

# St. Josemaría, Teacher of Forgiveness (Part 2)

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In the first part of this study we discussed St. Josemaría's teaching about forgiveness, its place in the message of Opus Dei, and how the Founder of the Work lived it personally. Special emphasis was placed on the "liberating newness" of forgiveness and its direct connection with charity. The Christian's response, says St. Josemaría, should be "to drown evil in an abundance of good" and to open wide one's arms to all humanity as did Jesus Christ the priest. In this second part we will consider some key ideas from the homily "Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom." Then we will look at how St. Josemaría reacted towards calumnies in his own life. Finally, the study will end with a reference to the practice of forgiveness in contemporary society in striving to foster a culture of peace.

## 1. The homily "Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom"

### a) *The overall context*

The homily "Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom," dated March 15, 1961, is found in *Christ Is Passing By*, the last book by St. Josemaría published during his lifetime, in 1973.

This homily, a meditation on Christian charity, understanding and forgiveness, also includes a reflection on certain events that had left a deep imprint on his own heart, meditated on in the light of charity and a love for freedom and justice.

The connecting thread is the identification of the Christian with Christ in the exercise of charity. "The charity of Christ is not merely a benevolent sentiment for our neighbor . . . Poured out in our soul by God, charity transforms from within our mind and will. It provides the supernatural foundation for friendship and the joy of doing what is right."<sup>1</sup> St. Josemaría referred to this progressive transformation of the person who draws close to Christ as "good divinization,"<sup>2</sup> which enables us to overcome evil with good.

1. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 71.

2. St. Josemaría, *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*, point 283: "and you will draw close to God... and know your weakness... and be deified... with a deification which, by bringing you nearer to your Father, will make you more a brother of your fellow-men." See also the commentary on this point, p. 462.

The origin of the homily seems to be the misunderstandings that can arise from the “mistaken idea that grants to the public . . . the right to know and to judge the most intimate details of the lives of others.”<sup>3</sup> He speaks movingly of the twisted interpretation of the actions of other people, who “time and again, over a number of years . . . have served as a bull’s eye for the target practice of those who specialize in gossip, defamation and calumny.”<sup>4</sup>

St. Josemaría was referring here to his own experience in spreading the message of Opus Dei. The great majority of people understood him, while others who did not share his apostolic methods respected the Founder and his apostolates. “But there will always be a partisan minority who are ignorant of what I and so many of us love. They would like us to explain Opus Dei in their terms, which are exclusively political, foreign to supernatural realities, attuned only to power plays and pressure groups. If they do not receive an explanation that suits their erroneous and twisted taste they continue to allege that here you have deception and sinister designs.”<sup>5</sup>

The calumnies stemmed above all from two sources. First, the inability to understand the novelty of the message of the universal call to holiness in the middle of the world<sup>6</sup> and a certain jealousy regarding the Founder’s apostolic work.<sup>7</sup> The second source was the tendency to confuse Opus Dei with a new political or pressure group, erroneously attributing to the Work the free actions of its members in their professional or political activity.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context that he presents his view of Christian freedom and the right to protect one’s own intimacy, and the harm done to both of these goods by others’ calumnies. At the end, he returns to the connecting thread, charity. When love for God is present, there will also be love for neighbor, respect for each person. “Christian charity cannot be limited to giving things or money to the needy. It seeks, above all, to respect and understand each person for what he is, in his intrinsic dignity as a man and child of God.”<sup>9</sup>

3. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 70.

4. *Ibid.*, no. 68.

5. *Ibid.*, no. 70.

6. See Álvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God*, p. 93.

7. Peter Berglar points out: “During the forties, a small but very active group . . . waged a campaign against Opus Dei and Escrivá. Hard to believe, but true, this opposition stemmed in large part from jealousy—a jealousy of the strong apostolic appeal this young spiritual family was exerting throughout Spain. From jealousy to envy is a small step, but a grave one, since it is a crossover from mere weakness to the vice of malice” Peter Berglar, *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder, Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter, New York, 1994, p. 179.

8. It was during this period that some members of Opus Dei began to have public prominence in social and political life. Those who were spreading calumnies claimed that Opus Dei was acting through these persons, following a political strategy. St. Josemaría confronted the situation decisively: “For more than thirty years I have said and written in thousands of different ways that Opus Dei does not seek any worldly or political aims, that it only and exclusively seeks to foster-among all races, all social conditions, all countries—the knowledge and practice of the saving teachings of Christ” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 70). On the teachings of St. Josemaría in regard to Christian formation and freedom in social and political matters, see Ángel Rodríguez Luño, *Consciencia cristiana y cultura política en las enseñanzas de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*. A conference given during the 46th Congress on Pastoral Questions, *Secularismo y cultura de la fe*, Castellldaura, 25 and 26 of January, 2011.

9. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 72.

b) Freedom, the right to defend one's personal privacy and to be oneself.

One of the central messages of St. Josemaría is the call to freedom:<sup>10</sup> the defense of the freedom of the children of God. God created human beings free and responsible, which in the context of society gives rise to pluralism. Thus understood, pluralism is a source of human richness.<sup>11</sup> But it can also be a source of conflicts, if there are attacks on freedom or if there is a lack of justice and charity. St. Josemaría insisted that we have to respect the intrinsic dignity and freedom of each person, and therefore the pluralism and legitimate differences that can arise.

The right to protect one's personal privacy, to not be forced to publicize one's private life, is indispensable to safeguard freedom of action. St. Josemaría spoke of the violation of this right and the need to defend it: "Faced with traders in suspicion who prey on the intimacy of others, we must defend the dignity of every person, his right to peace."<sup>12</sup>

In his defense of the right to protect one's privacy and reputation, he invoked the common ground of human dignity, where all persons meet independently of their beliefs. "All honest men, Christians or not, agree on the need for this defense, for a common value is at stake: the legitimate right to be oneself, to avoid ostentation, to keep within the family its joys, sorrows and difficulties. We are defending, no less, the right to do good without publicity, to help the disadvantaged out of pure love, without feeling obliged to publicize one's efforts to serve others."<sup>13</sup>

Calling oneself a Christian is no guaranty of acting out of charity: "We cannot be surprised that many persons, even those who think themselves Christians, act in the same way. Their first impulse is to think badly of someone or something. They don't need any proof; they take it for granted. And they don't keep it to themselves; they air their snap judgments to the winds."<sup>14</sup>

The message of Opus Dei needs freedom as one needs oxygen to live. Since it proclaims the universal call to holiness through the sanctification of work, the family and social relationships, freedom is a prerequisite, the only atmosphere suitable for its message.

But not everyone can understand this radical Christian freedom. This failure to understand is also what lies at the origin of many calumnies. On a level visible to all, the first victim is the person's good reputation. On a deeper level, as St.

10. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between freedom and apostolic mission, see Martin Rhonheimer, *Changing the World: The Timeliness of Opus Dei*, Scepter, New York, ch. 4, pp. 93-121.

11. Freedom is one of the central themes in the message of St. Josemaría. The well-known philosopher Cornelio Fabro wrote: "in perfect harmony with the Second Vatican Council, the founder of Opus Dei sets forth, as the first good that has to be respected and fostered by Christians, precisely personal freedom; so that the primacy of freedom is not only recognized in doctrine, but lived in practice, also with respect to other people," Cornelio Fabro, "A Master of Christian Freedom," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 2, 1977.

12. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 69.

13. *Ibid.*

14. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 67.

Josemaría perceived, the true victim is the freedom and respect due to each person.

St. Josemaría was thus led to become an untiring defender of freedom: “You can bear out that I have spent my whole life preaching personal freedom, with personal responsibility. I have sought freedom throughout the world and I’m still looking for it, just like Diogenes trying to find an honest man. And every day I love it more. Of all the things on earth, I love it most. It is a treasure which we do not appreciate nearly enough.”<sup>15</sup>

He then points to the widespread acceptance today of suspicion as the default attitude, the presumption of the other person’s guilt. This acceptance has been aggravated by some people’s misuse of the media, which have become at times true vehicles of injustice. The norm of suspicion seems to be gaining a foothold today in many aspects of personal, social and economic relationships, and trust is a declining value.

St. Josemaría writes: “Thus, for example, a familiar way of arguing assumes that everyone acts from motives that leave something to be desired. Following this gratuitous train of thought, one is obliged to pronounce a *mea culpa* over his own actions, to indulge in self-criticism. And if someone does not sling a ton of mud upon himself, his critics immediately assume that, in addition to being a devious villain, he is also hypocritical and arrogant.”<sup>16</sup>

The words of St. Josemaría resonate today with the same force and timeliness as back then,<sup>17</sup> pointing to the importance of grounding interpersonal relations on truth and charity, as the only way of generating trust in the social body.

### c) *Charity: from darkness to the light*

St. Josemaría then considers the reactions of the person offended, and how to confront calumnies with a Christian spirit, with an attitude of forgiveness. He describes how, by coming to know Jesus, one begins a path of personal transformation that leads to perceiving the dignity of each person, and consequently to a change in one’s outlook and relationships. One begins to live the justice and charity that lead to respecting and loving all men and women, and showing it with deeds.

St. Josemaría compares the effect of charity to the passage from blindness to seeing with a new light. “Among those who do not know Christ, there are many honest persons who have respect for others and know how to conduct themselves properly and are sincere, cordial and refined. If neither they nor we prevent Christ

15. *Ibid.*, no. 84.

16. *Ibid.*, no. 69.

