

Work as “a Mass”: Reflections on the Laity’s Participation in the *Munus Sacerdotale* in the writings of the Founder of Opus Dei

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This study has its origin in some words taken from the oral preaching of St. Josemaría. Commenting on a phrase from a traditional prayer to St. Joseph, *et operas innocentia tuis sanctis altaris deservire*, he said that we want “to serve our Lord not only at the altar, but in the whole world, which is an altar for us. All of the works of man are done as if on an altar, and each of you, in that union of contemplative souls which is your day, in some way says ‘his Mass,’ which lasts twenty-four hours in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our life.”¹ I think this reflection contains great theological riches, even though it is formulated, as so often happens with St. Josemaría’s texts, not in theological terms but in what we could call “pastoral” language.

The theological teaching that underlies these words, it seems to me, is the lay faithful’s participation in the “triple office” of Christ. Therefore I will begin this study with a brief consideration of the Magisterium’s teaching in this regard. Then I will consider some key texts from St. Josemaría. The founder of Opus Dei refers in several places to the participation by the lay faithful in the triple function of Christ,² but he often synthesized his teaching in a succinct expression: to have “a priestly soul” and “a lay mentality.” Grasping the meaning of this expression will require a brief look at the term “work” and its theological import in the founder of Opus Dei’s writings.

1. Participation by the lay faithful in the *munus sacerdotale*³

The place of the *tria munera* (three offices) of Christ, and particularly the faithful’s participation in them, in the New Testament and in the Tradition handed down

1. Notes taken from a meditation, March 19, 1968. Cited in Javier Echevarría, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Rialp, Madrid 2010, p. 17.

2. “A Christian knows that he is grafted onto Christ through baptism. He is empowered to fight for Christ through confirmation, called to act in the world sharing the royal, prophetic, and priestly role of Christ. He has become one and the same thing with Christ through the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and love. And so, like Christ, he has to live for other men, loving each and every one around him and indeed all humanity” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 106).

3. This expression has a certain ambiguity, for it can designate both the triple office of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling as a whole, as well as more specifically the *munus sanctificandi* (role or office of sanctifying). If I have used the term “priestly office” it is precisely to avoid limiting myself to the administration of the sacraments in referring to that office. Although this is its essential content in the case of the ordained ministers, the common priesthood, distinct from the ministerial not only in degree but also essentially, can be defined by its relation not only to participation in worship but also by the connection that such participation has with the *munus*

by the Fathers and in the liturgy is a question open to theological discussion. Aurelio Fernandez, for example, argues in an extensive monograph⁴ that the *tria munera* should be seen as simply a useful theory for systematizing the mission of the Church and that of Christ, but not as an inflexible schema exclusive of others (for example that of the double power of sacred ministry and jurisdiction): “Nevertheless, as I will try to show in this book, neither the Fathers nor the theologians unanimously agree that Christ’s mission is specified in three powers or functions, and therefore neither do they refer to that triple function as participated in by the ecclesiastical ministry, and even less by the other baptized. And above all, the Church’s early theology is foreign to the theory of the triple *munus* as it is considered today, that is to say, as an element basic to Christology and, in general, to the conception of the Church, which develops through the fulfillment of these three offices.”⁵

This thesis is opposed to that formulated thirty years earlier by Paul Dabin.⁶ This author defends the continual presence of the teaching of the *tria munera*, both in the teaching of the Fathers and in theology from the medieval period right up to the twentieth century: “The triple office is a sublime reality. Participation in it by the faithful is neither a usurpation nor something imaginary. It is a Catholic truth taught by the Fathers, theologians, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, and universally reflected in the various liturgies.”⁷ Since resolving this discussion far exceeds the limits of this work, I have decided to set aside the consideration of the biblical and liturgical foundations and focus on the teaching set forth in the texts of the Second Vatican Council. It is generally recognized that there this teaching is amply used to describe the mission of the Church and its faithful, whether laity or ordained ministers. The Second Vatican Council explicitly stressed for the first time⁸ the participation of the faithful in the triple office of Christ: priestly, prophetic and royal. The Council’s teaching closely links this to the common priesthood of the baptized as well as to the carrying out of the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church.

This teaching of the Council, which I will describe briefly below, was preceded by a certain amount of theological discussion, especially in the French-speaking world. To go into the details of these discussions far exceeds the scope of this study. Nevertheless, a very brief consideration of the disputed questions can serve as a framework to introduce the teaching on the participation in the *tria munera Christi*. I will take as the main authors in this regard Francis Mugnier, Yves Congar and Gérard Philips.⁹

regale (office of ruling). This is the perspective that will be explored in these pages.

4. Aurelio Fernandez, *Munera Christi et munera ecclesiae: Historia de una teoria*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1982.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

6. Paul Dabin, *Le sacerdoce Royal des Fidèles dans la tradition ancienne et moderne*, L’Edition Universel-Desclée de Brouwer, Bruxelles-Paris 1950.

