles needed for such an endeavor are to be found in the Church's social doctrine. But this doctrine will take on life only when men and women - whether on Wall Street or in a humble corner shop - see their work as something more than a mere source of income or a rung upon the social ladder. Men and women are needed - whether in City Hall or in neighborhood associations - who will work to foster a more humane society; educators are required - whether university professors or grade school teachers - who will help create a Christian culture.

Importance of the family

Along with all this apostolic endeavor centered around work, the apostolate done in and through the family will always have a fundamental importance. For parents, their first and most important apostolate, entrusted to them directly by God, is the education of their children.

The family is "the first and vital cell of society" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11). On its health depends the health or sickness of all of society. Society will be more fraternal if all family members learn how to sacrifice for each other. Tolerance and respect in human relationships depend on mutual understanding between parents and children. Loyalty will have a resurgence in society `if marital fidelity is properly valued. And materialistic consumerism will decline if the happiness of home is

not calculated only in material possessions.

The role of example is crucial in the education of children. John Paul II has commented about his own father: "My father was admirable, and almost all the memories of my childhood and adolescence are connected with him... The mere fact of seeing him on his knees had a decisive influence on my early years. He was so hard on himself that he had no need to be hard on his son; his example alone was sufficient to inculcate discipline and a sense of duty" (André Frossard, *Be Not Afraid*, p. 14). And Cardinal Luciani, later John Paul I, wrote: "In reality, the first book of religion that children read is the parents themselves. It is a good thing if the father says to the boy: 'There is a monk confessor at church, don't you think you could take advantage of the opportunity?' Better still if he says: 'I'm going to

church, to Confession; do you want to come along?" (*Illustrissimi*: Letters from Pope John Paul 1, p. 223)

Examples given in all circumstances - loyalty to friends, work habits, sobriety and temperance, joy in adversity, concern for others, generosity - are engraved forever in children's hearts.

Parents must also give generous attention to their children's education. The founder of Opus Dei used to tell business people: "The most important business you have is raising your children well." This will come about if parents become friends with their children; if children can always open their hearts trustingly to their parents when troubles of any kind crop up. St Thomas More wrote: "When I have returned home, I must talk with my wife, chat with my children and confer with my servants. All this activity I count as business when it

must be done - and it must be, unless you want to be a stranger in your own home. Besides, one must take care to be as agreeable as possible to those whom nature has supplied, or chance has made, or you yourself have chosen, to be the companions of your life" (Utopia).

True, the frantic pace of modern times does not seem to foster this calm dedication to children. We have more and more of everything, except time for others. There is a risk that parents may be devoured by work, even though it is done for the sake of their children's future. But their future well-being depends a lot more on the time parents have generously given rather than on the material comfort they have provided.

Children do not complain so much of parents who have not given them this or that, as of parents who have not given themselves to the family.

Families open to all

But a Christian aware of his or her mission as leaven for the world cannot be satisfied with home duties and obligations. In a highly competitive world, it is normal to seek at home, in one's own family, the much-needed affection and security so often lacking in the world at large. It is also understandable that many parents strive to protect their own family's welfare. At the same time, the Christian family is always an "open" family. "The family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates... Such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood of which it forms part" (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 71). A Christian family striving to live up to its ideals, despite its limitations and difficulties, is always attractive, even from a

human perspective. More so if such a family is truly open to others, fostering an apostolic spirit with relatives, colleagues, neighbors and friends of the children. Thus will be realized the ideal held up by John Paul II when he wrote: "the Church of the home is also called to be a luminous sign of Christ's presence and of his love for those who are far away, for families who do not yet believe, and for those Christian families who no longer live in accordance with the faith that they once received" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 54).

At the same time, all families are subjected to exterior influences coming from legislation, school and the media. To protect one's own family as well as to help others, a Christian should work towards the creation of a favorable social climate for the family.

As we read in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, "Families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend, but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family. Along these lines, families should grow in awareness of being 'protagonists' of what is known as 'family politics' and assume responsibility for transforming society" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 44).

A new evangelization

The first Christians transformed society as they strove to fulfill Christ's command: "They, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mk. 16:20).

At the threshold of the third millennium, in the midst of a society

that seems to be frantically fleeing God, Christians are called to carry out a new evangelization "in and from the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He (Christ) waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating room, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshops, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it" (Conversations with Monsignor Josemaria Escriva, 114).

As John Paul II has written, "This will be possible if the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to again take up in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach

to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel" (*Christifideles Laici*, 34). The world hungers for Christians who are consistent with their faith: people who stumble and fall, but who are determined to get up and go forward, under the protection of holy Mary, along the way leading to the Father through Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo was the first successor to the founder of Opus Dei

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo // Catholic Familyland, no. XXVII (1998)

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