17. Today more than ever, due to the rapid spread of information (principally through television and the Internet), the gravity of calumny is even greater because it reaches many more people, as is its banalization or trivialization, due to its frequency and wide acceptance.

from curing our blindness, if we let our Lord apply the clay which, in his hands, becomes a cleansing salve, we shall come to know earthly realities and we shall look upon the divine realities with new vision, with the light of faith. Our outlook will have become Christian.”<sup>18</sup>

Considering the scene of the cure of the man born blind narrated by St. John,<sup>19</sup> he focuses on the persons who take part in the cure: Jesus, the disciples and the Pharisees. “Specifically, let us try to see that, when there is love of God, a Christian cannot be indifferent to the lot of other men. He must show respect in his dealings with all men. For he knows that when love shrinks, there arises the danger of thoughtlessly, mercilessly invading the conscience of others.”<sup>20</sup>

Those taking part in the Gospel scene each look at the blind man from the perspective of their own heart. Jesus looks with eyes of mercy and wants to cure him; the disciples ask Jesus what sins were the cause of the man’s blindness, those of the person himself or those of his parents, taking for granted (as was habitual in the religious-cultural context of the time) that anyone suffering from a malady had done something wrong. The Pharisees, in turn, don’t want to accept what their eyes are telling them, and try to “coerce” the reality, to make it conform to their own prejudices.

St. Josemaría describes the gradual transformation of the disciples through their contact with Christ, and the obstinate closure to God on the part of Pharisees. In the former we see how God’s love truly transforms people, changing their way of relating to others. The latter, in closing their eyes to God’s light, are unable to see the blind man as their brother, and expel him from the synagogue, for “this closed mindedness immediately affects our relations with others.”<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to his contact with Christ, the blind man recovered his sight, while the disciples passed from darkness to the light: “As they come to know the Master better, and realize what it means to be a Christian, their thoughts are gradually tempered by understanding.”<sup>22</sup> On their part, the Pharisees refused to let go of their blindness, convinced, like so many others, that whoever nurtures suspicions is right and is superior to others. Christ restored light to the blind man and transformed his disciples, but was unable to reach the Pharisees, respecting their freedom.

In the final section of the homily, St. Josemaría invites the reader to accept offenses with a Christian spirit, with the resolution “not to judge others, not to doubt their good will, to drown evil in an abundance of good. . . . Let us forgive always, with a smile on our lips. Let us speak clearly, without hard feelings, when in conscience we think we ought to speak. And let us leave everything in the hands of our Father God, with a divine silence . . . if we are confronted with personal attacks.”<sup>23</sup>

18. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 71.

19. See *Jn* 9:1-41.

20. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 67.

21. *Ibid.*, no. 71.

22. *Ibid.*, no. 72.

23. *Ibid.*

## 2. Attitude in the face of calumnies

We will now look at how St. Josemaría lived forgiveness in his own life and how he reacted to offenses against his own person.

The calumnies against him began when the Work, founded in 1928, was starting to become known during the thirties in Madrid.<sup>24</sup> After the Spanish civil war, the attacks became especially severe during the forties and fifties.<sup>25</sup> Among others, Bishop Pedro Cantero provides the following witness: “the violence of those calumnies and attacks was such that, if the Work had been something merely human, it would have been destroyed or left in tatters.”<sup>26</sup> The attacks continued in the sixties and right to the end of his life in 1975.<sup>27</sup>

We want to focus on these events for several reasons:

First, the constancy of the calumnies and each new attack required St. Josemaría to live charity and fortitude in a heroic way. The testimonies of those who knew him and his writings show that his attitude in the face of the offenses was always one of charity. As Cardinal Bueno Monreal recalled, “here perhaps Josemaría found an opportunity to mature, growing in the heroic practice of charity.”<sup>28</sup>

Second, this entire period is linked to the foundational work of St. Josemaría: spreading the message of Opus Dei, explaining its spirit, protecting its charism and clarifying its canonical framework within the Church. The calumnies rose up as an obstacle to the expansion of the Work, yet at the same time were intertwined with that first expansion.<sup>29</sup>

The third reason is that the attacks frequently came from other Catholics, including churchmen who (even while disagreeing with his point of view, his apostolic methods, or his spirituality) should have treated him with charity. This fact made these attacks all the more painful, and quite different from those that occurred during the civil war, when he was persecuted simply for being a priest.

In fourth place, the especially offensive nature of calumny. Calumny, in seeking to damage a person’s honor and reputation by spreading false accusations, is an offense against both justice and charity. Once activated by the aggressor, it unleashes

24. See Álvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God*, p. 93.

25. See Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. II, where this topic is treated at length, especially on pages 334-393.

26. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios: Testimonios sobre el Fundador del Opus Dei*, Palabra, Madrid, 1994, p. 79, testimony of Bishop Pedro Cantero. This book is a collection of testimonies from people who knew the Founder personally. The testimonies reveal the gravity of the calumnies and the attitude of St. Josemaría in confronting them.