7. “Le triple office est une sublime réalité. Sa participation par les fideles n’est point une usurpation ou un rêve de l’imagination. C’est une vérité catholique enseignée par les Pères, les théologiens, le Catéchisme du concile de Trente, universellement utilisée par les diverses liturgies” (Dabin, *ibid.*, p. 39).

8. “The participation by the faithful in the *munera* of Christ is one of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council that constitutes an important magisterial pronouncement by reason of its beneficial effects on the life of the Church. The Conciliar declaration on this subject will, in addition, be the first time that the doctrine of the *munera* in the faithful is set forth by the Magisterium” (Juan Francisco Quingles, *The Common Priesthood and the Participation of the Faithful in the Tria Munera of Christ*, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, 2003, p. 7).

9. Francis Mugnier, *Roi, Prophète, Prêtre avec le Christ*, Letheilleux, Paris 1937; Yves Congar, “Struc-

These authors use a number of different texts from Scripture to explain the nature of the participation by all the faithful in Christ's priesthood. Some of these texts are used by all of them, although their interpretation at times differs. I am referring particularly to three passages: *1 Pet* 2:5 ("Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."); *Rom* 12:1 ("I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"); and *Rev* 5:9-10 ("Thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God.")

Perhaps the key question in this discussion is the relation between the priestly, prophetic and royal offices, particularly in the non-ordained faithful. While Congar tends to consider them separately, Mugnier and Philips take the view that the priesthood in a certain manner includes the *munus propheticum* and the *munus regale*.

Congar thinks that the notion of priesthood should be considered within the category of sacrifice, although he admits that Catholic tradition has also viewed it from the perspective of mediation. His emphasis on sacrifice is based on the view that not every mediation is priestly. He suggests that the types of priesthood should be distinguished according to the types of sacrifice: thus there is a double sacrifice and a double priesthood in the faithful. On the one hand, interpreting the texts cited above, Congar refers to the offering by the faithful of spiritual victims that come from their life according to the Spirit. This sacrifice and priesthood (which he calls royal-spiritual) is linked to grace and to ordinary life. By union with Christ through grace, the Christian can offer his own life as a spiritual sacrifice in such a way that his very existence acquires a dimension of cult or worship: "Worship, the sacrifices of the faithful, and therefore the priesthood which corresponds to them, are essentially those of a life that is holy, religious, prayerful, consecrated, charitable, merciful, apostolic. This worship, these sacrifices, the priesthood that corresponds to them, is not carried out in a liturgical or sacramental way."¹⁰

On the other hand, there is the consecration that the faithful receive for sacramental worship. This sacramental priesthood is divided in turn into two priesthoods which differ essentially and not just in degree. By the sacrament of Holy Orders some faithful are given the capacity to administer the sacraments and celebrate the liturgy (the hierarchical or ministerial priesthood), while in virtue of the baptismal character every Christian is given the ability to participate in the liturgical sacramental worship of the Church, in particular, the Eucharist (common or baptismal priesthood). Thus Congar separates the royal-spiritual priesthood from the bap-

ture du sacerdoce Chrétien," in *La Maison-Dieu* 27 (1950) 51-95; *Jalones para una teología del laicado*, Estela, Barcelona 1965, pp. 140-269; and Gérard Philips, "Un peuple sacerdotal, prophétique et royal," in *Divinitas* 5 (1961) 664-705. This article was included in a later work: *El laicado en la época del Concilio: Hacia un cristianismo adulto*, Dinor, San Sebastian 1966, pp. 77-111.

10. Yves Congar, *Jalones*, pp. 155-156.

tismal priesthood. While by the first type of priesthood the faithful participate in the kingly office of Christ; through the baptismal priesthood they participate in the priestly office. Congar explains this division between royal-spiritual priesthood and sacramental priesthood through the Augustinian distinction between *res* and *sacramentum*. The royal-spiritual priesthood is in the order of *res*, that is to say of grace, while the sacramental priesthood is in the order of *sacramentum*, of the means to attain grace.¹¹

Nevertheless, Congar also seems to hold that the exercise of the two priesthoods “unites” in some way when the faithful participates in the Eucharist: “The faithful offer themselves by carrying out a spiritual (moral) immolation of which they themselves are the priests at Mass, as both content and fruit. As content, because the Eucharist is the offering of the members with and in the head; but above all as fruit. . . . We have to bring to the Eucharist all the truth of our ordinary, daily life. . . . To put our whole life into the Mass, to include the Mass in our life, has always been the most practical truth preached by the Church to the faithful in the matter of Eucharistic participation. In this way, the spiritual-royal priesthood by which we offer ourselves as spiritual victims, is united to the baptismal priesthood, by which we liturgically offer the sacrifice of Christ. There is a kind of osmosis of one to the other, the presence of one in the other since, being members of the liturgical assembly, we offer ourselves with Christ, fulfilling the act of interior spiritual priesthood in our baptismal priesthood.”¹²

In contrast to Congar, both Mugnier and Philips defend a unitary vision of the three offices of Christ and, consequently, of the lay faithful’s participation in them. As opposed to the division between priesthood in the order of life and the priesthood in the order of worship (spiritual-royal priesthood and baptismal respectively), both authors speak of a single priesthood in the faithful. Philips insists that the priesthood of the faithful is an ontological reality, a true participation in the priestly dignity of Christ which is realized in different ways in the ordained minister and in the layman. Mugnier stresses that the priesthood is realized in a strict and formal sense only in the ordained minister and in a derived and analogical sense in the layperson.

