

Forming Priests to be Men of Communion

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“What is the identity of the priest? That of Christ [...]. He is a direct and daily instrument of the saving grace which Christ won for us”¹. It is in this way — at once simple and profound — that Blessed Josemaría helps to resolve the apparent *identity crisis of the priest*. He made the following observations: “in many places today the idea of the priesthood is very confused. They keep on saying that you must search for the identity of the priest and they question the value of giving oneself to God in the priesthood in present-day society”².

The reality which underlies these words — that the priest makes Christ present with his ministry — can help frame the reflection which I will make herein, about the way in which a priest is called to be an instrument of communion. The priest is an instrument of communion in the measure in which he is united — identified — with Christ and in consequence, united to the rest of the faithful around Christ, principle of unity and communion. This is realized principally in the Eucharist: is the Eucharist not at the same time the source and summit of the priestly life and of the life of the entire ecclesial community?

Many institutions are undergoing significant changes in our times and religious values often suffer as a result of this. This situation affects the position of the priest in the Church and in the world: the wide variety of religious, moral, family, and material circumstances, dense urban population which easily leads to isolation, the omnipresence of a type of techno-scientific thought which is not

¹ *A Priest forever*, 38-40.

² *Ibidem*, 36.

very conducive to contemplation or metaphysical considerations, exploited human weaknesses, and instant and hyper-atrophied information which gives preference to images over fundamental realities. The priest can be tempted either to set himself in opposition to these things in the name of the primacy of the supernatural and thereby risk isolating himself, or to make compromises in the name of pastoral effectiveness and thereby risk diluting true values.

The priest participates in the priestly ministry of Christ, bound to the sacerdotal plenitude of the bishop with whom he cooperates, and at the same time, is in the world “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the pagans [...] so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit”³. II Vatican Council has also united the clear message of Christ to all men with liturgical worship for the glory of God. “Since they share in the function of the apostles in their own degree, priests are given the grace of God to be the ministers of Jesus Christ among the nations, fulfilling the sacred tasks of the Gospel, that the oblation of the gentiles may be made acceptable and sanctified in the Holy Spirit”⁴.

So in order to fulfil the mission which he has received, the priest should live with and among other men. He should understand, accompany and guide them in the name of the One who has sent him. The priest is called to live with special intensity in the way in which Blessed Josemaría advised all Christians to live: “When you love other people and you spread that affection — Christ’s kindly, gentle charity — all around you, you will be able to support one another, and if someone is about to stumble he will feel that he is being supported, and also encouraged, to be faithful to God through this fraternal strength”⁵.

The priest should be completely available for the needs of all souls: “If we have dedicated ourselves to God in order to serve souls in the middle of the world”, says Blessed Josemaría, “this means that we have to keep in contact continually with our fellow workers and with all those around us, with a vibrant apostolic outlook, without making any distinctions, and without letting ourselves be led by likes and dislikes. We cannot insulate the fire of Christ; rather we have to increase, extend and spread this divine fire throughout the world”⁶.

In the ministry of the word — preaching and catechesis — the priest applies the permanent truths of the Gospel to the varied circumstances of human life. His example gives encouragement. He teaches the faithful to participate in the Liturgy where they can nourish their lives of prayer and experience the demands of their particular vocation to sanctity. As an educator in the Faith, he

³ Rom 15:16.

⁴ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

⁵ *The Forge*, 148.

⁶ Cited in J. ECHEVARRÍA, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Madrid 2000, p. 121.

forms them, whether personally or in groups, so that they can reach the fullness of Christian maturity, of vibrant and effective Christian charity⁷. It is from him that the Christian community can learn to make the local compatible with the universal, and to view the local parish in its true relation to the diocese and to the entire Church.

As Blessed Josemaría often said: “If you want to be useful, serve”⁸. In order to become an instrument of unity, the Minister of the Gospel, the Pastor of the Church, should not then seek his own personal preferences or ambitions in pastoral matters or in doctrinal issues which are matters for specialists — in which he could legitimately desire to specialize — and he should be equally welcoming to all the faithful, not letting himself be affected by personal preferences which stem from his sensibility, education or origin. He should also realize that either “God constructs or the devil destroys” with his example. He is “exposed” like the lamp set on a stand so that it “gives light to all the house”⁹. On the other hand, as the Master came for sinners as well as for the just, for the sick as well as the healthy¹⁰, when the servant finds himself with sick souls, he will realize the value of each one. As Blessed Josemaría once said: “take care of them, serve them, do not close the doors or the arms of your priestly charity [...]. If you do not take care of them, they will remain wounded, and they might even stop practising their religion”¹¹.

