

The ‘Dominant Passions’ of the Priest

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1. OPUS DEI: A GREAT CATECHESIS

Blessed Josemaría often explained the activity of Opus Dei by saying that it is a ‘great catechesis’, since the principal activity of the faithful of Opus Dei is “*education in the faith* of children, young people and adults [...] with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life”¹. He writes for example in *Christ is Passing By*: “The Christian apostolate — and I’m talking about an ordinary Christian living as just one more man or woman among equals — is a great catechesis. Through real, personal, loyal friendship, you create in others a hunger for God and you help them to discover new horizons — naturally, simply. With the example of your faith lived to the full, with a loving word which is full of the force of divine truth”².

Moreover, Blessed Josemaría frequently related the mission of Opus Dei, which he had been carrying out since 1928, to a certain text of the Gospel: “For many years now, ever since the foundation of Opus Dei, I have meditated and asked others to meditate on those words of Christ which we find in St. John: ‘And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all things unto Myself’³. By His death on the Cross, Christ has drawn all creation to Himself. Now it is the task of Christians, in His name, to reconcile all things to God, placing Christ, by means

¹ Definition of ‘catechesis’ in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 5.

² *Christ is Passing By*, 149.

³ *Jn* 12:32.

of their work in the middle of the world, at the summit of all human activities”⁴. And elsewhere, he tells us: “Jesus reminds all of us: ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself’⁵. If you put me at the centre of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment, in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality!”⁶.

The fullness of Christian life for faithful who live in the world has its own characteristics: “It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer”⁷.

In order to carry out this mission, the faithful need both the grace of God and the appropriate preparation. They require doctrinal and spiritual *formation* and spiritual direction regarding the adequate means needed to achieve this end. In such a way, Opus Dei — whose radical mission is precisely to promote and provide continuing assistance to the faithful in their struggle to sanctify themselves, others and the world *ad intra* — considers its primary duty to be that of giving this formation and direction. The faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei are continually in the process of being formed; as Blessed Josemaría often said, ‘formation never ends’. And at the same time, they are people who provide formation for others, as they continually strive to make Christ known to those around them. Opus Dei becomes in this way a place of formation and direction, a great catechesis; a place in where people both learn and are taught to find Christ and to place Him at the summit of all human activities.

2. TWO ‘DOMINANT PASSIONS’

I personally came into contact with Opus Dei before I became a priest. At that time, I learned about and tried to put into practice what Blessed Josemaría taught: that the passions to give doctrine and to bring souls to Christ are to be the passions of all Christian faithful, due to their baptismal consecration, and not merely matters for priests. In turn, this means that priests carry out this task in two senses. On the one hand, they direct souls and give doctrine with a new title, so to speak, as a requirement of their priestly consecration. And on the other

⁴ *Conversations*, 59.

⁵ *Jn* 12:32: “Et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum”.

⁶ *Christ is Passing By*, 183.

⁷ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

hand, they help the rest of the faithful — whom they form and direct⁸ — to exercise their common priesthood: “Priests are to be sincere in their appreciation and promotion of lay people’s dignity and of the special role the laity have to play in the Church’s mission”⁹.

For what refers to our topic, these *dominant passions* are specified for the priest in his tasks of preaching and giving spiritual direction.

Blessed Josemaría was a very passionate man; he liked the expression *vir desideriorum* which was used to describe the prophet Daniel in the Bible¹⁰. He was himself a man of great desires¹¹, of holy ambitions, of *zeal for holiness and apostolate*, who had “longings for holiness and apostolate”¹², as he used to say.

The human passions are a characteristic manifestation of our nature, of the substantial union between our bodies and souls. When properly controlled, the passions neither impede nor disturb our human actions. On the contrary, they make them firmer and more personal, thereby increasing their vigour and promoting genuine zeal. Should not we Christians love Our Lord God — in accordance with the Great Commandment of Christ Himself — with all of our hearts, with all of our minds and with all of our strength¹³? Is this not what it means to love God *passionately*? We are certainly not speaking here about the type of passion associated with the fleeting fancies of youth. We are referring rather to passion which is born of maturity, passion which does not seek its own satisfaction, but which is united (and concomitant) with the love of benevolence, passion which is mastered and nourished by prayer, and fomented and guided by the supernatural virtue of charity.

