

Grace and Conversion in the Writings of Blessed Josemaría

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People who encounter Opus Dei for the first time often remark on its seeming novelty, its difference from other ways within the Church. Yet, pressed to describe what precisely makes Opus Dei seem so new or different, most find themselves unable to pinpoint that certain elusive something.

Still, it is there — the newness, the difference — and it has accounted for Opus Dei's apostolic effectiveness as well as its obstacles, especially the incomprehension of some good people within the Church.

What is it that has set Opus Dei apart, especially in the early decades of its founding by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, when it drew vehement charges of heresy? Most people point to Blessed Josemaría's emphasis on the holiness of ordinary work. This, however, is not so new. We find it in many and diverse spiritual writers, from St. John Chrysostom and St. Benedict to Brother Lawrence and St. Francis de Sales.

What, then, is so new? Blessed Josemaría himself acknowledged that Opus Dei offered something “as old as the Gospel, and like the Gospel ever new”; and therein lies our clue to Opus Dei's difference.

I propose that at the heart of Opus Dei is not a novelty, strictly speaking, but a recovery — a *ressourcement* — a return to the Christian sources. Inspired by God, Blessed Josemaría retrieved a particular idea at the heart of Christianity, an idea that had been obscured by the controversies of recent centuries. It is an idea that encompasses grace and conversion, salvation, justification, and sanctification.

1. A FORGOTTEN TEACHING

“Divine filiation”, said Blessed Josemaría, “is the basis of the spirit of *Opus Dei*”¹. Though this teaching is familiar to those who have received their formation from *Opus Dei*, we must not take it for granted. For Blessed Josemaría used the phrase and the notion in ways that were startling for his time. Since the years of the Protestant Reformation, the Church set a defensive, apologetic agenda for theologians. Indeed, whenever heresies arise, the Church must treat dogma in a way that does not give due proportion to the whole truth. Thus, post-Reformation Catholic writers felt compelled to emphasize precisely the points that Protestants denied. For example, because the reformers emphasized faith over works, Catholic theologians tended to emphasize works more than faith. All this was necessary, in a remedial way. But its lingering effect was to produce a theology that was somewhat misshapen and off-center.

Blessed Josemaría’s recovery of “divine filiation” represented a reintegration of Christian experience, a recovery of the Patristic and Thomistic unity that had somehow gotten lost amid the shouting.

The concerns of the counter-Reformation are conspicuously absent from Blessed Josemaría’s teaching. In his homilies and ascetical works, we find no apologetic assaults on Protestantism, and little concern about the fine technical points of justification. Indeed, if you search all his ascetical works and all his homilies for any use of the word justification (in its technical sense), you will have searched in vain.

2. GETTING BEYOND POLEMICS

Instead of the post-Reformation vocabulary, what do we find? We find a vocabulary that was startling for its time and place. When he speaks of our redemption, justification, and sanctification, Blessed Josemaría dares to use terms like “divinization”.

“Isn’t it true, that you have seen the need to become a soul of prayer, to reach an intimacy with God that leads to divinization? Such is the Christian faith as always understood by souls of prayer”. And he goes on to quote Clement of Alexandria: “A man becomes God, because he loves whatever God loves”².

¹ *Christ is Passing By*, 64.

² *Ibidem*, 8.

While the word “divinization” appears often in the Fathers of the Eastern Church, it never gained wide currency in the West. Blessed Josemaría surely recovered the notion from his study of the Fathers, to which he was devoted from his seminary years onward.

For Blessed Josemaría, divinization is the process by which Christians become “sons in the Son” — sons of God through incorporation into the eternal Son of God. We are sons because Christ has shared his own divine sonship with us. Our sonship is more than mere imitation of Christ; it is more than a legal transfer of title; it is more than acting “as if” we were sons. Ours is a metaphysical participation in Christ’s only-begottenness.

Divinization, then, is the process of becoming ever more a child of God. It begins with baptism, but it is not a single event. Rather, Blessed Josemaría saw the Christian life as a continual conversion into Christ, a continual purification through penance and prayer, a continual “beginning again”, to use one of his favorite phrases. Indeed, that conversion is a continual return to a life of spiritual childhood. “I advise you to try to return sometime [...] to the beginning of your *first conversion*, which, if it is not becoming like children, is very much like it. In the spiritual life you have to let yourself be led with complete trust, single-mindedly and without fear”³.

