

Priests with Unity of Life

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1. UNITY OF LIFE ACCORDING TO BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

Christ's followers have always been challenged by the fact that we live in this world but we are not of this world¹. At first sight it might seem that one should live with a certain duplicity in life: on the one hand, living in this world, and on the other hand, not being of this world. Some say that the demands of the world and of the spirit are not identical, and could even be mutually opposed. How then can I live in this world when in fact I am called to live in the spirit?

Taking the lead from the gospel passage wherein Jesus tells his listeners, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"², Blessed Josemaría Escrivá presents a solution: "As you can see the dilemma is as old as Our Lord's answer is unequivocal and clear. There is no clash, no opposition, between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties and our religious ones; between the commitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on our way to our heavenly homeland"³.

¹ Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples, "...they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world" (*John* 17:14-16).

² *Mat* 22:21.

³ *Friends of God*, 165. He continues, "here too, as I never tire of repeating, we can see that unity of life which is an essential condition for those who are trying to sanctify themselves in

There is in fact only one life that we live, in its two aspects: on the one hand, our life in this world with all its activities, offered up to God, performed to the best of our ability, that is, sanctified; and on the other hand, our life in the spirit, our interior life, our life of prayer and mortification. This unity of life demands that the Christian quest for both divine and human perfection, going much beyond merely praying⁴, even to the point of clashing with the mentality of this world⁵.

2. UNITY OF LIFE IN THE PRIESTHOOD

Priests are in no way exempt from the challenge of living unity of life. In the same way that a lay person has to convert his or her professional and family concerns into opportunities to love and serve God and others, the priest has to ensure that in the exercise of his ministry (which is, in a sense, his ‘professional work’), he may truly “devote all this energy to the increase of the glory of God and to man’s progress in the divine life”⁶. Even in the carrying out of the sacred ministry, “[p]riests, too, involved and constrained by so many obligations of their office, certainly have reason to wonder how they can coordinate and balance their interior life with feverish outward activity”⁷.

Such coordination and balance can only be attained when the priest unites himself to Christ and imitates him in all his actions⁸. His union with Christ is manifested in the one life that he lives: in his engagement in pious devotion, in the

the midst of the ordinary situations of their work and of their family and social relationships. Jesus does not allow any division here”.

⁴ See, for example, *Friends of God*, 13: “It makes me very sad to see a Catholic — a child of God, called by Baptism to be another Christ — calming his conscience with a purely formal piety, with a religiosity that leads him to pray now and again, and only if he thinks it worthwhile! He goes to Mass on holidays of obligation — though not all of them — while he cares punctiliously for the welfare of his stomach and never misses a meal. He is ready to compromise in matters of faith, to exchange his faith for a platter of lentils, rather than give up his job [...] I want you to be genuine, solid Christians; and to become such you will have to be unswerving in your search for suitable spiritual food”. See also the full text of the homily where this passage comes from, *The Richness of Ordinary Life*.

⁵ *The Way*, 380: “‘And in a pagan or in a worldly atmosphere, when my life clashes with its surroundings, won’t my naturalness seem artificial?’ you ask me. And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs; and that contrast — because you’re confirming your faith with works — is exactly the naturalness I ask of you”.

⁶ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 14.

⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*, 2.

external performance of the works of the ministry (by being excellent liturgical presiders, good group organizers, or providers of social services), and in all his other activities.

Personally, I have learned much from Blessed Josemaría's life and teachings on how to give concrete and practical manifestations to such wishes of the Church. In the means of formation given by Opus Dei to some members of the diocesan clergy, we are constantly reminded to be good and holy priests, not only in desire but also in action. We are encouraged to be orderly in our work so we could be faithful to all our prayers each day. We are taught to joyfully live obedience to the Holy Father and to our bishops, whoever they may be, and whatever their personalities might be. As a consequence, I have to exert effort to know and continuously update myself with the teachings of the Church, especially with her latest pronouncements, and be creative in teaching them in turn to others. To the extent possible, that is, to the extreme, following Blessed Josemaría's example, I should try to live priestly fraternity by being truly concerned with my brother priests' spiritual and even physical well-being. In these means of formation, we are also helped to live all the supernatural and human virtues, to acquire the skills necessary for the ministry, and so on⁹.

3. LOVE FOR THE MASS

Among the many activities the priest is engaged in daily, it is the Holy Eucharist that takes the most important place. "A priest is worth what his Mass is worth". This thought highlights the centrality of this sacrament in the priest's life.

According to the Second Vatican Council, the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life"¹⁰. This takes on a particular significance when viewed not only from the perspective of the priest's interior life, but also in his task of sanctifying God's People. In my home diocese, Manila, many lay people participate in daily Mass. Many parishes have weekday Masses in the morning, noon and early evening. The two or three daily Masses of churches near offices are always full. Some companies even have their own chapels or use their auditoriums for daily Mass.

This scenario means that the people expect so much from the priest. They hunger for the Eucharist because it nourishes their spiritual life, with direct con-

⁹ Cfr. also *Conversations*, 16, for a brief overview of Opus Dei's work with priests.

¹⁰ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

sequences in their day to day living. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, “the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: ‘Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking’”¹¹. The faithful’s love for this sacrament could even serve as an encouragement for us ministers. But we priests have to strengthen their devotion by being ourselves true witnesses to this mystery. We cannot simply excuse ourselves by thinking that anyway sacraments work *ex opere operato* (i.e., they impart grace by the work itself that is being done, whether the minister is worthy or not). Our whole day depends on our Mass, and our day should be converted into a Mass, a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord.

The Council teaches us that “the other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch”¹². We may have many other important and urgent things to do, but if we fail in our devotion to the Eucharist, all our other activities would be laid to waste. I think this is logical because in the first place the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass makes present again the highest point in the history of our salvation: the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord. Likewise, as Blessed Josemaría loved to say, our whole day should be an extension of the Mass¹³. Furthermore, the mission of the Church is to bring God to the people and to bring the people to God, and we have a concrete way to do this in the Eucharist: Christ, who together with the Holy Spirit brings us to the Father, is substantially present with his body, blood, soul and divinity. How can we say that we want the people to meet God in all the other Church activities, if we do not lead them to the Eucharist, where God is truly present, and who is Christ himself under the species of bread and wine?

I would like to include a final thought I learned from Blessed Josemaría: people notice and are encouraged by our devotion to the Eucharist, as shown in the way we celebrate the Mass and other liturgical services. And they also notice our devotion in seemingly little things — the way we care for the vestments and liturgical linen, the cleanliness of the vessels, the way we genuflect and carry out

¹¹ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1327. Quote is from St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* 4, 18, 5: PG 7/1, 1028.

¹² II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

¹³ *The Forge*, 69: “Keep struggling, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the center and the root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship — an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next. Your whole day will then be an act of worship that overflows in aspirations, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the offering up of your professional work and your family life”.

the other gestures, and so on. Blessed Josemaría never got tired of reminding us of these, not because of any scrupulosity, but because they truly matter.

4. CONCLUSION

In this presentation I have attempted to highlight two concrete aspects of the priest's life and ministry: unity of life, and love for the Mass. If we try to examine them well, we see that they are indispensable not only for the priest and but also for the laity, since they form an integral part of Christian life. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, the Founder of Opus Dei, has given them a particular significance as a help in finding God in the ordinary circumstances of one's life — in my case, as a priest performing my ministry.