

Priestly Intellectual and Doctrinal Training

Daniel Kimutai Rono

Fr. Kimutai is a priest of the Diocese of Nakuru, in Kenya. He was ordained in 1996; currently he is the Dean of students and Vice-Rector at St. Matthias Mulumba National Theological Seminary, Tindinyo-Kapsabet, in Kenya.

1. INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to say a few words about what the life and teachings of Blessed Josemaría have meant for my intellectual education on my path towards the priesthood, and afterwards, in my task as an educator of other candidates to the priesthood in my diocesan seminary.

However, I cannot begin without first making some general considerations about the priesthood itself. In effect, the new being who emerges after the imposition of hands, which is ordered to the accomplishment of a specific mission, situates the priest in the Church in a completely particular way; he is now in Her and at Her head, using the traditional Augustinian expression which is recalled by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*. This new situation, proceeding as it does from the very nature of the vocation received, denotes a new responsibility in the ecclesial community and makes adequate formation absolutely necessary. This vocation requires formation in order to be a priest, which is to say, to assume and to live in accordance with one's own vocation in function of Christ's design in instituting the priesthood. In view of this, it is useful to recall that reflection on priestly formation should always follow the essential consideration of the very nature of the priestly ministry.

It has always appeared to be evident to me that Blessed Josemaría did not have any doctrine of his own about the priesthood. His writings on this topic are perfectly in line with the genuine Tradition of the Church, the unique guardian of the truth about the priesthood, and they highlight those aspects which have always been considered to be essential to the ordained ministry. At the same time,

it seems to me that the light which he received from God on October 2, 1928, allowed him to perceive with special sensitivity the seriousness of the need for Christians to be saints, and along with it, what the priestly vocation entails.

It also seems clear that Blessed Josemaría knew that the sanctity of a Christian — understood as the task of placing Christ at the summit of all human activities — necessarily requires the sanctity of priests; it suffices to read his biography to appreciate the effort that he expended in order to collaborate in the formation of priests, both in the dioceses that requested his help and in the service of the priests of Opus Dei.

On the other hand, he was also careful to point out that the divine light which was the origin of Opus Dei as a path of sanctity in the middle of the world also opened a path — the same path — to priestly sanctity (expressed in the joyful ‘there is room!’: there is room for secular priests in Opus Dei, they can incarnate this light in their priestly ministry)¹. And this is a reality which today is recognized by diocesan priests throughout the world, who seek sanctity in the exercise of their ministry, illuminated by the light which was received by Josemaría Escrivá on the 2nd of October, 1928.

2. THE NEED FOR LEARNED PRIESTS

The response to the gift of God which is the struggle for sanctity, requires of the Christian a continual formation, adapted to the place in which he lives his Christian life; and this place is none other than the world in the case of lay people and secular priests. This formation, inasmuch as it is indispensable for the accomplishment of one’s own vocation, was structured by Blessed Josemaría upon five pillars: human, spiritual, doctrinal-religious, apostolic and professional².

¹ In 1951 he wrote the following, recalling the difficulties which he had encountered a year before with regards to priests incardinated in dioceses joining Opus Dei, and his consequent decision to leave Opus Dei in order to begin apostolic work specifically in favour of priests: “But God did not so wish it, and he freed me, with his merciful hand, as affectionate as any father, from the truly great sacrifice I was preparing to make by leaving Opus Dei. In an unofficial way I had made known my intention to the Holy See... but afterwards I saw clearly that a new foundation, a new association was unnecessary since there was room within Opus Dei for diocesan priests” (*Letter*, 24-XII-1951, 3) in A. DE FUENMAYOR - V. GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS - J.L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei: The History and Defence of a Charism*, Princeton 1994, p 216.

² Cfr. *Conversations*, 19.

In what refers to the doctrinal formation of priests, the Founder of Opus Dei was in harmony with what so many saints throughout the History of the Church have perceived as the absolute necessity that priests be learned. In this vein, he made frequent reference to St. Theresa of Jesus in the formulation of this desire. He also considered that adequate intellectual preparation and its continual revision formed an integral part of the vocation to the priesthood and consequently constituted a daily duty in the life of each priest³. This is a preparation which is even more demanding when priestly work is understood as an authentic ‘training in holiness’, to use the term coined by John Paul II in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*⁴.

