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Living For Others

“In a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity are one and the same thing. They are a divine light that spreads warmth.” A new article on Christian life.

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During the World Youth Day in July 2008, Benedict XVI recalled the heritage we have received from preceding generations, and encouraged his listeners to build up, with their strongly Christian lives, a

society and a world that would be more human.[1]

Each generation should consider what it will leave to future ones: what we need to do, and how we need to do it, so that tomorrow's world may be better than today's. "Faith teaches us that in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we come to understand the greatness of our own humanity, the mystery of our life on earth and the sublime destiny that awaits us in heaven (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24). Faith also teaches us that we are God's creatures, made in his image and likeness, endowed with an inviolable dignity and called to eternal life." [2] The Christian message enables us to recognize mankind's true dignity, and gives us the means to act in accord with the truth.

Society needs the evangelizing spirit of the Church, which transmits to us

the ever-relevant teachings of Christ. And our Lord, as he made clear to us with his life, wants us Christians to be concerned about the people around us, and to serve society. This is the secret of Christian joy: to be bearers of Jesus' message.

Apostolate, a manifestation of charity

Apostolate springs from our awareness of the mission of charity to which God calls us. Christians are witnesses to Christ's charity among their fellow men and women and to unity among them. This is why apostolate can never become a mere tactic or strategy to bring souls to God; nor does it consist in a series of duties, for it flows in a natural way from love. We always bear in mind that its effectiveness comes from God, though he makes use of each person's dispositions.

Charity and apostolate go hand in hand; in fact, we could say that they are inseparable, since charity leads to inventiveness in discovering how we can improve our service to others. The message St. Josemaría received also highlights the relation between charity and apostolate, and stresses that both—a charity that is apostolic, and apostolate done for love—are identified with friendship: “charity requires that we live... friendship.”[3]

“In a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity are one and the same thing. They are a divine light that spreads warmth.”[4] The virtue of charity enables us to grasp the deepest reality about our neighbor. With the help of God’s grace, we Christians discover in each person a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ; we discover God himself there, who gives us his image in the human person, so that we may

treat it with respect and honor it as we should. Apostolate, which aims to be one and the same thing as friendship, is simply “venerating—I insist—the image of God that is found in each and every human being, and doing all we can to get them in turn to contemplate that image, so that they may learn to turn to Christ.”[5]

True charity is not the same thing as natural affability; it goes much farther than family relationships or friendships based on common interests or entertainment; nor is it simply the compassion we feel for those who are lonely or suffering in some way. Its measure is the love that Christ expressed in the “new commandment,” God’s own love, *the love I have had and will always have for you*, because its source is the inner life of the Blessed Trinity. It is a love that is not put off by physical or personal shortcomings; it is a desire “to be with the children of men” that

neither sin nor rejection nor the Cross can restrain. The virtue of charity is the love that God himself infuses into the hearts of Christians, in order to take and raise up to a supernatural level all human loves, all our yearnings and aspirations.

He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.^[6] We could paraphrase St. John's words, and add that those who do not love do not know their neighbor either, because they cannot recognize God's image in another human being. A lack of charity can affect people's intellect and other faculties to such an extent that they become insensitive to our Lord's demands and incapable of showing due gratitude to another person. Worse yet, it makes it impossible for God himself to acknowledge such people as his children: it is as though God were prevented from reaching the souls of

those who have shut themselves off from grace.

The importance of every person

Charity acquires its full meaning when we place ourselves at the service of others, when we acknowledge that the Christian vocation consists in making ourselves a gift to others, so that many men and women may encounter Christ.

This is the example that Jesus himself gave us, and that the witnesses of his life on earth recorded for us. He rejoiced in his friends' happiness,^[7] and he suffered with their sorrows. ^[8] He always made time for other people. He overcame his tiredness to speak with the Samaritan women;^[9] he stopped on his way to Jairus' house, to attend to a woman who was suffering from a hemorrhage; ^[10] and, in the midst of his own suffering on the Cross, he spoke with

the good thief and opened the gates of heaven to him.[11] And his love got down to specifics: we see this in his concern to find food for those who were following him, and in the way he met that material need;[12] he is concerned about his disciples' need for rest, and brings them to a secluded place to spend some time together.[13] We could cite many other examples that show the importance God gives to every single person.

The true proof of friendship is putting others first, giving them our time and attention. This was the key St. Josemaria gave us to show Christ to others. And Jesus taught it to us with his life—he always had time to devote to each person, to spend time with everyone. Charity acquires its true meaning when another person's life becomes a priority for me. People who meet an authentic Christian need to discover God's own love,

when they see how they are treated, how they are valued, how they are listened to, how their virtues are taken into account, how they are given the chance to become part of this supernatural adventure.

