

New Hearts Will Be Created: Marriage and Apostolic Celibacy (I)

How can we love Christ, a living person we do not see? And how can we love others as He loved us? In both marriage and celibacy, the Holy Spirit transforms our senses to make our hearts more like his.

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Did the men and women who walked with Jesus during his time on earth

ever imagine, in those years, that they would have to continue living without Him one day? When they saw Him die on the Cross, did they have any inkling of how they would go on, in his absence, through all the years still ahead of them? Sooner or later, they must have faced such thoughts. Perhaps that is why they were so eager to hold on to every moment. Veronica tries to capture the features of Christ on a cloth; the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Saint John, just beside them, imprint each of Jesus' words and gestures in their hearts. The other apostles may also have tried to preserve those moments, watching from afar, afraid of being recognised. Separation was painful for all of them, for it is never easy to say goodbye to someone we love.

Then, three days after his death, Jesus returned. We can imagine the apostles' joy. Perhaps the hope that

they might now remain with the Master for the rest of their lives rekindled, this time stronger. They were sure He would not leave again. His encounters with the disciples from Emmaus, Mary Magdalene, and the others seem to suggest just that. *Stay with us (Lk 24:29)*, the disciples who met Him on the road away from Jerusalem plead. But in different ways, the Lord asks them not to hold on to Him. *Do not cling to me (Jn 20:17)*, He tells Mary Magdalene; and He *vanished (Lk 24:31)* from the Emmaus disciples' presence. After giving his final teachings to the apostles, it seems that this time He truly departs: *He withdrew from them and was taken up into heaven (Lk 24:51)*.

How can we understand this separation, foretold and willed by Jesus Himself? How can we understand it now that He is no longer bound by time and space? The

risen Jesus could enter a locked house, walk beside his disciples without being recognised, and vanish in an instant. There were no longer any distances separating Him from his own, no walls to hinder his presence. He could be wherever He wished, with whomever He wished, whenever He wished. And yet He chooses to leave. Just when nothing could hold Him back, just when He appears without constraint, He decides to ascend into heaven. This unexpected choice reveals a deeper mystery still: his desire to teach us how to love in a new way.

A new way of loving

We too have probably imagined at some point how thrilling it must have been to see and hear Jesus directly, to live in his time, to feel Him physically near. Perhaps, like Saint Josemaría, a thought has crossed our mind: “Lord, I just want

to give you a hug!”^[1] Like the disciples on the day of the Ascension, we long to understand the meaning of his departure. They may have recalled what Jesus had told them earlier: *When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you also may be (Jn 14:3)*. Jesus Himself had told them that this separation was to draw them — and us — to a better place, and this time, to a place that would be final. He “goes before us to the Father, ascends to the heights of God, and invites us to follow Him.”^[2] Surprisingly, his absence becomes like a magnet, preventing us from settling here and drawing us steadily toward our true destiny, the definitive encounter with Jesus.

The first men and women who followed the risen Lord had to learn something entirely new, something no one before them had ever had to

do: love a living person, have a real relationship with Him in the present, without having Him physically close to them. They had to discover new ways of communicating and expressing affection. Christ's ascension into heaven inaugurates, for all of us, a new way of loving. The disciples were the first to experience the reality that now defines Christian life for all of us. For we cannot love Jesus in exactly the same way we love someone physically present. For instance our senses are confounded before his real presence in the Eucharist: "Sight, touch, and taste are all deceived," Saint Thomas Aquinas reminds us.^[3] This is a strange way to grow in intimacy with someone! At first, it may seem insufficient. That is why it calls for a re-education of the senses, a process that is neither immediate nor effortless. "Ah, who can heal me?" wrote Saint John of the Cross, who — like all believers — experienced this process of continual

learning. “Give yourself to me truly now; do not send me any more messengers, for they cannot tell me what I long to hear.”^[4]