Both authors, Mugnier and Philips, also maintain a unitary vision between the royal priesthood by which the Christian offers spiritual sacrifices (cf. *1 Pet* 2:5 and 9) and the ability to participate in the sacramental worship that is received with the baptismal character. The basis for participation in the common priesthood is in the sacramental character of baptism. Mugnier points out that the laity participate actively in sacramental worship, especially in the Eucharist, offering themselves in union with the Victim and taking as the matter of their sacrifice their own duties, especially work which is converted into a continuous Mass,¹³ as well as suffering and death. Philips also stresses that the full participation of the faithful in the liturgy

11. Congar, *Structure du sacerdoce Chrétien*, pp. 65-66.

12. Congar, *Jalones*, pp. 257-258.

13. “Faire ainsi de ma journée comme une messe en action, continuant, s’il se peut, la sainte messe

takes place not so much when they fulfill certain functions or substitute for the priest in what they can do, but that the field of their priestly action includes both the sacramental life and their ordinary life: the action of the sacraments is not momentary in character but is directed to the totality of one's life.¹⁴

Thus we have outlined some of the questions that we will have to return to in examining the Magisterium's teaching:¹⁵ the relation between the priesthood and the prophetic and royal offices as well the characterization of the common priesthood as a royal priesthood, or in other words, the relation between sacramental worship and existential worship.

In the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the People of God are described as a priestly people. In this context we find the doctrine of the priesthood of the faithful being born from the priesthood of Christ: "Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people 'a kingdom and priests to God the Father.'" Immediately following this we find a direct reference to the common priesthood of the faithful: "The baptized," says the Council, "by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices."¹⁶ The priesthood of the faithful is characterized as spiritual worship, that is, as an offering of one's own life which has sacrificial value precisely in virtue of the union with Christ that the Holy Spirit brings about through baptism. Through the sacraments, first of all baptism, the Catholic makes his own the worship of Christ, which is not a ritual worship (the worship of the Temple), but the offering of oneself in an act of obedience: existential worship. Christ instituted the sacraments precisely to make possible this participation, and with them he introduced a new ritual order, distinct from that of the old Israel, which was thereby abolished. This worship creates a new order of sacredness, so that the existential worship of Christ becomes sacrificial worship in the Church.¹⁷

Continuing with the text from *Lumen Gentium*, after stressing that the difference between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood is not one of degree but of essence, the Constitution clarifies how they are linked to

quotidiennement entendue et pratiquée, ce devrait être la vie normale de tout Chrétien" (Mugnier, *Roi, Prophète, Prêtre avec le Christ*, p. 215).

14. "The holiness produced by the sacraments is meant to give us the strength needed to Christianize our entire life" (Philips, *El laicado en la época del Concilio* [The laity in the time of the Council], p. 85).

15. The key documents for considering the Magisterium's teaching on the participation by the laity in the *tria munera Christi* are the following: *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 10-11, 31 and 34-36), *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (no. 2), *Christifideles Laici* (nos. 14-17), *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 901-913).

16. Vatican Council II, Apostolic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10. From hereon we will use the accepted abbreviation: LG, 10.

17. In these ideas about existential and sacramental worship, I am indebted to Professor Pedro Rodríguez: "This was to be the structure of worship in the *tempus ecclesiae* [time of the Church]. If in the *tempus Christi* worship of God and the sanctification of mankind is expressed in a definitive way in the *acta et passa Christi in carne*, which were existential, not ritual or sacred; in the *tempus Ecclesiae*, worship and sanctification would be the permanent presence in history of that surrender to God which Christ carried out once and for all—the *ephapax* of Christ (cf. *Heb 7:27*)—a presence which is given through certain sacred realities, certain sacred rites of Christological origin which are the sacraments. . . . The Christian who in the Eucharist and the sacraments receives the

one another: “each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.” The specific description of the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood makes clear that the term “priesthood” is being taken in a broad sense, as mediation, including the three offices: sanctifying, or priesthood in the strict sense, prophetic and royal. “The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches [*munus docendi vel propheticum*] and rules [*munus regendi vel regale*] the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people [*munus sanctificandi vel sacerdotale*]. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments,¹⁸ in prayer and thanksgiving [*munus sacerdotale*], in the witness of a holy life [*munus propheticum*], and by self-denial and active charity [*munus regale*].”¹⁹

Following the third chapter dedicated to clarifying the hierarchical nature of the Church, which deals, among other things, with how the bishops exercise the triple office of sanctifying, teaching, and ruling, there comes chapter four dedicated to the laity. There (as in the preceding chapter in regard to the bishops), one finds a description of how the lay faithful participate in the triple office of Christ as priest, prophet, and king (LG, 34-36). It is not possible here to go into all of the theological and anthropological riches contained there, including those related to Christian freedom and the legitimate autonomy of the created order. Rather I want to focus on the close tie that exists between participation in the office of Christ the Priest (*munus sanctificandi*) and participation in the office of Christ the King (*munus regendi*).

