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New Mediterraneans (V): "To Jesus, Through Mary" (with audio)

As a young priest, Saint Josemaria grasped with new depth a truth he had always known. "Yesterday I discovered another Mediterranean: if I am a son of my Father God, then I am also a son of my Mother Mary."

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At the foot of the Cross, only his Mother, Holy Mary, some other women and John, the youngest disciple, accompanied our Lord. Only these few people were at his side during those terrible hours. These few... and a crowd of onlookers and opportunists, the handful of soldiers who brought him to Calvary, and the accusers who continued to mock him, perhaps savoring their “victory.” And the rest of the disciples? They had fled.

John himself tells us: *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother’ (Jn 19:25).* The Evangelist concludes: *And from that hour the disciple took her into his home (Jn 19:27).*

In the young apostle, the Mother of Christ “is given as mother to every

single individual and all mankind.”[1] From that moment on, Mary is the Mother of all Christians. The first disciples understood this right away. Feeling sorrow at our Lord’s absence, they gathered around Mary after his Ascension into Heaven: *All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers* (Acts 1:14).

We too are called to experience Mary’s motherhood personally, and to respond like John, who “‘welcomes’ the Mother of Christ ‘into his own home’ and brings her into everything that makes up his inner life, that is to say into his human and Christian ‘I.’”[2] Each of us has to undertake this personal journey in our own way... and at our own pace.

“I am also a son of my Mother Mary”

Saint Josemaría had devotion to our Lady since his childhood. In May 1970, during a novena at the feet of Our Lady of Guadalupe, he said: “I recommend that all of us, at this moment especially, relive our childhood, and recall, as I do quite clearly—try your hardest, if you need to, to remember—the first time you turned to our Lady knowing what you were doing and wanting to do just that.”^[3] We know that when he was a small child, his mother offered him to Our Lady of Torreciudad in gratitude for having cured him of a life-threatening illness. He also learned from his parents to pray to Holy Mary. He would recall this as the years went by: “I still renew, morning and evening, and not just occasionally but habitually, the offering I learned from my parents: ‘O my Lady, my Mother! I offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial love, I consecrate to you

this day my eyes, my ears, my tongue, my heart...”[4]

While living in Saragossa, Saint Josemaría made daily visits to Our Lady of Pilar. He entrusted to her intercession the inklings he was sensing that our Lord wanted something special from him. We still have a small replica of Our Lady of Pilar, poorly made of plaster, on the base of which Saint Josemaría engraved with a nail “*Domina, ut sit!*” and the date 24 May 1924. “That was the materialization of what my prayer had been like for years, he said years later, which I have told you about so many times.”[5]

In Madrid he had an image that he called “Our Lady of the Kisses,” because he never failed to greet her with a kiss upon entering or leaving the house. “Not just that one, but all images of our Lady moved him. This was especially true of those he found

thrown out on the street and covered with grime, or those he caught sight of in his travels through Madrid, such as a picture in glazed tile that attracted his attention every day as he was leaving Santa Isabel.”[6]

Through contemplating the Gospel, he also learned how to stay close to Mary and turn to her, as the first disciples had done. In his book *Holy Rosary*, fruit of this loving contemplation of Christ’s life, he comments on the second Glorious mystery: “Peter and the others go back to Jerusalem—*cum gaudio magno*: with great joy (Lk 24:52) ... But you and I feel like orphans: we are sad, and we go to Mary for consolation.”[7]

Mary’s motherhood was another “discovery” that Saint Josemaría would make while still a young priest. In one of his personal notes dated September 1932, he writes:

“Yesterday I discovered another Mediterranean: if I am a son of my Father God, then I am also a son of my Mother Mary.”[8]

This was not something new. It was a truth that he had meditated on and experienced in his own life, and yet it suddenly took on new meaning.

Recalling his spiritual trajectory, he adds: “I will explain myself: through Mary I went to Jesus, and I’ve always had her as my Mother, even though I have been such a bad son. (From now on I’ll be good).” Our Lady brought him to Jesus. Mary had been his main intercessor in his insistent petition that he might see what our Lord was asking of him. Then what was new about this discovery? He explains: “I saw this reality of my filiation to my Mother in a clearer light, and felt it more distinctly yesterday. That’s why, during Holy Communion in my Mass, I told our Lady, my Mother: put a new suit on

me. My petition was only natural, since I was celebrating one of her feasts.”[9]

The image of “putting on a new suit” has strong Pauline echoes: *Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24)*. Thus this new discovery of Mary’s motherhood had all the flavor of a personal conversion. It was a reality that he saw with greater clarity, that he *felt* in a new way, and that led to a simple but profound resolution: *From now on I’ll be good*.