1. THE LIFE OF COMMUNION OF THE PRIEST WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Thus if the priest does not give God the worship that He desires, he will wait for people to come and find him in the progressive solitude of his isolation. He should rather reflect the image of the Good Shepherd who goes out looking for the lost sheep and who nourishes the weakened multitudes in preparation for their long journey. One particularly moving image is that of the Risen Christ who went out to seek the pilgrims of Emmaus, when they were sad and discouraged, like so many of our contemporaries. Thus, he who is both *pro hominibus constituitur* and *ex hominibus assumptus*¹², understands all human problems and

⁷ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 49-50.

⁸ *Christ is Passing By*, 50.

⁹ *Mt* 5:15.

¹⁰ Cfr. *Mt* 15:30.

¹¹ Cited in J. ECHEVARRÍA, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría...*, cit., p. 122.

¹² *Heb* 5:1.

appreciates all authentic human values. At the same time, he teaches another hope and other values of a higher order.

To achieve a life of communion with all of the members of the People of God called to participate in the common mission of evangelization, communion must begin with the members of the *Ordo presbyterorum* cooperating with the *Ordo episcoporum*.

The bishop and the priest are united like the arm and the hand, by the communal bond of the hierarchy, a bond of charity, shared pastoral responsibility, trust and friendship. Their relations are not therefore merely ordinary working relations nor are they simply a matter of respect or passive obedience. This union of the priest with his bishop is filial, as the bishop is called to be a father. In addition, when the priest strengthens his union with his bishop, he unites himself to the entire Church. A living union with the Head of the Church through his visible representative leads to full identification of initiative and zeal for all souls. Blessed Josemaría lived in this way throughout his life. From the first years of his priesthood, he frequently repeated the following phrase which directed his ministry: *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam!*¹³. Cultivating unity with the head requires unity between all the members, and rests on pastoral cooperation with other parishes and neighbouring dioceses. All of the pastoral and apostolic initiatives that are born in communion with the Church deserve to be warmly welcomed. “I would not lift my little finger to put out a flame that had been lit in honour of Christ; that is not my role”, affirmed Monsignor Escrivá. “If the oil that burns is not good, it will go out by itself”¹⁴.

Among priests, the fraternity which nourishes true collaboration springs from their common sacramental bond, strengthened by the irreplaceable relationships of mutual knowledge and friendship forged during the years in the seminary. Discreet but effective concern, established exchanges during retreats, and vacations, pilgrimages, and other periods spent together are also irreplaceable; these are what prevent one from feeling alone, above all in moments of physical or spiritual hardship. In order to be fortified, this spirit of fraternity requires one to generously overlook differences of age or mentality. Fraternity seeks to minimize differences and misunderstandings by respectfully pursuing the truth and by patiently suggesting what could be improved in the personal lives of others and in the accomplishment of their responsibilities. This is the climate which is necessary for true spiritual health. And this climate is especially present in those priestly associations warmly recommended by the conciliary Decree *Presbytero-*

¹³ Cfr. *The Way*, 833; *Christ is Passing By*, 139; *The Forge*, 647.

¹⁴ Cited in A. DEL PORTILLO, *Entrevista sobre el Fundador del Opus Dei*, Madrid 1992, p. 82.

rum Ordinis (n. 8) which aim to strengthen spiritual life, ministry and union with other priests and with the Shepherd.

So great was the concern of Blessed Josemaría to help his fellow brothers in the priesthood seek sanctity in their ministry that, not finding the way to give the appropriate legal structure to the bond of these priests with Opus Dei, he prepared himself to do what could be compared to the sacrifice of Abraham. Around the year 1950, he decided to leave Opus Dei — that to which he had dedicated his entire life in accordance with the will of God — in order to start a foundation to help diocesan priests. The Lord accepted this act of generosity and made the sacrifice unnecessary: He produced a providential *delay* in a phase of the approval of Opus Dei and this allowed diocesan priests to join through the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Blessed Josemaría wrote about this proposed sacrifice in 1951: “God did not 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”¹⁵.

2. COMMUNION WITH OTHER FAITHFUL

The priest and the lay faithful are in communion not only because they are brothers and members of the same body, but also because they participate in the same mission. It would be to strike a blow to the sanctifying climate of the Christian community for a priest to seek merely to be a human leader, to shine before men, to secure benefits for himself, to accumulate useless material advantages, or to claim special treatment. What truly arouses the esteem and loyalty of men of good will are priests who help lay people to cultivate their doctrinal competence and who are diligently available for spiritual attention so that all can discover and respond to the universal call to sanctity. By acting in this way, the laity will also be encouraged to joyfully and responsibly fulfill their proper role in the Church and in the world.