27. See Álvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God*, pp. 97-98.

28. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, cit., p. 23, testimony of Cardinal José María Bueno Monreal.

29. The calumnies are united to the first expansion because they had the indirect effect of helping make the message of Opus Dei reach unforeseen persons and places.

damage whose effects escape from his control and take on a life of their own, propagated like a metastasis invading a healthy body. The calumny is repeated, and it is often accepted by others without checking its truth or falsehood. This repetition generates stereotypes and clichés that are very difficult to undo. As the Founder himself foresaw, even today residues of the calumnies unleashed during those years still endure.<sup>30</sup>

Another characteristic of calumny is its potential for psychological violence. Unlike other attacks, which last for a particular period of time and then cease, calumny can endure indefinitely over time, perpetuating the pain. This can produce in the person offended a true psychological torture, and result in a permanent tension.

Finally, we should point out that the rapid expansion of Opus Dei throughout the world shows that the immense majority of people understood the newness of Opus Dei's message: "Many thousands and millions of people throughout the world have understood this."<sup>31</sup>

#### a) *Humility*

The first attitude that we notice in St. Josemaría is the humility that characterized his entire response to the calumnies. The attacks on his reputation facilitated a progressive detachment from himself, already begun in the preceding years. God made use of the campaigns of defamation to lead him by the hand to humility, purification and identification with Christ in his suffering. Recalling a specific moment of special pain, at the beginning of the forties, he said: "There came a moment when I had to go one night to the Tabernacle . . . and say: Lord (and how much this cost me, since I am very proud, and the tears flowed freely) if you don't need my honor, why should I want it? Since then I don't give this any importance."<sup>32</sup>

Grounded on charity and humility, St. Josemaría summed up his response to these attacks in the following program: "forgive, say nothing, pray, work, and smile."<sup>33</sup>

#### b) *Forgiving and praying*

St. Josemaría strove to react to calumnies by always forgiving from the first moment<sup>34</sup> and praying for those who attacked him. Well aware of his human

30. "The worst thing, surely, is that these deformations and this interpreting as evil the most holy realities, will become rooted and embedded in the spirit of many people and perhaps in a whole generation. And they could be the cause of an incredible persistence in not recognizing the truth." Letter December 29, 1947/February 14, 1966, no. 67, cited by Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, vol. II, p. 541.

31. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 70.

32. Articles of the Postulator, cit., p. 124.

33. Álvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God*, p. 98.

34. "Force yourself, if necessary, always to forgive those who offend you, from the very first moment. For the greatest injury or offence that you can suffer from them is as nothing compared with what God has pardoned you." St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 452. See the commentary on this point in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, p. 623.

weakness and knowing that he was capable of “every horrible deed and mistake,”<sup>35</sup> he realized that God was always forgiving him, holding out his hand to lift him up. And if God is always ready to forgive us like that, Christians should do the same, and always as well.

“I could see that his reaction to the attacks, some of which were quite brutal, was always supernatural and full of charity. But I would like to make clear that this wasn’t in any sense a passive or stoic reaction. He reacted energetically, with a lot of prayer and mortification . . . and with complete trust in God.”<sup>36</sup>

The great quantity of calumnies could have made him bitter and distrustful, filled with cynicism. But thanks to the forgiveness that he always granted right from the first moment, these attacks only served to make him more understanding towards others. “In these and other similar circumstances, I never saw a reaction of resentment. He was not a man for that, but rather a person who understood, forgave, and forgot.”<sup>37</sup>

We can also mention here the testimony of Bishop Juan Hervás, the founder of Cursillos de Cristiandad. This prelate was the target of calumnies in the fifties of the last century. In the midst of that attack he had to travel to Rome, because he had been accused before the Holy Office. Since he was a friend of St. Josemaría, he took advantage of the trip to visit him.

Years later, in 1976, he recalled the saint’s consoling words to him: “Don’t worry, they are benefactors, because they help to purify us. We have to love them and pray for them.’ He spoke very forcefully when he insisted on the need to love those who did not understand us, to pray for those who judged us without wanting to get at the truth. And he insisted on the need to pay attention only to the voice of the Church and not to the rumors of the street, and, with God’s help, to keep our heart free of bitterness and resentment. How much good his words did for me! He was speaking about his own experience . . . That advice carried great conviction because of the authenticity with which he himself had lived it, and continued living it then.”<sup>38</sup>

As we have already seen, the decision to forgive brings with it a great freedom. This liberation, from the psychological point of view, is reinforced by the fact of

35. St. Josemaría, *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, commentary on point 45, p. 240.

36. *A Man of God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. 2, Scepter, London - New York, 1992, Testimony of Bishop Jose Lopez Ortiz, pp. 5-26.

37. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, Testimony of Fr. Silvestre Sancho Morales, O.P., p. 400. On “forgiving and forgetting,” John Paul II has written. “This does not mean forgetting past events; it means re-examining them with a new attitude and learning precisely from the experience of suffering that only love can build up, whereas hatred produces devastation and ruin. The deadly cycle of revenge must be replaced by the new-found liberty of forgiveness” (John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1997). See also the *Compendium of the Catholic Catechism*, no. 595: “Even if it seems impossible for us to satisfy this requirement [of forgiving our enemies], the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit can, like Christ, love even to love’s extreme; it can turn injury into compassion and transform hurt into intercession.”

38. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, p. 202. Testimony of Bishop Juan Hervás Benet.

praying for the aggressor: it displaces the center of attention from oneself to the other person.<sup>39</sup> We no longer see ourselves as the “victim,” but put ourselves in the other person’s shoes and perhaps come to understand that we too may have been at fault in the souring of that relationship. Praying for those who attack us also strengthens our decision to forgive and closes the doors on vengeance.

c) *A time to be quiet*

“And let us leave everything in the hands of our Father God, with a divine silence-’Jesus was silent’-if we are confronted with personal attacks, no matter how brutal and shameful they might be.”<sup>40</sup>

St. Josemaría made a distinction between the calumnies that were directed against himself, and those aimed at the Church or Opus Dei.

If they were directed at himself, he didn’t try to defend himself. He opted for the attitude of silence, imitating Christ in his Passion: “He, personally, never defended himself, imitating in an eminent way the example of our Divine Master: *Iesus autem tacebat.*”<sup>41</sup>

In Jesus’ silence we see his desire to accept all possible forms of human suffering, giving them a redemptive meaning. Here he seems to take on the suffering of those who are unable to defend themselves against injustice and violence—often they are innocent persons, including children. Christ’s silence gives a voice to those who have no voice. St. Josemaría wanted to identify himself with Jesus here as well, when he could have defended himself and had a right to do so.

St. Josemaría wrote in *The Way*: “Jesus remains silent. *Iesus autem tacebat.* Why do you speak, to console yourself, or to excuse yourself? —Say nothing. Seek joy in contempt: you will always receive less than you deserve. —Can you, by any chance, ask: *Quid enim mali feci,* what evil have I done?”<sup>42</sup>

The silence we are speaking of is an exterior silence. In his heart there would have been an intense dialogue with God, a progressive identification with Christ.

St. Josemaría kept silent about the defamatory campaigns against him throughout many years. Many specific episodes, with names and dates, went with him to the tomb.

He wanted to instill in his children the same way of acting, and asked the faithful of the Work who were the target of calumnies during the apostolic expan-

39. See point 802 of *The Forge*. After referring to those who do us harm as “benefactors,” he says: “Pray to God for them: as a result, you will come to like them.”

40. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 72.

41. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, p. 104. Testimony of Bishop Laureano Castán Lacoma.

42. St. Josemaría, *The Way, Critical-historical Edition*, point 671. See also the commentary, pp. 820-821.

sion not to speak about those events among themselves, so as to avoid the temptation of lacking charity towards the persons involved.<sup>43</sup>

d) *A time to speak*

“We will speak clearly, without rancor, when we think in conscience that we should speak.”<sup>44</sup> His readiness to always forgive was far removed from the desire to avoid conflicts or to shirk pointing to errors out of a sentimental charity.

Therefore, when the attacks were not directed against himself, but against the Church or against Opus Dei, his sense of justice led him to intervene and speak to those responsible. St. Josemaría had a deep awareness of his responsibility before God that the foundational charism remain clear and not lose its integrity in being handed on. The calumnies against the Work placed in danger both the spirit and the very existence of the institution, above all in the first moments of its life.

Therefore, as founder, he saw himself with a debt of justice to come to the defense of the Work and of his spiritual children. In these cases, factors distinct from himself came into play: the charism of Opus Dei, the persons who had joined the new foundation and others who participated in its apostolates. “These were moments when unbelievably some persons wanted to destroy the Work or hinder its development. Josemaría employed all the means to make the truth clear and not leave anyone in error, since this was a requirement of charity. Afterwards, towards the persons involved, he always showed understanding. I never heard him speak badly of anyone.”<sup>45</sup>

He distinguished between forgiveness, justice and the defense of the truth. Forgiving others does not mean renouncing the truth. He forgave those who calumniated him but he did not give up his right to defend and clarify the spirit of the Work. He wrote in 1961: “I have always tried to tell the truth, without pride or disdain, even if those who vilified me were uncouth, arrogant, hostile, bereft of a minimum of humanity.”<sup>46</sup>