The priestly office of the laity is described in section 34 in the following terms: “The laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit . . . all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’ Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”²⁰

However, to carry out the consecration of the world to God that section 34 speaks of, the lay faithful in any temporal matter have to be guided by a Christian conscience, as section 36, which is dedicated to participation in Christ’s royal office,

sanctifying and adoring efficacy of the existential worship of Christ, should also make of his or her own life a ‘priesthood,’ a ‘victim,’ and an existential ‘sacrifice’ in the midst of the world.” (*The Sacred and the Eucharistic mystery according to St. Thomas*, a conference given at the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, June 25, 2005, pp. 12 and 14 of the manuscript).

18. LG, 11 shows how the priesthood is actualized in the different sacraments: “It is through the sacraments and the exercise of the virtues that the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community is brought into operation.”

19. LG, 10.

20. LG, 20.

makes clear.²¹ This participation involves two aspects: knowledge and respect for the laws proper to each sector of temporal reality, in which the laity have the same responsibility and freedom as any other citizen; and the ordering of these realities to the glory of God, which requires fulfilling the demands of justice and charity and healing the effects of sin. Both the lay faithful's participation in the royal office as well as their participation in the priestly one entail the characteristic that defines the lay person as such: secularity.²²

The secularity of the lay faithful is described in this part of the Constitution in close relationship with their participation in Christ's triple office—royal, prophetic, and priestly. "The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God."²³ The laity exercise the *munus regale* in their own manner: "They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven."²⁴ The reference to the spirit of the Gospel, the sanctification of the world, and the image of leaven, call to mind the *munus sanctificandi* that the laity exercise as a result of their reception of the sacraments²⁵—not only in the sphere of worship, but also in the totality of their existence. "It is through the sacraments and the exercise of the virtues that the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community is brought into operation."²⁶ A reference to the prophetic office appears after this. "In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity."²⁷ Thus the participation of the laity in Christ's triple office is specified by secularity, just as that of the pastors is defined by the ministry they receive with holy orders.

21. "Because of the very economy of salvation the faithful should learn how to distinguish carefully between those rights and duties which are theirs as members of the Church, and those which they have as members of human society. Let them strive to reconcile the two, remembering that in every temporal affair they must be guided by a Christian conscience, since even in secular business there is no human activity that can be withdrawn from God's dominion" (LG, 31). This paragraph is cited in no. 912 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which describes the participation of the laity in Christ's kingly mission.

22. "What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature" (LG, 31).

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. This aspect is clarified at the end of number 14 of *Christifideles Laici*: "The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist."

26. The teaching the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in connection with the participation by the laity in Christ's priestly mission is significant here: "Parents share in the office of sanctifying by leading a conjugal life in the Christian spirit." (no. 902; this is a quote from canon 835 of CIC). Thus the priestly mission, while presupposing the sacraments, does not limit itself to their reception but extends to what has been referred to as existential worship.

27. LG, 31. Also relevant here is number 2 of the Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*: "But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world. They exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of men. Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ."

The brief affirmation in LG 31—“What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature”—is expanded in number 15 of *Christifideles Laici*. There a distinction is made between the secular dimension that corresponds to the Church (and, consequently to all of its members) in virtue of its mission, and the secular nature that specifically characterizes the lay faithful.²⁸ This secular nature is an ecclesiological reality and not a mere sociological datum: “The world thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation.” We could say that the world is the place where Christians exercise their royal priesthood. “God . . . has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin, and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession, and in the various activities of society.”²⁹

This task can only be carried out from the Christian newness that stems from baptism and from the life of Christ received in the other sacraments: “The lay faithful’s position in the Church, then, comes to be fundamentally defined by their newness in Christian life and distinguished by their secular character.”³⁰ In short, the tie between participation in Christ’s triple office, in his priesthood, understood now in a broad sense, and secularity shows that the sacred and the profane should not be seen as two water-tight compartments that fail to communicate with each other. As Illanes has shown: “because Christ is the plenitude—and therefore also the plenitude of the priesthood—every Christian, each Christian, is constituted a priest, has access to God knowing that the sacrifice of his own life will be considered as a pleasing offering and well accepted. . . . All merely external worship, every attempt to offer God something distinct from our very life is lacking in meaning.”³¹

In this relationship between priesthood and secularity, between the priestly office and the royal office, the Eucharist plays a central role. If the root of the common priesthood is found in baptism, it is in the Eucharist where the existential and the sacramental worship converge. The liturgy is the “summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed and the font from which all her power flows;”³² the Eucharist is the “fount and apex of the whole Christian life,”³³ which “contains all of the spiritual good of the Church, that is to say Christ himself, our Pasch and the Bread of Life, which gives life to mankind through the action of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴ Number 10 of *Lumen Gentium*, already cited, highlights the fact that “the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist.”