Learning to relate to a God who reveals Himself and yet remains hidden is not the work of a single day, nor is it a task we can accomplish on our own. From the very beginning, the apostles themselves needed special help to enter into this new way of knowing and loving. Jesus had promised that help in the Holy Spirit, for it is He who “manifests the risen Lord to them, recalls his word to them and opens their minds to the understanding of his Death and Resurrection. He makes present the mystery of Christ (...) to bring them into communion with God.”^[5]

This is why, in a well-known Christian hymn, we ask the Holy Spirit to awaken our spiritual senses:

“Come, Creator Spirit, visit the souls of your faithful and fill with divine grace the hearts you have created. (...) Kindle our senses with your light, pour your love into our hearts, and with your constant help, strengthen our weak flesh.”^[6]

The saints, both married and celibate, learned this

All Christians — single and married, young and old, priests and laypeople — need to learn the art of letting ourselves be drawn by a God who reveals Himself and hides Himself in a particular way. Perhaps in those who have received the gift of celibacy or those who are single, this need to learn how to love through faith is more clearly visible. Their lives, too, are meant for giving and receiving love, yet they lack the physical presence of another person with whom to share their daily existence and intimacy. Still, even in

married life, it is Jesus Christ alone who can fully satisfy each spouse's deep need for love. In both cases, as with the first disciples, it is the Holy Spirit who makes this transformation possible.

Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri,^[7] a doctor and supernumerary of Opus Dei, married to Laura Busca, once shared that from Saint Josemaría he had learned above all two things: to love every person — with all their ordinary defects and limitations — because he saw each of them as a child of God; and to discover in the ordinary activities of daily life a supernatural, spiritual, divine depth.

^[8] Both of these require seeing beyond the surface, beyond what appears before our eyes, and grasping the true value of people and even of the smallest things. “Most people have a plane-like vision, stuck to the earth, of two dimensions,” Saint Josemaría write. “When you

live a supernatural life, God will give you the third dimension: height, and with it, perspective, weight and volume.”^[9]

This new way of seeing reality is especially important in difficult moments. Years later, after he was diagnosed with cancer, Eduardo wrote about his experience of illness in a local newspaper. After reading his testimony, another patient — an atheist — wrote him a letter thanking him and sharing how deeply moved he had been. Eduardo replied: “You can be sure that, as a doctor, I am fully convinced that the Lord always sets up camp beside the sick. He does them great good. Their ears become more sensitive and their sight more profound.”^[10]

The saints are the great masters of the subtle signs of God and the ones who have best learned to see, understand, and love in this new

way. Saint Josemaría learned to perceive God's presence even in things that might seem completely ordinary. As a teenager, the sight of footprints left in the snow by some Carmelite friars sparked the flame of his vocation. In his early years as a priest, living with very little, he dared to ask his guardian angel to wake him up in the morning. Later, during the Spanish Civil War, he emerged from a deep inner turmoil when, upon finding a wooden rose — part of the altarpiece of a destroyed church — he understood that he must continue along the path God had marked out for him. Later still, having grown in that way of seeing, he would fill his home with objects that awakened a sense of God's presence; this new way of communicating with Jesus.

The saints learned to be guided and to love through their spiritual senses. And their mission now is “to awaken

the desire for God in those who have the grace to come near them.”^[11]

A process that takes our weaknesses into account

When Jesus ascended into heaven and sent his Spirit in order to be with each of us in a new way *until the end of the world* (Mt 28:20), what exactly was He offering us? What is it that He continues to offer us today

Jesus knows how hard it is for us to know Him and to love Him. *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses*, Saint Paul says (Heb 4:15). Jesus knows that the longing for communion that lives in each of us has been wounded by sin. That’s why we so often act blindly, driven by false expectations or a distorted sense of our own worth. The Holy Spirit comes to heal this longing to give and receive love, in both single and married people. God comes to

help us find the true source of life, his very self: “He thirsts for man to thirst for Him.”^[12]

