

Priestly Charity as a Response to the Power to Act ‘In Persona Christi’.

Reflections on the teachings and examples of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

Most. Rev. John Myers, Archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, USA

This intervention focuses on the timely and challenging teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá regarding the ministry and formation of priests. His prevailing thought was that the priest's personal life should clearly reflect the dignity of his office, i.e. acting *in persona Christi*. In the course of this intervention we shall see how the founder of Opus Dei tried to promote and stress priestly dignity by connecting it to the interior life. The interior struggle, invariably moves the laity to pursue their own personal spiritual life and, as a consequence, to evangelize secular structures through the sanctification of their work and daily activities.

Although there are many facets as to how a priest can personally reflect the dignity of acting *in persona Christi*, we will focus on only these: priestly charity in his relationship with the laity and with his brother priests, and finally zeal for potential candidates to the priesthood. I will make my remarks from the context of Blessed Josemaría's writings on the ministerial priesthood, particularly articulated in his seminal homily, *A Priest Forever*, given in 1973.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERIOR LIFE

On the fiftieth anniversary of his own priestly ordination, Pope John Pope John Paul II wrote: “While the Second Vatican Council speaks of the universal call to holiness, in the case of the priest we must speak of a special call to holiness. Christ needs holy priests! Today's world demands holy priest! Only a holy priest can become, in an increasingly secularized world, a resounding witness to Christ

and his Gospel. [Only with a deep inner life] can a priest become a guide for men and women and a teacher of holiness”¹. His struggle for holiness through his priestly ministry will determine the extent to how effectively he can meet the high standards of Christian charity demanded by his calling to the priesthood.

A priest must develop a close friendship with God through a deep love for the Holy Eucharist, frequent recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation, meditation on the Gospel, and a spirit of penance. For Blessed Josemaría, the celebration of the Holy Mass formed, as he liked to say, the center and root of his interior life². The renovation of Our Lord on Calvary passes through the hands and voice of the priest when he celebrates the liturgy — regardless of his degree of holiness. As he would remark: “This is the source of the priest’s incomparable dignity. It is a greatness which is on loan: it is completely compatible with my own littleness”³. Although the priest’s interior struggle does not add anything to the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice of the Mass, his effort nevertheless to live the Mass and celebrate it with the best possible dispositions, has a powerful transforming effect on him. The Mass and Eucharistic piety leads the priest to union with Jesus Christ, and consequently his words and demeanour will invariably reveal the love and joy of Christ to his people. Thus, his priestly life centered on Christ will influence every facet of his ministry. As the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium* declared, “Keeping in mind what they are doing and imitating what they are handling, these priests, in their apostolic labors, rather than being ensnared by perils and hardships, should rather rise to greater holiness through these perils and hardships. They should ever nourish and strengthen their action from an abundance of contemplation, doing all this for the comfort of the entire Church of God”⁴.

Hence, this desire for union with Christ amid everyday pastoral activities is rooted in the traditional practices of piety recommended by the Church — especially reading and meditating on Scripture, prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, Marian devotions, and offering quality work to God.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, IX.

² Cfr. *A Priest forever*, 49; *Christ is Passing By*, 87, 102; *The Forge*, 69. See also JOHN PAUL II, *Apost. Ex. Pastores dabo vobis*, 23.

³ *A priest forever*, 39.

⁴ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 41.

2. PRIESTLY CHARITY AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE NEW COMMANDMENT

Next, we can focus on how the New Commandment⁵, instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, flows from a rich interior life. Declared in the intimacy of the Last Supper, Jesus Christ says that the priest must love with the same love with which Christ loved. This kind of love can only be drawn from the fusion of the priest's heart with the heart of Christ. We could argue therefore, that God brought Opus Dei into existence to give a renewed expression of this New Commandment among both priests and laity. A priest then not only fulfills his calling through his sacramental ministry, but also by loving everyone with and through the heart of Christ as he makes the cares and concerns of others his very own. As Blessed Josemaría would say, "Their life is a wonderful self-surrender, full of joy..."⁶. People ask for kindness and affection that really is only possible through a life of serious prayer. In the words of Blessed Escrivá, by means of prayer and charity a priest learns "...how not to hamper the presence of Christ in him..."⁷.

The New Commandment includes the relationship of charity between priests and laity, between priests themselves, and zeal for potential candidates for the priesthood. We will consider each one briefly.