28. “Certainly all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but in different ways. In particular the sharing of the lay faithful has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is ‘properly and particularly’ theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression ‘secular character’” (*Christifideles Laici*, 15).

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Jose Luis Illanes, *Laicado y Sacerdocio*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2001, pp. 208-209.

32. Vatican Council II, Apostolic Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

33. LG, 11.

34. Vatican Council II, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

The encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* offers valuable suggestions in this regard. The Eucharist is a sacrifice in the proper and strict sense: the self-giving of the Son to the Father given in turn by the Son to the Church. "Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ."³⁵ This offering brings with it a commitment to transform one's own life: "Proclaiming the death of the Lord 'until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely Eucharistic."³⁶ Linked to the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist, this also entails the transformation of the historical circumstances a Christian is called to live in: "A significant consequence of the eschatological tension inherent in the Eucharist is also the fact that it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us."³⁷ Thus the Christian's life becomes a sacrament, a sign and instrument of Christ's presence and his salvation: it is leaven and light.³⁸ The Eucharist is the source from which Christ's life flows, which empowers Christians to direct temporal realities to God, and the center towards which temporal activities are directed so that they acquire the value of sacrifice, of existential worship.

2. An approach to the theological concept of work

We now turn to the consideration of the theological meaning of the term "work" in the writings of St. Josemaría. This term is linked in his teachings to other concepts of great theological depth, including vocation, the world, and secularity. At times "work" is used to designate the specific reality of professional work; at other times, however, it serves to combine in a single word all that is included in the lay Christian's insertion in the world: the totality of circumstances and obligations that determine his or her secularity and that are the path and matter for one's spiritual life.

As a point of departure I want to consider some words that St. Josemaría, citing St. Paul, proposed as a "motto"³⁹ for our Christian life: "It is understandable that the Apostle should write: 'All things are yours, you are Christ's and Christ is God's.' We have here an ascending movement that the Holy Spirit, infused in our hearts, wants to call forth from this world, upwards from the earth to the glory of the Lord. And to make it clear that in that movement everything is included, even what seems most commonplace, St. Paul also wrote: 'in eating, in drinking, do everything as for God's glory.'"⁴⁰ We see reflected here the teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: creation "did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created 'in a state of journeying' (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained."⁴¹

35. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 13.

36. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 20.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22.

39. *Conversations with St. Josemaría Escrivá*, 70 (cited as *Conversations* below).

40. *Conversations*, 115.

41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 302.

A deep solidarity exists between the world's destiny and mankind's destiny. With our fall, the world suffered the consequences of sin, made subject to sin and vanity. Only through the unity between the creative and redemptive plan of God, which is grasped by faith, is the Christian value of the world fully illuminated. Otherwise it is undervalued as a simple background to mankind's life or even diminished in its goodness by considering only its dark side (the world as one of the three temptations, the world as subject to sin and vanity). The full Christian valuation of the world consists in realizing that creation, even as it is now after sin, has not only not lost its original goodness but calls for the action of the children of God to free it from its servitude to sin, while awaiting its eschatological fullness at the end of time.⁴²

The Christian is called to redirect the world to the glory of God: "Work is man's original vocation. It is a blessing from God, and those who consider it a punishment are sadly mistaken. The Lord, who is the best of fathers, placed the first man in Paradise *ut operaretur* (*Gen 2:15*), so that he would work."⁴³ In a parallel text he insists: "Make no mistake about it. Man's duty to work is not a consequence of original sin, nor is it just a discovery of modern times. It is an indispensable means that God has entrusted to us here on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power. It enables us to earn our living and, at the same time, to reap 'the fruits of eternal life', for 'man is born to work as the birds are born to fly' (*Job 5:7 [Vulg.]*)." ⁴⁴ Work is thus a participation in God's creative power, with both a human and supernatural aim. Human because by it we gain our living and build up the earthly city; supernatural because it brings us the fruit of eternal life, and contributes to the offering of the world to God.⁴⁵

It is through work that men and women insert all noble human activity into the "return" of the world to God, made possible by the redemption: "Any job, no matter how hidden, no matter how insignificant, when offered to the Lord, is charged with the strength of God's life!" ⁴⁶ Christ took on the human condition in its fullness, including work,⁴⁷ which thus acquires redemptive value: all of Christ's actions are redemptive. Christians, when they carry out their work with "human perfection (professional competence) and with Christian perfection (for love of God's Will and as a service to mankind)," ⁴⁸ help to free creation, which is good in its deepest being because it comes from God's hands, from its subjection to sin. By revealing the divine dimension hidden in all human realities, even the most ordinary ones, these realities recover the "noble and original meaning" that they received with creation

42. Cf. *Rom 8:19-23*.

43. St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, 482.

44. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 57.