Blessed Josemaría continually struggled to practice all that he taught. In relation to this topic, his homily entitled “Passionately Loving the World” is very well-known. But in addition to making appeals to love the world, he entreats us to ‘repay’ the love of God the Father who “loves each one of us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children”¹⁴, with a love which is equally intentional. Josemaría Escrivá invites us in this way, to fall in love with Jesus Christ, and in loving His Holy Humanity, to love God with the same heart with which we love our parents, our friends, and all humanity, our neighbours¹⁵.

⁸ Cfr. II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

⁹ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.

¹⁰ Cfr. *Dan* 9:23.

¹¹ Cfr. *Furrow*, 628.

¹² *Conversations*, 62.

¹³ Cfr. *Mk* 12:30.

¹⁴ *The Way*, 267.

¹⁵ Cfr. *Christ is Passing By*, 142.

In all of this, the human person is considered to be *ganzheitlich*, as is currently fashionable to say in German. In other words, one is helped to become aware of the human person in his complete integrity of body and soul, with his reason and his emotions. The person is esteemed as a spiritual being, but with a heart that beats — and even more, if he allows himself to be led by his heart at the right times.

We priests, men with hearts, called to love God passionately and to love all humanity with anxious desires like those of Christ Himself (*Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo nisi ut accendatur?*¹⁶) participate in His priesthood (both ‘descendant and ascendant’). We should therefore have deep longings and holy concerns which inform our personalities. In other words, we should feel those ‘dominant passions’ of preaching and directing souls, which Blessed Josemaría dreamed about.

I will now briefly address three points, in order to refer to the way in which these passions are manifested in the soul of the priest, in his preaching and in spiritual direction.

Naturally, these passions refer first of all to the very priest himself, his way of being and acting, and his attitude towards other men and towards his ministry. One can elucidate a number of these features from the teachings and life of Blessed Josemaría. For example, as a good shepherd (which is what the priest who seeks to follow the model of His Lord needs to be), he had sincere compassion for other men. Escrivá writes in *Furrow*: “The people of that land, so far away from God and lost, reminded you of the Master’s words: ‘They are like sheep without a shepherd’. And you too were filled with a strong feeling of compassion deep within you. Make up your mind, where you are now, to give your life as a holocaust for all”¹⁷.

In addition, Josemaría Escrivá had the holy concern to seek out those who were close to him when they needed his encouragement or advice, *haciéndose el encontradizo* (managing to “bump into them” at the right moment). He also knew how to find just the right words: *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re* (“gentle in manner, but firm in substance”). In this regard, he advised: “Practise a cheerful charity which is at once kindly and firm; human and at the same time supernatural. It should be an affectionate charity, knowing how to welcome everyone with a sincere and habitual smile, and how to understand the ideas and the feelings of others. In this way, with gentleness and strength, and without concessions in matters of personal morals or in doctrine, the charity of Christ — when it is being

¹⁶ *Lk* 12:49.

¹⁷ *Furrow*, 826.

well lived — will give you a spirit of conquest. Each day you *will* have a greater desire to work for souls”¹⁸.

In order to live in this way, he continually asked God for the “gift of tongues”¹⁹, for himself and for all Christians: “I insist: ask God to grant us, his children, the ‘gift of tongues’, the gift of making ourselves understood by all. You can find the reason why I want this ‘gift of tongues’ in the pages of the Gospel, which abound in parables, in examples which materialise the doctrine and illustrate spiritual truths, without debasing or degrading the word of God. Everyone, both the learned and the less learned, finds it easier to reflect on and understand God’s message through these human images”²⁰.

Finally, Blessed Josemaría was genuinely interested in every person, and was generously available for the needs and concerns of all those around him: “That is precisely why I have always taught that we are interested in each and every person. Out of a hundred souls we are interested in a hundred. We discriminate against no one, for we know for certain that Jesus has redeemed us all, and that he wishes to make use of a few of us, despite our personal nothingness, to make his salvation known to all”²¹.