The Spirit sent by Christ comes to restore the disciples’ ability to know and love Him, even making use, at times, of their very sins. Peter, for example, learns that his betrayal does not have the final word, and that it need not cloud his vision or harden his heart. It is Jesus who rekindles his life by drawing out the deep love in his heart, asking him: *Do you love me?*, and then entrusting him with the mission once more: *Feed my sheep (Jn 21:17).*

The resurrection of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost remind us that we can receive a fire that enables us to know and love in a new way no matter how old we are, or what may have happened in our lives. Ernesto Cofiño,^[13] for instance, was already

over fifty when he decided to open himself more deeply to the work of the Holy Spirit. His wife noticed that something had changed in him and, perhaps to encourage that transformation, told the priest who was helping Ernesto spiritually: “I don’t know what you’ve done with my husband... but it’s wonderful!”^[14]

This offer from the Lord, which is grace, is available to “all those who have a big heart, even though their frailties may have been quite big.”^[15]

A strength we can shape together with God

Once filled with the Holy Spirit, the Lord sends us out on mission in many different ways. He sends Mary Magdalene to announce to the apostles that He has risen; He sends the apostles to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world; we can imagine Martha, Mary, and Lazarus as models of welcoming Christ into one’s home.

Each saint is an expression of love, driven by the love of God. This malleability or flexibility of our capacity to love is a natural characteristic of the human person that the Lord strengthens. Thanks to our freedom, we are not enslaved to our impulses like animals are; rather, we are capable of choosing what to love, how much to love, and how to love.

For married couples, this flexibility allows them to shape their married life according to the different stages of life. The love experienced at the beginning of courtship takes on new nuances with time, with parenthood, and can continue to grow as they go through moments of joy and moments of crisis. When the love of God is at the heart of that project, marriage finds both an anchor and an inexhaustible source of love and life. Tomás Alvira,^[16] late in his life, once addressed a group of

grandparents and, drawing on his own experience, said: “What are seventy or eighty years compared to eternity? Nothing. It has been said that, compared with eternity, every person is always young. A sixteen- or eighteen-year-old boy, with well-developed muscles, feels young when he helps an older person get up or carry something heavy. An elderly person may not have the physical strength to do such things, but they can have a strong spirit, feel spiritually young, and help the young, our grandchildren, by opening paths for them and pointing out good roads to follow that they know from experience.”^[17] In this way, people of all ages discover their own way of loving, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who keeps love always young, flowing from the eternal and infinite heart of God.

This flexibility of our strength, of our love, is also apparent in its erratic

nature: when it arises with force and we struggle to channel it as we would like. We see this, for example, in infidelities, in those who feed worldly desires, or in those who perpetrate toxic or abusive relationships. These cases often reflect an uncontrolled form of the desire to love and be loved, revealing how deeply original sin has wounded human nature. “I feel capable of all the horrors and all the errors committed by the most wretched of people,” said St. Josemaría.^[18] That is why we can echo St. Augustine’s pray: “The human heart is an unfathomable abyss, Lord... It is far easier to count a person’s hairs than to count their affections and the movements of their heart.”^[19]

Nevertheless, Christ’s life reminds us that the greatness enclosed within this strength to love can not only be redeemed but also wonderfully shaped by the Holy Spirit. This

applies even in situations where a marriage has failed, or in times of special difficulty. We see how Jesus' love tenderly welcomes everyone: children and the elderly, the apostles in the prime of their lives and those whose lives seem to be already settled. He offers his friendship both to those who will carry the seed of the Gospel far from home and to those who will evangelize from within their own households. He also dedicates abundant attention to those who consider themselves his adversaries, like Pharisees, Sadducees, and teachers of the law, and even tries to draw in the one who would ultimately betray Him: Judas Iscariot. His love is not only for his family in Nazareth, his close friends, or those from his own region, but for everyone who desires to open themselves to God's love, whatever their situation: they are his family (cf. *Mk* 3:35).