45. "This means it must be a job which contributes effectively towards both the building up of the earthly city—and therefore it must be done competently and in a spirit of service; and to the consecration of the world—and in this regard it must both sanctify and be sanctified" (*Conversations*, 70).

46. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, 49.

47. Meditation on the years of Christ's work in Nazareth was a constant in the writings and in the preaching of St. Josemaría. I cite, as an illustration, two texts: "Of Jesus' thirty-three years, thirty were spent in silence and obscurity, submission and work." (*Furrow*, 485). "I don't understand how you can call yourself a Christian and lead such an idle, useless life. Have you forgotten Christ's life of toil?" (*The Way*, 356).

48. *Conversations*, 10.

and which has been obscured by sin.⁴⁹ “Human work done in this manner . . . helps to shape the world in a Christian way. The world’s divine dimension⁵⁰ is made more visible and our human labor is thus incorporated into the marvelous work of creation and redemption. It is raised to the order of grace. It is sanctified and becomes God’s work, *operatio Dei, opus Dei.*”⁵¹

Thus it is clear that the world in its present state possesses a vocational value for Christians. That is to say, the specific circumstances of every man and woman’s life, all that pertains to their life in the world, can constitute and in fact constitutes for the majority of Christians the matter for their Christian life, that is, for their sanctification.⁵² It is not sufficient, nor even correct, to affirm that Christians who live in the middle of the world can sanctify themselves in spite of their circumstances; rather we should say that it is precisely through those circumstances that they should strive for sanctity.⁵³ In other words, all the circumstances of a person’s life in society (condensed at times into one word: work) are a path and means for one’s Christian life.

Work is thus converted into the place of one’s calling by God.⁵⁴ “You must understand now, more clearly, that God is calling you to serve Him in and from the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work.”⁵⁵ The true place of the Christian life of the lay faithful is ordinary life.⁵⁶ Properly speaking there are no realities that are exclusively “profane” after Christ took on human flesh.⁵⁷ “Christ has gone up to heaven, but he has given to all honest human things a specific capacity to be redeemed.”⁵⁸

The lay faithful’s call or vocation entails a mission, that of contributing to the restoration of all things in Christ: “God is urging the Church to fulfill this task, the

49. “I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ” (*Conversations*, 114).

50. The same idea is sometimes expressed in a poetic way: “It is very much our mission to transform the prose of this life into poetry, into heroic verse” (*Furrow*, 500).

51. *Conversations*, 114.

52. “The Christian does not sanctify him or her self in spite of the fulfillment of the mission that he or she has received during their earthly life, but precisely through the fulfillment of that mission. And this is valid both for missions or tasks which are directly ecclesiastical or formally religious, as well as for every human task, including those that are purely temporal in content” (Jose L. Illanes, *Ante Dios y en el mundo: Apuntes para una teología del trabajo*, Pamplona 1997, p. 33). “One’s human vocation is a part, and an important part, of one’s divine vocation” (St. Josemaría Letter of October 15, 1948; cited by Illanes, *La vocación cristiana*, Madrid 1975, p. 35).

53. Cf. Illanes, *La santificación del trabajo, tema de nuestro tiempo*, Madrid 1967, 99-106).

54. “What amazes you seems natural to me—that God has sought you out in the practice of your profession! That is how he sought the first, Peter and Andrew, James and John, beside their nets, and Matthew, sitting in the custom-house. And-wonder of wonders!-Paul, in his eagerness to destroy the seed of the Christians” (*The Way*, 799).

55. *Conversations*, 114.

56. Cf. *Conversations*, 112.

57. Cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 88.

58. *Ibid.*, 120.

task of making the entire world Christian from within, showing that Christ has redeemed all mankind.”⁵⁹ All of this is related to a divine light that St. Josemaría received on August 7, 1931.⁶⁰ “At the very moment when I elevated the Sacred Host, without losing the necessary recollection, without becoming distracted (for I had just made, mentally, the Offering to the Merciful Love), there came to my mind, with extraordinary force and clarity, that passage of Scripture, *‘Et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad me ipsum’* [Jn 12:32]. (Ordinarily, before the supernatural, I feel afraid. Later comes the ‘Do not be afraid, it is I.’) And I understood that there would be men and women of God who will lift the cross, with the teachings of Christ, to the pinnacle of all human activities... And I saw our Lord triumph, attracting to himself all things.”⁶¹ Professor Pedro Rodríguez sums up what the Founder of Opus Dei saw that day with an incisive phrase: “He understood the salvific meaning of Christian secularity and, consequently, the path to sanctify it.”⁶² The Founder understood that human work, every ordinary situation of the Christian faithful, is part of the redemption, and is a means by which Christ is leading creation back purified to the heart of God.⁶³