As I lived in the same house as he did for a number of years, I was able to see first hand that his ‘rule of conduct’ was as follows: if I am not with another person, I am free; I am not ‘busy’, but rather available to receive whoever comes to me, because people are always more important than things. With this attitude, accompanied by his kind and penetrating gaze, he could truly touch the heart of each person. That is passion!

With regards to preaching, the passion of the priest is manifested in a certain healthy and productive tension, which is very attractive. On the one hand, this comes from the fact that from the moment when priests are ordained, they “concentrate on fortifying themselves through continuous prayer so as to speak only of God, to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments”²². And on the other hand, the priest’s words are an expression of his personality, of his convictions, of his personal faith: they make an impression precisely because the priest practices what he preaches²³. In such a preacher, one notes a type of *Sendungsbewusstsein* (consciousness of his mission), which has been deliberately cultivated. The word which he proclaims becomes fresh and new. In its directness, the mes-

¹⁸ *The Forge*, 282.

¹⁹ Cfr. 1 Cor 12:10.

²⁰ *The Forge*, 895.

²¹ *Friends of God*, 9.

²² *A Priest Forever*, 36.

²³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 47.

sage receives a renewed vitality which makes it agreeable to the listeners, who feel touched from within. Even though there may be many listeners, *cor ad cor loquitur* (“one heart speaks to another”), and each person feels moved and encouraged. As the preacher with this passion knows how to place himself personally in the Gospel scenes, “as one more among the people present”²⁴, with all of his senses, he also knows how to place his listeners before the mystery of God and to lead them to personal prayer and effective resolutions. The true preacher will always try to convert his own personal prayer into audible words.

As for spiritual direction, the relevant ‘passions’ are first of all respect for the person in his or her particular singularity, and respect for the freedom of the children of God, united to the faith by the power of grace. Above all, this is a question of knowing how to listen to others. By the light of the common faith, the priest helps others, one by one, to personally discover their way, both with regards to their mission in life and with regards to momentary decisions: “One of the fundamental tasks of the priest is and always will be to give doctrine, to help individuals and society to become aware of the duties which the Gospel imposes on them, and to move men to discern the signs of the times. But all priestly work should be carried out with the maximum respect for the rightful freedom of consciences: every person ought to respond to God freely”²⁵. This duty of the priest is comparable to the patient work of a miniaturist, who makes the beauty of each miniature radiate with its own individual characteristics. This passion of the priest — united to the love of God and sincere charity — consists only in providing human and spiritual support to people, in order to help them, “so that they live their lives with their eyes on God”²⁶.

We have learned from Blessed Josemaría to see the face of Christ in those who surround us, to love them with their defects (as long as they are not offensive to God), to respect each person with his or her personal convictions and responsibilities, to learn from each person who crosses one’s path, who is in some way ‘Christ passing by’, and to avoid judging the intentions or being the enemy of anyone. On one occasion, Blessed Josemaría referred to this attitude of exquisite respect for the personal freedom and responsibility of each individual, recalling a memory from one of his first years in the priesthood: “I have never ill treated anyone who turned his back on me, not even when my offer of help was repaid with insolence. That is why, back in 1939, my attention was caught by an inscription

²⁴ *Friends of God*, 253.

²⁵ *Conversations*, 59.

²⁶ *The Forge*, 948.

on a building where I was preaching a retreat to some university students. It read: 'Let each wayfarer follow his own way'. It was very useful advice"²⁷.

In relation to the dominant passions, Blessed Josemaría invites priests to have an entirely human quality of supernatural love of God and charity towards others, towards each person in his or her singularity. The priest is also to be a man of the heart, who can in this way be a living witness of his faith, when he preaches and guides *suaviter et fortiter* the people entrusted to him, whom he directs and accompanies on their way towards divine love. With the grace of God, this will be the apostolic fruitfulness of these dominant passions.

²⁷ *Friends of God*, 59.