This great flexibility in our capacity to love, which is sustained, strengthened, and shaped by the Holy Spirit, makes the greatness of both marriage and celibacy possible. The torrent of love that springs from the human heart can be directed toward one's spouse and family or, following Christ's example, redirected toward the Lord's great family, living as He did. The Holy Spirit dwells in that flexibility of our capacity to love and elevates every human path. For this reason, following the teachings of St. Josemaría, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, reminds us that "marriage is a 'divine path on earth,'" and that celibacy is "a call to a particular identification with Jesus Christ, which also brings with it a greater capacity to love everyone—even humanly speaking, but above all supernaturally. Thus it is that celibacy, in forgoing physical paternity and maternity, makes a

much greater spiritual motherhood or fatherhood possible.”^[20] That is why the traditional prayer to the Holy Spirit says: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful. Enkindle in them the fire of Your love. Send forth Your Spirit, and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.” Then new hearts will be created in all of us, celibate or married, single or widowed.

With Christ’s physical absence and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles entered a new stage. Everything remained the same, and yet everything had changed. In a sense, the mission was now more fully in their hands. They would continue doing the same things, but now with a new kind of autonomy. This shows just how much the Lord values and trusts our

freedom to keep seeking Him and to continue discerning and choosing the course of our mission. That's why, whatever path God calls us to, growth as apostles involves truly forming a team with the Holy Spirit. Even though happiness here on earth can sometimes feel fleeting, anyone who lives in the Holy Spirit shows that, whether in success or failure, the Lord remains present and keeps drawing us to Himself. By his grace, He gradually transforms our senses, so that we don't settle or stop, and so that we may come to discover how much He desires for us to grow in his love, until the day He embraces us forever in Heaven.

^[1] Pilar Urbano, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter, 2011.

^[2] Benedict XVI, Homily, 26 May 2005.

^[3] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Adoro te devote*.

^[4] St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Songs 6-7.

^[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 737.

^[6] *Veni Creator* hymn.

^[7] Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri (1910-1985) was a Spanish doctor specialising in internal medicine, renowned for his work at the Clínica Universidad de Navarra and for his deep awareness of his Christian vocation and his dedication to patient care. His cause for canonization is now open, together with that of his wife, Laura Busca.

^[8] Cf. Esteban López-Escobar, Pedro Lozano, *Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri*, Palabra, Madrid 1994, 267-268.

^[9] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 279.

^[10] Juan Antonio Narváez Sánchez, *El doctor Ortiz de Landázuri. Un hombre de ciencia al encuentro con Dios*, Palabra, Madrid 1997, 177.

^[11] St. John Paul II, Homily, 18 October 1991.

^[12] St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 64, 4. Quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2560.

^[13] Ernesto Cofiño (1899-1991) was a Guatemalan doctor and paediatrician, a pioneer in children's health in his country. He dedicated his life to the care of children and to teaching, influencing numerous social initiatives with his Christian life. He was a member of Opus Dei and his cause for beatification is open now.

^[14] José Luis Cofiño, José Miguel Cejas Arroyo, *Ernesto Cofiño*, Rialp, Madrid 2003, 122.

[¹⁵] St. Josemaría, *Instrucción*, 1-IV-1934, n. 66. Quoted in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, Scepter, 2001.

[¹⁶] Tomás Alvira (1906-1992) was a Spanish educator and scientist, doctor of science and high school professor. A member of Opus Dei, he was noted for his commitment to the education of young people and his example of Christian life in marriage and the family. His cause for canonization and his wife's are in process.

[¹⁷] Alfredo Méndiz, *Tomás Alvira. Vida de un educador (1906-1992)*, Rialp, Madrid 2023, 289-290.

[¹⁸] St. Josemaría, *Way of the Cross*, 14th Station.

[¹⁹] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV, XIV, 2.

^[20] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 20 October 2020, no. 22. The internal quote is from St. Josemaría, in *Conversations*, no. 92.

Gerard Jiménez Clopés y Andrés Cárdenas Matute

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