We need to provide effective help to souls through the spiritual direction (even if this term isn't used) that is part of our apostolate. "Meditate on this: the strongest and most effective instruments, if they are not properly used, become dented, worn out, and useless."[14] In positive terms, we should try to help each person recognize the talents that God has given them, and to see ways in which they can put them at the service of others. We need to encourage their initiative, as Jesus did with the apostles, preparing them one by one, trying to draw out the best from everyone. We try to get to know their situation, their family and professional responsibilities, and to

put ourselves in their shoes. We share with them the concerns and challenges of today's society, and the mission of the Church and the Work, in a world that is desperately seeking salt and light, even without knowing it.

And always, seasoning everything with the salt of charity. *Charity is patient, is kind; charity does not envy, is not ambitious, is not self-seeking, is not provoked; thinks no evil, does not rejoice over wickedness, but rejoices with the truth; bears with all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*[15] Charity is always ready to seek what is best for everyone, which requires a great and generous heart, learning to pass over others' defects as well as our own, rising above irritation, bad moods or rude answers. Charitable people are patient, with fortitude of spirit: they know how to wait, to never humiliate others, to bear anything for love;

they don't complain, or take pleasure in others' sorrows or setbacks, and don't seek to stand out. They are always ready to provide a friendly word of understanding and peace.

Value of friendship

With his example, St. Josemaria taught us how to be friends to our friends. A friend, as classical writers put it, is another self—someone who helps make our lives more tolerable, who is there for us in our troubles, and shares our joys and sorrows. A friend is someone we can confide in, because we can trust them. We all need to be able to rely on each other, so as to travel the road of life in this way, to make our aspirations bear fruit, to overcome difficulties, to benefit from the results of our efforts. Hence the enormous importance of friendship, not only on the human but also on the divine plane.

Friendship is something that is easily noticed; it is almost a tangible reality: we can sense that we are in tune with a friend, that there is an affinity between us, that we enjoy one another's company. For Christians, friendship is raised up to a new level by grace, and becomes a way to communicate Christ's life to others. Thus friendship is transformed into a real gift from God, inseparable from charity.

We all need to grow in our appreciation for the value of friendship, and expand the circle of our acquaintances. As Christians we need to establish a positive dialogue with a great variety of people, and never allow our own opinions to result in unjust discrimination, or our attitudes or words to offend those who have a different viewpoint. To achieve this, we need to be willing to listen to others and try to understand their reasons for

saying what they do; otherwise there would be no true dialogue, because people would soon realize we weren't really interested in what they say. We need to learn to see things from other people's point of view.

This doesn't mean that we should yield in matters that don't depend on us—since they belong to God—or hide or distort Christ's teachings out of fear of hurting someone. Such an attitude would be equivalent to deceiving someone we love, closing off to them the path to the only truth that can fully satisfy the yearning of the human heart and cure its restlessness. Rather, Christ's charity strengthens our own viewpoint, while giving peace to our heart and gentleness to our way of expressing ourselves. Thus we will make our Lord's message of hope and salvation more attractive to others: when we give advice, when we correct

someone's attitude, our affection for our friends will lead us to use words that don't cause them pain or imply that we are judging them. Our words will be perceived for what they really are: a sincere desire for our friends' happiness.

Then we experience the deep truth of the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch: "Christianity is not a work of persuasion, but of greatness."[16] The greatness that is Christ's charity, since people will be drawn to God not so much by our arguments as by what they see in us, with God's grace.

"Every generation of Christians needs to redeem, to sanctify its own time. In order to do this, it must understand and share the desires of other men—one's equals—in order to make known to them, with a 'gift of tongues,' how they are to correspond to the action of the Holy Spirit, to that permanent outflow of rich treasures

that comes from our Lord's heart. We Christians are called upon to announce, in our own time, to this world to which we belong and in which we live, the message—old and at the same time new—of the Gospel.”[17]

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[1] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to Young People*, 17 July 2008; *Homily*, 19 July 2008.

[2] Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 19 July 2008.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 62.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 565.

- [5] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 230.
- [6] *1 Jn* 4:8.
- [7] Cf. *Lk* 10:21.
- [8] Cf. *Jn* 11:35.
- [9] Cf. *Jn* 4:6 ff.
- [10] Cf. *Mk* 5:30-32.
- [11] Cf. *Lk* 23:42-43.
- [12] Cf. *Mt* 14:15-16.
- [13] Cf. *Mk* 6:31.
- [14] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 391.
- [15] *I Cor* 13:4-7.
- [16] St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 3, 3.
- [17] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 132.

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