Those who have studied Saint Josemaría’s writings in greater depth have highlighted the itinerary of this discovery. Eight days after describing this new Mediterranean that had

opened up before him, he wrote another note that would later appear in *The Way*: “We go to Jesus—and we ‘return’ to him—through Mary.”[10] It was a reflection that had been brewing in his soul for quite some time, but he suddenly understood it with new depth, and it clarified for him anew the importance of Mary in his relationship with God. Four days after this note, he wrote: “To how many young people I would like to shout in their ears: Be Mary’s... and you will be ‘ours’!”[11] Years later, when asked what this meant, he answered: “I want to say what you understand perfectly well... On the one hand, if there is no devotion to Mary you cannot do anything; it’s as if these souls had no foundation for spiritual life. On the other hand, when there is filial devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, souls find themselves well-disposed to serve our Lord in whatever state they may be: single, married, widowed, and

the priests as priests.”[12] Ultimately it is Mary who leads us to Jesus; and Jesus brings us to the Father. Our Lady is simply the one who “facilitates” our access to God.

“Returning” to Jesus through Mary

In that same September in 1932, Saint Josemaría meditated over and over again on the role that our Lady plays on our path to Jesus. Now he wasn’t focusing on finding Christ or discovering his will for us, but about “returning” to him when we have strayed. This way of expressing things was new for those who heard him speak in this way. For example, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo remembers that he was surprised by it himself: “I asked the Father: Father, why have you written this? That we go through Mary, I understand, but that one ‘returns’... And he told me: My son, if someone has the misfortune of separating

himself from God by sin, or is at the point of separation because he has become lukewarm or apathetic, then he appeals to the Blessed Virgin and finds strength again; the strength to go to the confessional if necessary, to go to the Confidence and bare his conscience with great sincerity, without keeping dark spots in his soul, without sharing secrets with the devil, and through Mary he goes to Jesus.”[13]

Getting up again after a fall can be hard, and it gets harder as the years goes by. Physically speaking, this is obvious; we only need to think of the problems that can come when an elderly person falls down in the street. But this also holds true in the spiritual life. As we grow older, it can happen that it becomes harder for us to say we are sorry. It humiliates us to keep falling in the same ways; we are ashamed to commit such sins “at this stage of the game!” The constant

evidence of our own weakness can become too much for us, and sometimes we can even give in to a loss of hope that takes away our joy.

Despair is a subtle enemy that leads us to close in on ourselves. We think that we have let God down, like someone who buys an electronic device and realizes it is not as good as it was made out to be.

Nevertheless, on seeing us in this state, God wants to remind us that *he knows us perfectly!* He could say to each of us, as to Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you* (Jer 1:5). Therefore his Love for us gives us a firm sense of security: knowing what we are like, God loved us to the extreme of giving his life for us... and it wasn't a mistake.

When even this truth, which is so consoling, becomes hard for us to grasp, remembering our Mother can be, as it were, the “shortcut” that

facilitates our path back home.[14] Mary draws us in a special way to the Mercy of this God who awaits us with open arms. In his last general audience, Benedict XVI confided: “I should like to invite all of us to renew our firm confidence in the Lord, to entrust ourselves like children in God’s arms, certain that those arms always hold us, enabling us to press forward each day, even when the going is rough. I want everyone to feel loved by that God who gave his Son for us and who has shown us his infinite love. I want everyone to feel the joy of being a Christian.”[15] And so that we might truly feel this joy, God wanted to make clear his love for us, a love that is both paternal... and maternal.

The “maternal” love of God is given expression in various places in Scripture; perhaps the best-known passage is that of Isaiah: *Can a mother forget her infant, be without*

tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you (Is 49:15). Or even more explicitly: As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you (Is 66:13). Nevertheless, God wanted to go still further and gave us his own Mother, the woman from whom his beloved Son took flesh. As a result, Christians of all times have discovered in Mary a privileged and especially accessible path to the infinite Love of the God who forgives.

Sometimes we encounter people who find it hard to address a God who seems abstract or distant to them, or who do not dare to look at Christ directly. It's a bit like children who prefer to go to their mother before facing their father when they have done something wrong or broken an object of great value... Similarly, "a great many sinners cannot say the *Our Father* who can still say the *Ave*

Maria.”[16] And thus, through Mary, they can “return” to Jesus.

To Mary, with the tenderness of children

In Saint Josemaría’s life, the discovery of Mary’s importance goes hand-in-hand with living spiritual childhood. In a point from *The Way* originating from some difficult circumstances in his life, he wrote: “Mother! Call her again and again. She is listening, she sees you in danger perhaps, and with her Son’s grace she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. Call her, and you will find yourself with added strength for the new struggle.”[17] Those who were with Saint Josemaría at the time didn’t know how much of his own experience was being reflected in these lines. During those years, Saint

Josemaría was also learning how to draw close to God as a little child.