In his efforts to serve the laity, the priest must shun all forms — according to Blessed Josemaría — of 'bad' clericalism. Clericalism, the misuse, and even abuse of the office of the ministerial priesthood, can take on different forms. One form of clericalism is that the priest mistakenly equates the high dignity of his office for his own personal sanctity. Another form may lead the priest to put himself on a pedestal, from which he can be condescending to the laity or unwilling to share responsibility. Other kinds of clericalism involve 'cutting corners' instead of displaying professionalism in the exercise of the priestly ministry. The expectation of special treatment from the laity is also a type of clericalism incompatible with the spirit of service commanded by Christ, the High Priest. An attitude of ecclesiastical 'careerism' that leads one to an inordinate self-assertion also detracts from the true dignity of the priestly office. Therefore, the existence of this wrong clericalism reveals in part, the need to give greater priority to personal friendship with Christ and a more serious spirit of service.

Clericalism in all its forms bothered Josemaría Escrivá to such an extent that he would often describe himself to be 'anti clerical.' Thus he states in no uncertain terms that he would never turn his priesthood into a 'career'. As he told

⁵ Cfr. *Jn* 15:12.

⁶ *A Priest forever*, 36.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 43.

in a familiar meeting in Peru in 1974, “I did not want to be a priest just for the sake of being a priest, *el cura*, as they say in Spain. I felt a great veneration for the clergy, but I did not want to be a priest in that way”⁸.

Priestly charity, on the other hand, guides and leads the priest away from the attitudes of clericalism and toward the notion of true professionalism, poverty, and paternal charity towards all. As mentioned above, when guided by the principle of priestly charity, the minister of God seeks only the glory of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and is led to lay down his life for everyone in a spirit of faith and love.

3. A PRIEST IS NEVER ALONE

Priestly charity must also include his brother priests, especially those of one’s own presbyterate. According to the practice of Blessed Josemaría, a crucial expression of priestly charity is to make sure that no priest feels alone. As the Second Vatican Council stated in *Lumen Gentium*: “In virtue of their common sacred ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in intimate brotherhood, which naturally and freely manifests itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in their meetings and in communion of life, of labor and charity”⁹. The Council reiterates this teaching in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (*De Presbyterorum Ministerio et Vita*): “It is very important that all priests, whether Diocesan or Religious, help one another always to be fellow workers in the truth. Each one, therefore, is united to in special bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and brotherhood with the other members of this priesthood... Each and every priest, therefore, is untied with his fellow priests in a bond of charity”¹⁰.

How well Josemaría Escrivá laid down an example for us in this regard! As one of his early confessors gave testimony at the beginning of the process of canonization: “If we wished to highlight a field where his love for the Church found rooms for expansion — besides as I say, the Work that God had entrusted to him — we should record that the diocesan clergy were among the main beneficiaries of his apostolic zeal. I am well aware of that, both before I was his confessor and during the years when I stood in that relationship with him, until he moved to Rome he devoted a large part of his time, at the request of many Bishops, to

⁸ S. BERNAL, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, London 1977, p. 63.

⁹ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

¹⁰ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

preaching many retreats to the clergy, with sacrifice and great generosity, never expecting to receive any stipend whatsoever, taking his encouragement and his spiritual drive to thousands of priests throughout Spain. I am moved to recall — as proof of that untiring generosity — the he was not able to be by his mother's side when she died a holy death in Madrid in 1941, because he was looking after one of those retreats"¹¹.

From the love that Josemaría Escrivá lived toward his brothers priests from his earliest days we could say that there developed in a natural and supernatural way, the creation of a 'priestly family,' inspired by the charity of Christ. Given his unique vocation he did everything possible — from promoting retreats and outings, to living the blessed challenge of fraternal correction — so that priests never felt alone and never lacked the warmth of a family and a home. From the very beginning of his priestly ministry he devoted special attention to those whom God had chosen for the priesthood. By his pastoral fraternity, he managed to prove wrong an opinion of his own father, Don José, who had warned him about loneliness within the priestly vocation. As Blessed Josemaría opened his heart to some priests in Peru in 1974 regarding the discovery of his calling to the priesthood, "One fine day I told my father I wanted to be a priest: it was the only time I saw him cry. He had other plans in his mind but he did not object. He told me: 'My son, think it over carefully. A priest has to be a saint... It is very hard to have no house, no home, to have no love on earth. [My father was wrong]. Think about it a bit more, but I will not oppose your decision.' And he took me to speak to a friend of his who was a priest, the administrator of the Collegiate Church of Logroño"¹².