Placing the cross at the pinnacle,⁶⁴ at the summit of all human activities, at the center of secular life, has nothing to do with exterior signs, with a “confessional” state, with nostalgia for past times. The “summit” where the cross of Christ should be raised is the hearts of men and women and not, at least primarily, specific institutions or professions: “a Christian has a full right to live in the world. If he lets Christ live and reign in his heart, he will feel—quite noticeably—the saving effectiveness of our Lord in everything he does. It does not matter what his occupation is, whether his social status is ‘high’ or ‘low’; for what appears to us to be an important achievement can be very low in God’s sight; and what we call low or modest can in Christian terms be a summit of holiness and service.”⁶⁵

Placing Christ at the summit of all human activities requires above all that Christians allow Christ to live in them: that each be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*. To understand this adequately, we need to return to the topic of the Christian’s participation in the priesthood of Christ, which is the focus of the third and final section of this study.

3. With a priestly soul and a lay mentality

The triumph of Christ, which will be fully seen only at the end of the world, is

59. *Conversations*, 112.

60. For the Scriptural and theological framework for this locution, cf. Gérard Derville, “*La liturgia del trabajo: Levantado de la tierra atraeré a todos hacia mí (Jn 12:32) en la experiencia de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*,” in *Scripta Theologica* 38 (2006) 823-825 [821-854].

61. *Apuntes íntimos*, 217 in Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá, Vol. I: The Early Years*, Scepter, NY 2001, p. 288.

62. Pedro Rodríguez, “*Omnia traham ad meipsum*. The meaning of John 12:32 in the spiritual experience of Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer,” in *Romana* 13 (1991) 347 [331-352].

63. Cf. Rodríguez, *Vocación, trabajo y contemplación*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1986, p. 78.

64. In a letter referring to that same experience, the founder of Opus Dei spoke of placing Christ at the “summit and in the heart of all human activities” (cf. Letter March 11, 1940, 13 in Vazquez de Prada, op. cit., p. 290; cf. also *The Forge*, 678).

65. *Christ Is Passing By*, 183.

already a reality after his death and resurrection. As a result, placing Christ at the summit of all human activities is closely related to participation in the Eucharist. This relationship between creation, work and the Eucharist is beautifully expressed by the liturgy in the formula of the Offertory of the Mass where, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “we give thanks to the Creator for bread and wine, fruit of the ‘work of human hands,’ but above all as ‘fruit of the earth’ and ‘of the vine’—gifts of the Creator.”⁶⁶ The fruit of the earth and the work of humanity are converted into Christ himself and thus work becomes a Mass.⁶⁷ As St. Josemaría said: “In the Holy Sacrifice of the altar, the priest takes up the Body of our God, and the Chalice containing his Blood, and raises them above all the things of the earth, saying: *Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso, et in Ipso*—through My Love, with My Love, in My Love! Unite yourself to the action of the priest. Or rather, make that act of the priest a part of your life.”⁶⁸

St. Josemaría liked to refer to the common priesthood of the faithful, as a reality imbuing one’s entire life, by the expression *priestly soul*.⁶⁹ Priestly soul means to live the “holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ This priesthood is exercised to the extent that one’s life is united to the root of grace: “Live and work for God, with a spirit of love and service, with a priestly soul, even though you may not be a priest. Then all your actions will take on a genuine supernatural meaning which will keep your whole life united to the source of all graces.”⁷¹ The fount of all grace is the Paschal mystery,⁷² at times called simply “the Cross,”⁷³ the liturgical memorial of which is the Holy Mass. This is why St. Josemaría calls the Mass the center and root of the Christian life:⁷⁴ the center toward which all one’s actions converge and the root from which they draw the salvific strength contained in the Paschal mystery.

Thus one’s entire day should be converted into an act of worship,⁷⁵ made up of prayer, work, family life and social relationships: “Each of you, in that union

66. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1333.

67. Cf. Derville, *La liturgia del trabajo*, p. 852. As St. Josemaría himself relates: “After so many years, that priest made a marvelous discovery: he came to understand that the Holy Mass is real work: operatio Dei, God’s work. That day, when he celebrated Mass, he experienced pain, joy, and tiredness. He felt in his flesh the exhaustion of a divine task” (*The Way of the Cross*, Station XI, 4).

68. *The Forge*, 541.

69. “The expression priestly soul alludes . . . to the repercussion at an existential and spiritual level of that ontological-sacramental reality which is the royal priesthood” (Illanes, *Existencia cristiana y mundo*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2003, p. 292).

70. Cf. *Furrow*, 499. This point is found the chapter entitled “Work.” A parallel text can be found in *Christ Is Passing By*, 96: “Through baptism all of us have been made priests of our lives, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

71. *The Forge*, 369.

72. “Because of the Blessed Trinity’s love for man, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist brings all graces to the Church and to mankind” (*Christ Is Passing By*, 86).