3. SALVATION FOR SONSHIP

Divine filiation is the fruit of our redemption by Jesus Christ, and it is the normal condition of the redeemed. In his meditation on the Fourteenth Station of the Cross, Blessed Josemaría wrote: “The work of our Redemption has been accomplished. We are now children of God, because Jesus has died for us and his death has ransomed us. *Empti enim estis pretio magno!* (1 Cor 6:20), you and I have been bought at a great price”. Our sonship is the object of Christ’s saving death.

Yet it is fair for us to ask: For what reason did Christ save us? In the centuries after the Protestant Reformation, both Catholic and Protestant theologians tended to emphasize that we are saved *from sin*. They differed in their view of how this happened and what was its effect in our lives. But they were alike in their focus on the sin from which Christ saved us.

In contrast, Blessed Josemaría taught that we are saved not merely *from sin*, but *for sonship*. Thus he could preach of divine filiation as the end of diviniza-

³ Furrow, 145.

tion, and of divinization as the reason for our redemption: “[...] by divinizing the everyday, common life of men, the Son of God conquered. That is the triumph of Jesus Christ. He has raised us to his level, the level of children of God, by coming down to our level, the level of the children of men”⁴.

Moreover, Christ has redeemed not only human souls, but all human realities in the world. Blessed Josemaría taught: “Our faith teaches us that man, in the state of grace, is divinized — filled with God. We are men and women, not angels. We are flesh and blood, people with sentiments and passions, with sorrows and joys. And this divinization affects everything human”⁵. On another occasion, he said: “The fact that Jesus grew up and lived just like us shows us that human existence and all the ordinary activity of men have a divine meaning”⁶.

4. MAN THE SAINT

Divine filiation, then, begins with a divine initiative, a grace. God wills, however, that it should require human cooperation. We must choose to correspond with the graces God gives us; and this is the gradual work of our divinization, our day-by-day conversion as children of God.

This theology of grace has profound implications for everyday human life. No one could accuse the founder of Opus Dei of having an excessively “vertical” understanding of redemption. Indeed, the necessary corollary to his thought on divinization is his teaching on the *hominization* that occurs in the life of grace. It is Christ, after all, who fully humanizes us, Christ who reveals man to man⁷. Christ is the perfect man; and as we are conformed to his image, we become not only divinized — if I may use the word “only” in this context — but also perfected in our humanity. We share Christ’s *divinized* humanity.

Blessed Josemaría taught that “nothing perfects our personality so much as correspondence with grace”⁸. Grace “renews man from within and converts a sinner and rebel into a good and faithful servant”⁹. Better still than a servant, man is empowered by grace to become a saint, a holy one, a sharer in the divine life. “With divine grace”, wrote the founder of Opus Dei, “you can become a

⁴ *Christ is Passing By*, 21.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 103.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 14.

⁷ Cfr. II VATICAN COUNCIL, Apost. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁸ *Furrow*, 443.

⁹ *Christ is Passing By*, 162.

saint, which is what matters”¹⁰. God’s grace converts us, from sinners to saints. In a homily, Blessed Josemaría invoked St. Augustine’s authority on the matter: “And shall I dare to say, I am holy? If I mean by ‘holy’ that I bring holiness and that I need no one to make me holy, I would be a liar and full of pride. But if by ‘holy’ I understand one who is made holy, as we read in Leviticus, You will be holy, because I, God, am holy, then the whole body of Christ, down to the last man living at the ends of the earth, may dare to say, together with its head and under him, I am holy”¹¹.

In this divine economy, no one can claim to lack the means to achieve sanctity and sonship. “Our Lord, besides wanting us to be saints, grants each one of us the relevant graces”¹².

For Blessed Josemaría, the model of humanity perfected by grace was the Blessed Virgin, who was “full of grace” from the moment of her conception, and who showed her constant correspondence to grace through her “fiat”. Blessed Josemaría remarked: “Try to imitate the Virgin Mary and you will be a complete man or woman”¹³.

Such exaltation, he taught, would be humbling — and humanizing: “To become God-like, to be divinized, we must begin by being very human, accepting from God our condition as ordinary men and sanctifying its apparent worthlessness. Thus did Mary live. She who is full of grace, the object of God’s pleasure, exalted above all the angels and the saints, lived an ordinary life”¹⁴.

5. LOVE IN ACTION

Grace is God’s gift of his own life. It is our share in his divine life. And it is a constant gift to the soul who has not committed mortal sin. Yet, again, it is up to the soul to accept the grace and act upon it. This response, according to Blessed Josemaría, is the response of a child to his Father. In *Furrow*, he wrote: “Is corresponding to divine grace, you ask, a matter of justice or generosity? It is a matter of Love!”¹⁵.

This filial love fills the soul with zeal to advance in the process of conversion and divinization — to become a more perfect, a more faithful son of the Father.