Only a few days after John Paul II proclaimed the heroic sanctity with which Josemaría Escrivá has practised the Christian virtues, Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo pronounced a discourse entitled *Priests for a New Evangelization*⁵. The reflections that he made in that discourse revolve around the question: *what class of priests do the Church and the world need today?* He responded that the question “has an answer which necessarily begins like this: *the Church and the world need holy priests*, which is to say, priests who, being aware of their own limitations and miseries, make a decided effort to travel the path of sanctity, of the perfection of charity, of identification with Jesus Christ, in faithful correspondence to divine grace”⁶. After illustrating different aspects of priestly sanctity as they were lived by Blessed Josemaría, including his life of prayer and penitence, his pastoral charity, and his Eucharistic and Marian devotion, Msgr. del Portillo concluded this itinerary towards sanctity by stressing the need for intense and continual formation: “it is imperative that priests acquire in their years of preparation, and in their successive permanent formation, a clear consciousness of the identity that exists between the realization of their personal vocation to be a priest in the Church and the exercise of the ministry *in persona Christi Capitis*... This priestly

³ “If I can put it this way, I would say that this is their new professional work. To it they will devote their whole day and find that they still have not enough time to do all that has to be done. They have constantly to study theology; they must give spiritual guidance to very many souls, hear many confessions, preach tirelessly and pray a great deal; their heart must always be focused on the tabernacle, where He who has chosen us to be his own is really present” (*A Priest Forever*, 64).

⁴ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30-31.

⁵ Pronounced in the closing session of the XI International Symposium of Theology, Pamplona, 20-IV-1990. Published in AA.VV. (ed. L. F. MATEO-SECO), *La formación de los sacerdotes en las circunstancias actuales*, Pamplona 1990, 979-1000. Also published in L.F. MATEO-SECO - R. RODRÍGUEZ-OCAÑA, *Sacerdotes en el Opus Dei*, Pamplona 1994, 267-295; cited by these pages.

⁶ A. DEL PORTILLO, *La formación...*, cit., p. 278.

formation is something which lasts an entire lifetime because, in its distinct aspects, it tends — it should tend — to form Christ in him. It carries out this identification as an ongoing task, in response to the identification which has already been produced by the sacramental gift received”⁷.

If doctrinal formation is necessary for the sanctity of all of the faithful, it can be said that it is especially necessary in the case of priests, since there is a mutual interdependence between deepening in the understanding of the faith and priestly sanctity. This is so in the first place, because the priest should live the mystery that he himself represents and proclaims. He should deepen in the mystery in order to believe and to live in it, at the same time that the intimacy with which he tries to deal with God leads him to understand the truths of the faith more deeply with a supernatural light that illuminates his reason.

In addition, doctrinal formation is indispensable in order to carry out the task of teaching, sanctifying and leading the rest of the faithful, to whom priests should be able to give reason of their hope⁸ and criteria which help them to order their lives in a Christian way and to resolve the difficult moral problems which they may have to face. As John Paul II wrote, “I myself have emphasized several times the importance of this philosophical formation for those who one day, in their pastoral life, will have to address the aspirations of the contemporary world and understand the causes of certain behaviour in order to respond in appropriate ways”⁹. Preaching also requires appropriate doctrinal formation, since it cannot be left up to improvisation or reduced to the continual repetition of the same predetermined ideas.

When it came to deciding what should be the contents of this doctrinal-intellectual formation, Blessed Josemaría always remained faithful to the indications of the Magisterium of the Church about priestly formation. He was concerned that priests carry out in-depth study of the truths of the faith and morals, always distinguishing these from what were mere opinions or ways of explaining which were proper to different historical circumstances¹⁰. These truths — and not the opinions — are what are to constitute the object of the priest’s preaching and the adequate instrument with which pastors should guide the faithful towards Christ.

⁷ A. DEL PORTILLO, *La formación...*, cit., pp. 294-295.

⁸ Cfr. 1 *Pet* 3:15.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Fides et ratio*, 60, with reference to the Apost. Const. *Sapientia christiana*, 79-80 and Apost. Ex. *Pastores dabo vobis*, 52.

¹⁰ See the indications presented in P. BERGLAR, *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder*, New York 1994, 250-251.