43. The persecution and calumnies broke out with great virulence in Barcelona, in 1941. In May of 1942, St. Josemaría wrote to the director of the only center of Opus Dei then existing in the city: “+ May Jesus bless my sons and watch over them. My dear sons: We should rejoice that our Lord has seen fit to treat us in a divine manner. What can I tell you? Be happy, *Spe gaudentes* [rejoicing in hope]. Bear suffering with charity, with never a word against anyone; *In tribulatione patientes!* And be filled with a spirit of prayer—*Orationi instantes!* [constant in prayer!]. My sons: the sunrise is already beginning to show, and what a harvest we will have in that blessed Barcelona, with the new day! Be faithful. I bless you. An embrace from your Father, Mariano.” A letter to Rafael Termes Carreró, from Madrid, May 2, 1942, cited in Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. II, p. 346; for the events in Barcelona, pp. 342-360).

44. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 72.

45. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, p. 56. Testimony of Bishop Abilio del Campo y de la Bárcena.. Along the same lines, see Bishop Laureano Castán Lacoma, p. 104.

46. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 70.

Years later, in the 1970's, in moments of a grave crisis in the heart of the Church, St. Josemaría also gave an example of fortitude and love for the truth in defending publicly, before thousands of people, the Church and the Pope.<sup>47</sup>

e) *Working and smiling*

One of the effects of calumny is its paralyzing power. It acts like a poison in the central nervous system of the soul. The victims, in seeing their reputation damaged, feel as though the earth were opening under their feet and they have no solid ground to stand on. They “do not know where to turn. They are frightened. They do not believe it is possible, they wonder if the whole thing is not a nightmare.”<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, calumny is a formidable obstacle for someone trying to attain a noble goal, since the temptation is to give up. Together with the understandable dejection it brings, it gives rise to a fear of continuing to act, so as to avoid new attacks. The persistence of calumnies and their spread can also lead to doubts about one's own goals and the certainty of working for the good: “If so many people are opposed, including churchmen, might it not be I myself who am mistaken?” Truly it is difficult to put oneself in the place of a person who is calumniated, because of the suffering, fears, anxieties and doubts it can generate.

To respond by working overcomes the danger of paralysis that calumny can give rise to. Working helps to avoid sterile complaints, to not waste time criticizing one's adversaries or become obsessed with the calumny. As we have already pointed out, his response was never a passive one but a dynamic response, based on “complete confidence in God,”<sup>49</sup> of prayer and work. Working meant being able to defend the truth whenever necessary, and to transmit faith and confidence to his children, urging forward the development of the apostolates.

As Bishop Santos Moro testified: “I admired his patience and his determination to continue pressing forward without wavering, carrying out God's Will, with absolute trust in Him.”<sup>50</sup>

This attitude showed immense faith in God and in the charism he had received, great charity in forgiving, firm hope that God would iron out the difficulties and, as fruit of these three virtues, fortitude, serenity, interior peace and joy.

Let us stop to consider joy, summed up in the word smiling. Smiling is a consequence of loving the will of God, who allows the unjust accusation.

47. See Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, where he describes the apostolic trips throughout the Iberian peninsula in 1972, on pp. 457-469, and to South and Central America in 1974 and 1975, on pp. 496-537.

48. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 68.

49. *A Man of God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. 2, Scepter, London - New York, 1992, Testimony of Bishop Jose Lopez Ortiz, p. 5-26.

50. *A Man of God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. 2, Scepter, London - New York, 1992, Testimony of Bishop Santos Moro Briz, p. 6-9.

Sadness and a lack of serenity and perhaps a lessening of confidence in God are the natural fruits of calumny, through the position in which it places its victim. St. Josemaría describes the pain wrought by calumny by recalling the “story of Susanna, that chaste woman, so falsely accused of wrong doing by two lustful old men . . . How often does the trickery of those moved by envy or intrigue force many noble Christians into the same corner? They are offered only one choice: offend our Lord or ruin their reputation. The only acceptable and upright solution is, at the same time, highly painful. Yet they must decide: ‘Let me rather fall into your power through no act of mine, than commit sin in the Lord’s sight’ (Dan 13:23).”<sup>51</sup>

It is precisely for this reason that the witness of those who dealt with him during that period is so striking: “Even now I am amazed at being able to declare that I never saw him worried; that is to say, you would never have noticed that he might be passing through a difficult time. There is no doubt that his faith in God, his hope in the help of his heavenly Father and, consequently, his cheerfulness and good humor, allowed him not only not to lose his peace but to infect others with his enormous confidence that what God wanted would be fulfilled.”<sup>52</sup>

The testimony of Archbishop Pedro Cantero is also very relevant here. “I am surprised to recall now that—no matter what happened—he never lost his characteristic smile. It was not the easy smile of a good natured person for whom everything is going well or who is not aware of what is going on. It was the external manifestation of his interior peace: the peace that comes from embracing, with all the strength of his heart, a cross whose dimensions none of us knows exactly. It was the joy and peace that come from hiding oneself in the wounds of our Lord: from accepting, when truly difficult situations arise, the will of our Father God, who wants to identify us with his Son on the Cross.”<sup>53</sup>

### 3. Forgiveness and a culture of peace

#### a) *Cultural parameters of forgiveness*

The message of forgiveness and its practice among Christians has greatly influenced Western culture and legislation. Nevertheless, the practice of forgiveness today confronts strong cultural currents that distort its nature and make it difficult to understand and, even more, to put into practice.<sup>54</sup>

Let us briefly consider three of these currents, focusing on their impact on forgiveness: relativism, individualism, and hedonism.

51. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 68.

52. *A Man of God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. 1, Scepter, London - New York, 1992, p. 2-17. Testimony of Cardinal José María Bueno Monreal.

53. *Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: Un hombre de Dios*, pp. 79-80. Testimony of Bishop Pedro Cantero.

54. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity: Contemporary Society and Its Fears*, Cambridge, 2000.

For relativism, it is personal decision that determines the goodness or evil of one's acts, with no objective boundaries. This subjective perspective tends to excuse one's own actions and to blur and erase any guilt. Without the awareness of an offense there can be no guilt, and without guilt there is no need to ask for forgiveness.<sup>55</sup> Relativism leads to the "banalization of evil," which reinforces the absence of guilt and makes forgiveness meaningless. It hinders the possibility of sharing common principles by which we can recognize others as human beings, even when they offend us.

Individualism, in turn, by exalting the radical autonomy of the human person, also puts up strong barriers to the possibility of forgiveness.<sup>56</sup> Forgiveness in interpersonal relationships requires accepting the existence of a universal fraternity among all men and women as a key part of the truth about the human person in society.<sup>57</sup>

Individualism makes it difficult to put oneself in the place of another person. "The understanding of the great mystery of expiation is blocked by our individualistic image of man. We can no longer grasp substitution because we think that everyman is ensconced in himself alone. The fact that all individual beings are deeply interwoven and that all are encompassed in turn by the being of the One, the Incarnate Son, is something we are no longer capable of seeing."<sup>58</sup>

For anyone who has to forgive, individualism can lead to a distorted form of forgiveness, to granting it out of the desire for power over others, as though the destiny of the offender were in our hands and his liberation from guilt depended exclusively on us.<sup>59</sup>

The third current making forgiveness difficult today is hedonism, which leads to avoiding suffering at all costs. But forgiving is always a painful process. "Guilt is a reality, an objective force; it has caused destruction that must be repaired . . . Guilt must be worked through, healed, and thus overcome. Forgiveness exacts a price—first of all from the person who forgives. He must overcome within himself the evil done to him; he must, as it were, burn it interiorly and in so doing renew himself.

55. "It seems to me that the core of the spiritual crisis of our time has its roots in the eclipse of the gift of forgiveness . . . the current moral discussion tends to free mankind from guilt, bringing about a situation in which the conditions for its possibility are never present" (Joseph Ratzinger, *"Una compañía en el camino" La Iglesia: Una comunidad en camino*, 5, 4, Ed. Paulinas, Madrid 1992, p. 90).

56. "Forgiving . . . enacted in solitude or isolation remains without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self" (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., Chicago 1958, p. 237).

57. The interdependence of all men and women can be seen on the natural plane, for example, in the so-called "Crimes against Humanity," where those that commit these crimes are viewed as offending not only a particular human being, or a particular juridical order, but all of humanity. The concept of universal fraternity is also found in the Ubuntu, a feature of the African vision of the world, better known today because of its influence on the transition of South Africa to a free society. See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Rider, London, 1999, pp. 34-36.

58. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth I*, pp. 159-60.

59. See Jutta Burggraf, "Aprender a perdonar," in *Dialogos Almudi*, June 6, 2004.

As a result, he also involves the other, the trespasser, in this process of transformation, of inner purification, and both parties, suffering all the way through and overcoming evil, are made new.”<sup>60</sup>

Asking for forgiveness also has its price: expiation,<sup>61</sup> the restoration of the order damaged by the offense and rediscovering the truth about oneself, betrayed by the offense committed. This is the process of acknowledgment of the truth, repentance, reparation, and the commitment to avoid new offenses.<sup>62</sup>

There are no shortcuts to forgiveness. Trying to attain it, and freedom from the guilt entailed, without assuming the suffering involved, makes forgiveness difficult and also promotes the proliferation of a false forgiveness,<sup>63</sup> which simply perpetuates the wounds opened and prevents the closing of the cycle of offenses.<sup>64</sup>

The overall influence of these cultural currents is to create a society founded on self-interest, which is unable to understand the need for gratuitous acts, and therefore for forgiveness, the gratuitous act *par excellence*. As Benedict XVI insists, “the ‘earthly city’ is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy, and communion. Charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships as well.”<sup>65</sup> The existence of gratuitous acts guarantees the genuineness of the love present in our own life and in society.<sup>66</sup>

#### b) *Learning how to forgive*

Forgiveness has to be practiced in one’s daily life, in marriage, in the family,<sup>67</sup> in school, in one’s friendships, at work, in all situations. Forgiveness should be a daily experience in one’s “lifestyle”<sup>68</sup> as a Christian.

60. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* 1, pp.158-59.

61. For an anthropological vision of expiation, see René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Maryknoll, NY 2001.

62. From the point of view of the person offended, forgiveness has to be granted in an unconditional way. It is the offender who does not obtain the forgiveness granted (the freeing from his guilt) if he does not confront the truth and make reparation. When all the elements are present, the way is opened to reconciliation. Forgiveness thus facilitates the path to justice. See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, USCCB Communications, 2005, no. 518.

63. See M. Lopez Guzmán, *Desafíos del perdón despues de Auschwitz: Reflexiones de Jankelevitch desde la Shoa*, Madrid 2010, pp. 63-121, where the author provides an analysis of false forgivenesses.

64. “Guilt calls forth retaliation. The result is a chain of trespasses in which the evil of guilt grows ceaselessly and becomes more and more inescapable. . . . Guilt can be overcome only by forgiveness, not by retaliation” (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* 1, p. 157).

65. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6.

66. In the sphere of social work, one should give primacy to justice, since “justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI’s words, ‘the minimum measure’ of it” (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6).

67. The family is the paradigmatic place for gratuitous acts. There young people can experience forgiveness and learn to ask for forgiveness, to grant it, to overcome rancor and revenge, to love in a gratuitous way, to be understanding, to acquire a sense of justice, to respect others. There is a great need to strengthen the family, which is the foundation for learning love and forgiveness.

68. John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1997.

The unity of life that St. Josemaría preached, which is a call to consistency in Christian life, requires living forgiveness always and from the first moment. For if one fails to practice forgiveness in one's daily life, a small offense can quickly give rise to negative feelings and a lack of communication.<sup>69</sup>

It has sometimes been said that one needs to "learn to forgive."<sup>70</sup> But perhaps, since charity is the source of forgiveness, it would be better to say that one has to learn to love: to love God and, with his love, to love our neighbor, even if he offends us.<sup>71</sup> A person who doesn't forgive doesn't know how to love.

Nevertheless, there can be a real need to learn how to forgive, especially when the emotions unleashed are quite strong and the offense appears too great to set it aside. Then it may indeed be necessary to undergo a learning process: How does one forgive? What steps have to be taken? What needs to take place in one's own heart?

Many authors from a great variety of perspectives, whether religious, psychological, political or social, coincide on the same points required for forgiveness to take place:<sup>72</sup> truth (recognition); repentance (sorrow for the harm caused); requesting forgiveness from the person offended; the commitment not to offend again; and reparation (reestablishment of the previous situation).<sup>73</sup>

Resentment and revenge trap a person in the past, amid a welter of aggressive emotions. Likewise rejecting forgiveness when it is granted closes one up in the past, and damages present and future relationships. In contrast, forgiveness overcomes the past, through love, truth, justice and suffering, and opens up new opportunities for the future, renewing human relationships. Forgiveness when personally experienced, both granted and received, "bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin."<sup>74</sup>

"Our responsibility is great, because to be Christ's witness implies first of all that we should try to behave according to his doctrine, that we should struggle to make our actions remind others of Jesus and his most lovable personality. We have

69. "Something similar can happen in our dealings with others: at first there is a small, cutting remark, and in the end people can end up cold shouldering each other, and living in an atmosphere of icy indifference" (St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 15).

70. See Robert J. Sternberg and Karen Sternberg, *La naturaleza del odio (The Nature of Hate)*, Madrid, 2010, p. 258.

71. Christian forgiveness is never merely a technique. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in explaining Christ's command to love others as I have loved you (Jn 13:34), teaches: "It is impossible to keep the Lord's commandment by imitating the divine model from outside; there has to be a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness and the mercy and the love of our God."

72. See, for example, Desmond Tutu, *No Future*, cit., pp. 218-219; Robert and Karen Sternberg, *La naturaleza*, cit., pp. 258-259.

73. The clear parallels with the acts of the sacrament of reconciliation suggest that it can be seen as a model of forgiveness, not only when God is the one who forgives, but also among persons, institutions and even societies.

74. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2844.

to act in such a way that others will be able to say, when they meet us: this man is a Christian, because he does not hate, because he is willing to understand, because he is not a fanatic, because he is willing to make sacrifices, because he shows that he is a man of peace, because he knows how to love.”<sup>75</sup>

75. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 122.