¹⁰ *Furrow*, 104.

¹¹ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 85.4, quoted in *Christ is Passing By*, 133.

¹² *Furrow*, 314.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 443.

¹⁴ *Christ is Passing By*, 172.

¹⁵ *Furrow*, 669.

Such zeal provides the momentum that is necessary for a lifelong struggle. “Grace, like nature, normally acts gradually. We cannot, properly speaking, move ahead of grace. But in all that does depend on us we have to prepare the way and co-operate when God grants grace to us [...]. Grace normally takes its time, and is not inclined to act with violence”¹⁶. So Blessed Josemaría urged ordinary Christians to have “holy impatience”, but a holy patience, too¹⁷.

The formula, then, for divinization is God’s grace plus man’s correspondence. As proof of this, the founder cited “the Lord’s admonition to the Apostle: ‘My grace is enough for you’, which is confirmation that, if you want to, you can”¹⁸.

Yet, we remain free, and we may choose not to correspond to God’s grace, our conversion and, ultimately, our divinization. Since God constantly offers us his graces, we are constantly faced with the choice between corresponding or refusing. Thus, in all the writings of Blessed Josemaría, we find an urgency about the present moment. “I have always thought that many mean by ‘tomorrow’ or ‘later’, a resistance to grace”. Thus, Blessed Josemaría exhorted Christians to live in the present moment, to concentrate on the duties at hand. *Nunc, hodie!* — “Today, now” — was one of his favorite prayers of aspiration. Another was *Nunc coepi!* — “Now I begin”. For him, the gradual process of conversion, of divinization, was nothing more than a series of those present moments, and he wished to waste none of them. “And how many chances to learn from the Master you have wasted by not knowing how to supernaturalize them!”¹⁹.

6. SACRAMENTAL GRACES

The premiere way to supernaturalize those moments, according to Blessed Josemaría, is to draw on the grace of Holy Communion. The Mass, he said, must be “the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life”²⁰. The Eucharist “is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass”²¹. In this context, he quotes St. Cyril of Jerusalem: “When

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 668.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Furrow*, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 261.

²⁰ *Christ is Passing By*, 87.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

we participate in the Eucharist, we are made spiritual by the divinizing action of the Holy Spirit, who not only makes us share in Christ's life, as in baptism, but makes us entirely Christ-like, incorporating us into the fullness of Christ Jesus"²². Blessed Josemaría concludes: "This pouring out of the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and makes us acknowledge that we are children of God"²³.

In Blessed Josemaría's teaching, divine filiation is the principal expression of divine grace; it is the hermeneutical key for understanding man's divinization and hominization. In this light, we see that conversion is not mere repentance, but a loving response of our filial trust in our Father God. Conversion, then, flows from grace. It is the effect of grace in our intellect and will. Grace is God's gift; conversion is our response. These actions, divine and human, reproduce Christ's sonship in man.

It would require little effort to show the patristic pedigree for these ideas, as the founder himself did by quoting Clement, Cyril, and Augustine in three of the passages I cited. Blessed Josemaría could just as easily have drawn from St. Irenaeus, who wrote, just one generation away from the time of the apostles:

"It was for this end that the Word of God was made man,
and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man,
that man, having been taken into the Word,
and receiving the adoption,
might become the son of God"²⁴.

Elsewhere, Irenaeus wrote that, by God's grace,

"man, a created and organized being,
is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God...
making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect,
that is, approximating to the uncreated One.
For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God"²⁵.

And permit me, please, to cite one more sympathetic Father of the Church, St. Hippolytus, who sat at the feet of Irenaeus. At the beginning of the third century, he wrote, in words that could easily have appeared in *Furrow* or *The Way*:

²² *Catechesis* 22.3.

²³ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 87.

²⁴ *Against the Heresies* 3.19.1.

²⁵ *Ibidem* 4.38.3.

“If you, too, want to be God,
then listen to the one who created you
and do not resist him here below
in order that, when you have been found to be faithful in little things,
you may also be able to receive what is great”²⁶.

In his teaching on grace and conversion, the founder of Opus Dei recovered something ancient; but, in doing so, he also accomplished something new. He anticipated many later currents in theology and ecclesial life — the movement of *ressourcement*, which recovered the thought of the Eastern Fathers, and Pope John Paul II’s plea for the Church to breathe again with both lungs, East and West. Blessed Josemaría was decades in advance of these developments as he brought his reading in the Church’s common heritage — Scripture and the Fathers — to bear on the problems of our day and on the perennial issues in the spiritual life.

²⁶ *Philosophoumena* 10.33.