The strong fraternal and family spirit lived by Josemaría Escrivá allowed him to show that a priest need not be consigned to a life of loneliness. The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which he founded on February 14, 1943, would provide the proper venue for priestly fraternity and mutual support. The aim of this society is to promote personal sanctity and foster fraternity among priests. He took this priestly fraternity so seriously that in the 1950s — being unable to find the canonical solution by which priests incardinated in their dioceses could form part of Opus Dei — he had considered leaving Opus Dei in order to dedicate himself more fully to the formation, guidance, and paternal care of priests¹³.

¹¹ J.M. GARCÍA LAHIGUERA, *Testimony to Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, in J.M. GARCÍA - J.M. BUENO, *Testimonies to a Man of God*, New York 1992, p. I-16.

¹² S. BERNAL, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, cit. p. 62.

¹³ See above the paper of Msgr. Javier Echevarría; he explains that "seeing that the Lord needed him to work with priests, and that Opus Dei had already reached a certain degree of

4. ZEAL FOR NEW PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

A final aspect of Blessed Josemaría's love for the priesthood was his zeal for winning new vocations to the priesthood and their proper formation. This zeal was shown by the care he put into forming the first members of Opus Dei, three of whom were ordained in 1944. This same zeal, however, was displayed through his life in his habitual encouragement to both Bishops and priests to eagerly look for candidates to the seminary.

We must first emphasize the tremendous respect for freedom that Blessed Josemaría had for every person, since God bestows each one with this highly exalted gift either to love him or reject him. For Blessed Josemaría the highest exercise of freedom consists in embracing the will of God and laying down one's life for Christ and his Gospel. Because of the high value he placed on freedom, Josemaría Escrivá would say that a person chooses to love and follow God *because he wants to* (in Spanish, *porque me da la gana*), which is the highest of supernatural reasons.

Second, once the candidate has freely decided to pursue preparation for the ministerial priesthood, he would stress that they must have as their aim a life of service, or as he would say, "leave one's heart on the floor so that others may walk softly"¹⁴. He stressed from the very beginning, that the desire to serve others and the actual development of that spirit must include a significant part of the formation of the future priests of Jesus Christ.

In the diocese of Peoria, where I used to live and work, we strive to instill the habit of service in all our seminarians as well as the young men who are interested in becoming seminarians. In our Emmaus Days Program for prospective seminarians, in addition to developing one's love for the Eucharist and life of prayer, we also encourage the boys in the practice of manual labour. These peri-

development and proximity to its definitive approval, he decided to leave Opus Dei in order to dedicate all of his energy to found an Association dedicated to these brothers. He did this for 'love of you', as he explained on one occasion to a group of priests, 'which is love of Jesus Christ'. Cfr. *supra*, p. 53.

¹⁴ Fr. Pedro Casciaro remembers how Blessed Josemaría explained to him the mission of the priest: "A priest has to be like that carpet. Over it the body of our Lord is consecrated. It's at the altar; it's true, but it is there to be of use. Furthermore, it is there so that everyone else can have something soft to tread on and you see how it does not complain, it does not protest... Do you understand what the service of a priest is? You will see that later on, in your life you will reflect on these things" (Blessed Josemaría quoted by P. CASCIARO, *Dream and your dreams will fall short*, London 1997, p. 93).

ods of physical exertion can be very formative, since a priest's life is often comprised of hard work and repetitive tasks. It is also my experience as a former director of vocations that many young men are willing to pursue the priesthood, provided that they are challenged and edified by men who love their priesthood and live it close to Jesus Christ.

5. CONCLUSION

This talk has focused on Blessed Josemaría's overriding conviction that the vocation to the priesthood is a calling to live the New Commandment in an exquisite way. The priest personally dignifies his office to the degree that he prides himself on self-giving service. I would like to conclude this intervention with the powerful words of the Holy Father in his call for sanctity among priests: "If we take a close look at what contemporary men and women expect from priests, we will see that, in the end, they have but one great expectation; they are thirsting for Christ. Everything else — their economic, social, and political needs — can be met by any number of people. From the priest they ask for Christ"¹⁵.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, IX.