The book *Holy Rosary* is a fruit of this way of praying, as are some chapters in *The Way*. The “discoveries” we have just recalled come from this trusting relationship with God and with Mary. In fact, Saint Josemaría followed this path throughout his whole life. A few days before his last Christmas on earth, he confided to a group of his sons: “Usually I abandon myself; I try to make myself small and put myself in our Lady’s arms. I tell our Lord: Jesus, make a little room for me! Let’s see if we can both fit in your Mother’s arms! And that’s all. But you should all follow your own path; mine doesn’t need to be your way. Long live freedom!”[18]

Without being the only path to achieve this, *becoming children* facilitates attitudes such as humility and hope-filled abandonment in all

of life's circumstances. It's also a way to grow in simplicity and naturalness in our efforts to draw close to God. Furthermore, since it is a path marked by recognizing our own weakness and dependence, it enables us more easily to open to God the doors of our own heart, that is, our own intimacy.

Children are vulnerable, and therefore they are very sensitive to love; they have a deep understanding of the gestures and attitudes of adults. Therefore we need to let ourselves be "touched" by God, by opening the doors of our soul to him. The Pope also suggests this to young people: "He asks us if we want a full life. And in his name, I ask you: do you want a full life? Start right this moment by letting yourself be open and attentive!"[19] Having a heart does not mean falling into affectation or sentimentality, a mere caricature of authentic tenderness. On the

contrary, rediscovering one's heart, letting oneself be moved, can be a path to finding God. As Saint Josemaría said in 1932: "My poor heart yearns for tenderness. *Si oculus tuus scandalizat te...* No, it is not necessary to throw them afar; it is not possible to live without a heart ... And this tenderness, which you have placed in us, how it is satisfied and fulfilled completely, when we seek you with the tenderness (which led you to death) of your divine Heart."[20]

We can go to Mary, and through her to Jesus, by way of tenderness, which is the way children begin to know their mothers and to trust them for their whole lives. By this and other paths that God may suggest to us, we enter an immense Mediterranean: that of having a Mother in Heaven who is all beautiful, Holy Mary.

The discovery of the various “Mediterraneans” that we have been considering in these articles expanded Saint Josemaría’s heart incredibly. Holding onto God’s hand and taking small steps in his interior life, he grasped the meaning of the Cross, sensing that he was the son of a Father overflowing with Love. He also discovered Jesus’ warm, tender Love. And he learned to let himself be loved by God, our Consoler, trusting in God rather than in his own strength; and he gradually found ways to let the Holy Spirit play the leading role in his spiritual life and actions. In short, he came to understand more clearly that the fullness of Christian life doesn’t consist of fulfilling a list of tasks, meeting a certain standard, or “carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in *being united with Christ*, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The

measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.”[21]

Following Saint Josemaría’s steps, we too can ask God to lead us more fully into these Mediterraneans of the interior life, “in order to enter more deeply into the Love of God, and show that love to other people through what we do and say.”[22] There is no more urgent, or more beautiful, endeavour.

[1] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptoris Mater*, 25 March 1987, 23.

[2] *Ibid.*, 45.

[3] Saint Josemaría, Notes from his prayer done out loud in the old

basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico, 20 May 1970, in Pedro Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, Scepter, 1997, p. 321.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 296.

[5] Notes from a family gathering, 26 July 1974 (AGP, library, P01). The replica is preserved in a gallery of mementoes from his life, in the central offices of Opus Dei, in Rome.

[6] Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 352.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, Second Glorious Mystery.

[8] Saint Josemaría, *Apuntes intimos*, 820, 5 September 1932, in *Holy Rosary, Critical-Historical Edition*, introduction to the Second Glorious Mystery.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 495.

[11] Saint Josemaría, Text from Notebook VI, no. 825, dated 17 September 1932, in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on no. 494.

[12] Saint Josemaría Notes from a get-together, Madrid, 23 October 1972, in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on 494.

[13] Notes from a conversation with Alvaro del Portillo, Madrid, 4 September 1977, cited by Pedro Rodríguez, *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on 495. Saint Josemaría called the fraternal chat or conversation of spiritual accompaniment the "confidence," highlighting the trust and discretion that should mark it.

[14] “Mary, Mother of our Lord and our Mother ... provides a short-cut to God” (Javier Echevarría, “Love for Holy Mary in the Writings of Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Palabra*, 156-157 (1978), pp. 341-345.

[15] Benedict XVI, General Audience, 27 February 2013.

[16] Jean Daniélou, *Advent*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1950, p. 112.

[17] *The Way*, 516.

[18] Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, 20 December 1974, in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, vol. 2, p. 68.

[19] Pope Francis, Speech, 28 July 2016.

[20] Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, 1658, 9 October 1932, in *The Way*.

Critical-Historical Edition, comment on no. 118. Cf. *Mk* 9:47.

[21] Benedict XVI, General Audience, 13 April 2011.

[22] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 97.

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