73. “To be a Christian, and in particular to be a priest-bearing in mind, too, that all of us who are baptized share in Christ’s priesthood- is to be at all times on the Cross” (*The Forge*, 882).

74. “The holy Mass brings us face to face with one of the central mysteries of our faith, because it is the gift of the Blessed Trinity to the Church. It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life. It 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” (*Christ Is Passing By*, 87).

75. “Keep struggling, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the center and the root of your

of contemplative souls which is your day, in some way says ‘his Mass,’ which lasts twenty-four hours in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our life.”⁷⁶ As Derville has written: “Worship and work form a single reality: Escrivá speaks of a Mass that last twenty-four hours! The joining of wills at the altar of work is the glorification of God and of man, as occurred on the Cross.”⁷⁷

The matter of the sacrifice that the Christian offers in union with the sole victim, Christ, is one’s own life. The Christian therefore, incorporated in Christ and sharing in the one salvific sacrifice, that of the Cross, is both priest and victim; the offerer of an offering that is not something exterior but his or her own life. In this sense the Mass is spoken of as “our Mass.”⁷⁸ It is not a ceremony at which one is an observer, but an encounter in which the one participating receives the gift that Christ makes of himself and is thus committed to returning to him the gift of one’s own life.

The use of the term “altar” in this context needs some clarification. “Everyone in the Work has a priestly soul: *altare Dei est cor nostrum* (St. Gregory the Great, *Moral*, 25, 7, 15) “our heart is an altar of God.”⁷⁹ On this “altar” we offer our Mass, which lasts the entire day. Our everyday, ordinary life thus becomes a place of worship: “Serve him not only at the altar, but in the whole world that is an altar for us.”⁸⁰

Here we encounter an apparent paradox. On the one hand St. Josemaría insists that in the Mass we find all that our Lord expects of a Christian: “We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God’s love. We may have wanted to see a program for Christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and it is within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the holy Mass, to learn to deepen our personal relationship with God in the sacrifice that summarizes all that Christ asks of us.”⁸¹ On the other hand, he says with equal force that the “church” is not the place *par excellence* for our Christian life. “When things are seen in this way, churches become the setting *par excellence* of the Christian life. And being a Christian means going to church, taking part in sacred ceremonies . . . On this October morning, as we prepare to enter upon the memorial of our Lord’s Pasch, we flatly reject this deformed vision of Christianity. Reflect for a moment on the setting of our Eucharist, of our act of thanksgiving. We

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 Forge*, 69).

76. St. Josemaría, notes taken during a meditation, March 19, 1968. Cited in Javier Echevarría, op. cit., p. 17.

77. Derville, *La liturgia del trabajo*, p. 830.

78. “That is why I must love the Mass so much! (‘Our’ Mass, Jesus)” (*The Way*, 533).79

79. St. Josemaría, Letter March 19, 1954, no. 8 (AGP P06 1987, vol. III p. 57).

80. St. Josemaría, Notes taken during a meditation, March 19, 1968. Cited in Javier Echevarría, op. cit., p. 17.

81. *Christ Is Passing By*, 88.

find ourselves in a unique temple. We might say that the nave is the university campus; the altarpiece, the university library. Over there, the machinery for constructing new buildings; above us, the sky of Navarre . . . Surely this confirms in your minds, in a tangible and unforgettable way, the fact that everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians. Your ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. There you have your daily encounter with Christ.”⁸²

The paradox, as I just said, is merely an apparent one. In reality, it is precisely by participating in the holy Mass that Christians discovers the true value of the created world, whose care is entrusted to them: the real possibility of sanctifying it and sanctifying themselves in it. This possibility is closely tied to the exercise of their common priesthood, with their priestly soul. The founder of the Work, whenever he employed the expression priestly soul, usually added “and a lay mentality,” in order to emphasize that the exercise of their royal priesthood does not separate Christians from their responsibility to build up the earthly city.

A “lay mentality” includes a number of characteristics: love for the world, freedom, responsibility, professional preparation and competence. “A man who knows that the world, and not just the church, is the place where he finds Christ, loves that world. He endeavors to become properly formed, intellectually and professionally. He makes up his own mind with complete freedom about the problems of the environment in which he moves, and then he makes his own decisions. Being the decisions of a Christian, they result from personal reflection, in which he endeavors, in all humility, to grasp the Will of God in both the unimportant and the important events of his life.”⁸³

As José Luis Illanes has stressed, both attitudes—priestly soul and lay mentality—and the ensemble of dispositions that make them up, should be harmoniously blended. Giving primacy to one dimension in detriment to the other will lead either to clericalism or laicism. In contrast, “the union of both gives rise to a balanced Christian outlook: the eagerness to make Christ present in all human activities, which St. Josemaría perceived with special clarity on August 7, 1931; seeing the need to bring the world to God from within the world itself, to which Christians are called in virtue of their royal priesthood.”⁸⁴

82. *Conversations*, 113.

83. *Conversations*, 116.

84. Illanes, *Existencia cristiana y mundo*, p. 295.