And thus we reach the key to the spirit of unity. Firmly convinced of the greatness of their participation in the priesthood of Christ — which encompasses all men of all times — the priest needs to ask Jesus for a large, universal heart like that of St. Paul, which has genuine concern for all of the churches. The priest

¹⁵ Cited in A. DE FUENMAYOR - V. GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS - J.L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Chicago 1994, p. 216.

will then be able to seek vocations to the priesthood, love the seminary all of his life, and prefer the renewal of souls by supernatural means to the reform of external structures, which only really comes as a consequence of personal conversion.

To educate the People of God in the Faith, a life informed by pastoral charity finds the path to identify itself with Christ in a joyful spirit of sacrifice, forgetfulness of self, intelligent and responsible obedience, understanding, firmness, and a heart fortified by the mastery of the senses, which in turn cultivates patience and a spirit of poverty. *Homo Dei et homo ad homines missus*¹⁶. The priest united to God, who knows that he has been consecrated to be sent to men, accepts the fact that he no longer belongs to himself. He makes himself available to others in order to enlighten intelligences, guide consciences and nourish souls. Blessed Josemaría used to say that a priest has to be like a carpet which does not complain or protest and which “is there so that everyone else can have something soft to tread on”¹⁷.

What is the root of this principle of unity? Does it not stem directly from the Will of the Lord? Jesus prayed, “that they may all be one: even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee”¹⁸. “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is who bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing”¹⁹. The marvellous unity of the Divine Persons is the effect of their interrelations as gift, love and procession; all comes from the Father. The Blessed Trinity is the model of unity that we can and should freely strive to reflect here on earth so that nothing separates us from one another, except what legitimately distinguishes our personalities from those of others.

At the beginning of the Millenium, the priest finds himself at the front lines in the work of teaching and of breaking down the human barriers that separate men — temperaments, races, opinions, sensibilities, resources — *omne regnum divisum contra se desolabitur*. The Kingdom of God is not only to be found in heaven; it is also present in the conscience of each baptized person as long as it is not engulfed by sin. In November 1968, I heard Blessed Josemaría agree in the course of a conversation with his barber who was complaining in confidence about the injustice of the physical damage that Roman students were causing to their own universities with their protests and manifestations. The Founder of Opus Dei added that when differences of opinion or other difficulties arise — whether they are legitimize or born of self-love — it is prayer, dialogue, and concessions on secondary issues that avoid serious conflicts. Diversity is a treas-

¹⁶ Cfr. *Heb* 5:1.

¹⁷ Cited in P. CASCIARO, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, London 1997, p. 93.

¹⁸ *Jn* 17:21.

¹⁹ *Jn* 15:5.

ure and unity is necessary for life, in particular so that the *sap* of divine grace can circulate throughout the entire body of the Church.

In conclusion, we can say that the priestly duty to be an instrument of unity is *not* to be an insulator. Blessed Josemaría liked to keep this small electrical apparatus on his desk in order to remind him that the mission of the priest is to unite souls to one another and to God, not to separate them. This is also what an eminent Parisian priest referred to with the humorous name of ‘insulary vicar’. He said that he had discovered that in addition to general vicars, episcopal vicars and primary and secondary vicars, there are also ‘insulary vicars’, jealously and mysteriously established in their own parrochial domains, alongside of others with whom they rarely communicate.

To be tempted to adopt this attitude is not to have completely understood that authority implies service to communion and that governing is to direct individual wills towards the common good in truly necessary matters. When the branch is united to the vine — without complexes and without presumption — he will bring forth the expected fruit. He will avoid making distinctions between parishes and dioceses, between rich and poor, and between gifted and less interesting people. And he will certainly abstain from seeking the most advantageous positions for himself, and from purposefully alternating attitudes of warmth and frigidity towards others.

Among the means that we can enumerate to achieve this goal, good use of the tongue is not the least important. Words are to be used to advise and encourage, rather than for ironic or negative comments. The man of communion is called to give priority to caring for the sick and the weak, and to realize that the pride of one person is enough to negatively affect the climate of an entire apostolic project. On the other hand, even if there are few working on an apostolic project, the effect of all working together in unity can make more of a difference than could be imagined.

“Charity does not consist so much in ‘giving’ as in ‘understanding’”, said Blessed Josemaría²⁰. This means mending broken friendship, calming aggressive behaviour and managing crisis situations amicably, without sacrificing justice. “Even if you do not understand why, keep thinking that this person has the right to be tired, because you have caught him at the end of the day carrying the weight of his work... because of his situation, etc.”²¹. We create a pleasant atmosphere when we avoid making major problems out of trifles and when we seek to carry out our duties competently without neglecting the others. “Practice a cheerful

²⁰ *The Way*, 463.

²¹ Cited in J. ECHEVARRÍA, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría...*, cit., p.140.

charity which is at once kindly and firm; human and at the same time supernatural [...]. 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 well lived — will give you a spirit of conquest. Each day you will have a greater desire to work for souls”²².

²² *The Forge*, 282.