In everything else, Blessed Josemaría was a staunch defender of theological pluralism and an enemy of the existence of ‘schools’ in Opus Dei. He taught those who benefited from the spirit that God gave to him, to make freedom compatible with responsibility, and the desire to know with the humility to accept the deposit of the faith, of which the Church is the only interpreter and guarantor¹¹.

As is the case with all diocesan priests, Blessed Josemaría treasured in his heart many unforgettable memories of his formative years in the seminary. It was with special affection that he remembered certain seminary professors, in whom he had recognized the ability to make the heights of academic knowledge compatible with pastoral wisdom. Blessed Josemaría was a tireless advocate of the view that the sacred sciences should be taught with academic rigour in all seminaries, with seriousness at least equivalent to that with which civil studies are carried out. He did not merely preach this view; he himself promoted the creation of a Faculty of Theology in the University of Navarre and was the inspiration for the creation of the University of the Holy Cross, which both aim to encourage the study of the sacred sciences at the highest level.

The Founder of Opus Dei encouraged all the priests that he met throughout his life to continually deepen in the studies which they had pursued during their seminary years, through a daily effort to keep up-to-date. This is how Msgr. Echevarría summarized it, recalling a continual teaching of Blessed Josemaría: “you cannot let your books ‘sleep’ on your bookshelves: allot some time in your daily schedule to study, to refreshing your theological knowledge and to meditating on the teachings of the documents of the Church’s Magisterium”¹². He also believed that dedicating themselves to these sacred sciences could constitute a specific way of living the priestly vocation for some, as they could serve the Church with their intelligence, thereby contributing to the formation of others.

3. A CONSEQUENCE OF UNITY OF LIFE: DOCTRINAL PIETY

One aspect that the spirit of Opus Dei stresses is unity of life. The priest finds this unity of life in pastoral charity, as his proper way of sharing in the sentiments of Christ and of identifying with Him as Head and Pastor of his Church. I have already pointed out that Blessed Josemaría’s concern for the intellectual formation of priests is born of his understanding of the mission of the priest in the Church as a guide and master of saints. In order to conclude these considera-

¹¹ Cfr. *Conversations*, 30.

¹² J. ECHEVARRÍA, *Homily in a priestly ordination*, 15-IX-1995, in *Para servir a la Iglesia. Homilias sobre el sacerdocio (1995-1999)*, Madrid 2001, 77.

tions, I now want to make reference to another manifestation of this unity of life which was frequently highlighted by the Founder of Opus Dei: doctrinal piety.

In effect, the intellectual formation of priests does not have the sole aim of passing on some knowledge about the truths of our faith to others; the priest should be the first beneficiary of his study, since it should nourish his own interior life, his personal relationship with God. Blessed Josemaría always advocated having a deep doctrinal piety, that is to say, one which is founded upon and nourished by the truths of the faith which, illuminated by the intelligence, should also inflame the heart and strengthen one's daily determination to convert. In his study, the priest should encounter new motives of love and self-giving. And on the other hand, his life of prayer, his life of faith, far from being based on more or less sentimental attitudes, should be anchored in the knowledge of the mystery of Christ.

For his own sanctity and for the sanctity of the rest of the faithful, the priest needs to improve his intellectual-doctrinal formation, which is neither erudition nor mere sentiment; the priest leads souls towards Christ, he proclaims the Word to them, but more than 'proclaiming' it, he 'lives' it. The priest should 'live by the Word'. In order to do this, he should intellectually prepare himself to know it in depth and to proclaim it effectively¹³.

In short, as John Paul II pointed out when considering his fifty years of priestly ministry, intellectual formation is necessary for the ministry and for the interior life of the priest. And at the same time, interior life and docility to grace prepare the intelligence to receive and understand the divine mysteries more easily: "In our day, marked as it is by a high degree of specialization in almost all areas of life, intellectual formation is extremely important. Such formation makes it possible to engage in a serious and creative dialogue with contemporary thought. Study of the humanities and of philosophy and knowledge of theology are the paths to this intellectual formation, which then needs to be continued for the rest of one's life. In order to be authentically formative, study needs to be constantly accompanied by prayer, meditation, and the invocation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and the fear of the Lord. St. Thomas Aquinas explains how, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a person's whole spiritual being becomes responsive to God's light, not only the light of knowledge but also the inspiration of love. I have prayed for the gifts of the Holy Spirit since my youth and I continue to do so"¹⁴.

¹³ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, IX.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.