



## The Incarnational Vision of Saint Josemaría

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Material reality, the visible world around us, is not only created by God but also ordered to God. The One who is Truth and Beauty and Goodness Itself is the end of all things. They exist to reveal and to glorify him.

### I. Sacramental View of Human Life and Work

As the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”. Beyond this feature of all finite things, that they are created to reveal and glorify God, Christians know that God has united himself with the material world in taking on a human nature. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us . . . and we beheld his glory” (St. John 1:14). We saw it with our own eyes, the disciple tells us.

One of the great contributions of saint Josemaría to theological reflection comes from a deep and sustained meditation on the *humanity* of Jesus Christ. If we had any doubts about the value and dignity of ordinary, everyday activities and relationships, focusing on the life of Jesus can transform our view of these things. Whereas we are so often inclined to think that our work, our errands, our duties towards family and friends are major obstacles to deepening our spiritual life, Saint Josemaría reminds us that *these must be the very material of our growth in holiness*. If our vocation is in the world, we don’t have some other life to give to God. We only have the one we’re living, complete with all of its big or trivial cares and concerns, successes and failures, joys and sorrows. Even the most apparently mundane item on our list of things to do can bear spiritual fruit in our lives and the lives of others.

Consider the life of Jesus. He spent 30 years in an obscure town, enjoying his family and relatives and friends, learning the prayers his mother taught him, going to school, attending weddings and funerals, helping to run a carpentry business. As saint Josemaría puts it, “Nothing is foreign to Christ’s care. . . . We cannot say that there are things—good, noble, or indifferent—which are exclusively worldly.

This cannot be, after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death.” (*Christ is Passing By*, 112)

### **The Acting Person**

We can go a bit deeper into this theme by asking what it is that gives our actions their value. Karol Wojtyła in his philosophical work *The Acting Person* argues that any freely chosen action has two effects: one is an *external* effect on the world outside of the agent, but one is an *internal* effect on the person who acts. In shaping the world, we are also shaping ourselves, and selves are more important than things. Taking these two dimensions of human acts in reverse order, let us consider first the way in which we *form our character through work*. This task is mainly a matter of the *input* to our actions—the attitude, effort, perseverance, wholeheartedness, and so on with which we do them. But beyond this, if we see our work as fulfilling the will of God for us at this moment, and so put ourselves into it out of love for him, as an offering, uniting it with the actions of Jesus, the value of that work increases to infinity. It becomes, in effect, an extension of the incarnation, of the human life of our Lord, and participates in the value of his actions who is Son of Man and Son of God.

The external effect of our actions is the more obvious one, since we are always *forming the world through work*. Some of our actions affect persons directly, while others do so only indirectly. When an act is directed toward another person, we must always bear in mind what it is called the personalist norm: Persons are always to be loved for their own sake; they are never to be treated as means to an end, even a good end. It is easy to think we are living by this norm without reflecting very deeply on the actual persons who are the recipients of most of our actions—those closest to us. It goes against the grain for us to remember that, like our Lord, we have come not to be served but to serve—indeed, to spend our lives serving others for his sake.

When an act is not explicitly directed in some way toward persons, we cannot assume that it has no significance for persons. Indeed, all work, all actions, ultimately affect persons in one way or another, and this both gives them a deeper motivation and guides the way in which they are carried out.

### **II. Marriage and Family Life**

This has all been rather abstract, but we cannot live it in the abstract. Rather, we bring it to life in our unique circumstances, with our own parents, spouses, children, friends, colleagues—our own list of things to do. saint Josemaría assures us that “Loving souls for God’s sake will make us love everyone: understanding,

excusing, forgiving all. We should have a love that can cover the multitude of failings contrived by human wretchedness. We have to have a wonderful charity . . . defending the truth, without hurting anyone.” (*The Forge*, 559) This may sound easy, but in fact it calls for a lifelong personal training program. First we need to practice forgiveness, beginning with the faults and failings of those close to us, the offenses (real or imagined) that cause us the most pain. A priest of Opus Dei here in Boston, Fr. Salvador Ferigle, since gone to his reward, had a memorable way of expressing the second part of saint Josemaría’s point in this passage. “Truth and charity,” he would say, “charity and truth; but never one at the expense of the other.” Our relationships will be transformed if we make this our goal.

## **Marriage**

We are used to hearing that marriage is a vocation, one way of dedicating our lives to God, but we don’t always think very personally about what this means. If anything, just as in the case of work, we may be tempted to think that the demands of marriage and family are major obstacles to our holiness or to deepening our interior life. We could be the picture of patience if only the spouse and the children would see the wisdom of all our suggestions. In fact, just the opposite is true. Our lives are spent in family relationships and friendships of many kinds, and these must be the very material of our growth in holiness and likeness to Christ. Most of the changes required for our spiritual progress are not going to be changes in others. Early in our marriage, one of our married friends, a father of six children, told my husband, “Remember that marriage is a school of virtue.” Whether we’re taking graduate courses or repeating the courses we took last year, the point is to persevere.

A vocation from God is never to “marriage-in-general” or “marriedness”—rather it is to give ourselves exclusively and unconditionally to *this man* or *this woman*. Unconditional giving does not mean just that when we get to the end of our rope, we should tie a knot and hang on (though we should definitely hang on!). We are called to make the good of the other, the beloved, our own good. Christ is our model in this as in all things, and we are called to the same humility, mercy, selflessness, and understanding that he showed to others (and that he shows to us).

Obviously we cannot accomplish all this on our own. This reality was much on the heart of saint Josemaría and contributed greatly to the inspiration for the beginnings of Opus Dei. We can only live the life of Christ by uniting ourselves to him. In a homily entitled “Getting to Know God”, saint Josemaría offers this advice: “Try to commit yourself to a plan of life [a plan for your interior life], and to keep to it: a few minutes of mental prayer, Holy Mass—daily, if you can manage it—and

frequent Communion; regular recourse to the Holy Sacrament of Forgiveness—even though your consciences do not accuse you of mortal sin; getting to know Jesus in the tabernacle; praying and contemplating the mysteries of the Holy Rosary, and so many other marvelous devotions you know or can learn.” (*Friends of God*, 149)

Some might be tempted to reply at this point: “Get real! These are basically luxury items in the Christian life. They’re great if you have extra time on your hands—if you’re sick for a long time, or retired—or if you’re just naturally pious. But most people can’t afford them. We just have too much to do already.” Americans find this attitude very natural, I think; we believe in cramming every minute of the day with activity. If we’re parents, we’re tempted to schedule every minute of the children’s day too. This relentless ‘busy-ness’ can blind us to the truth about our lives. *Contact with Christ is food for our souls and there is no substitute*. Of course we can *live* without cultivating Christ’s presence in our lives, just as we can live on a diet of junk food, but we cannot *live our vocation well* without him. Moreover, no one else can take our place in this face-to-face meeting with our Lord. We cannot just hang around holy people hoping it will be contagious. We need to hear for ourselves the voice of our Father God, “This is my son, the Beloved. . . . This is my daughter, the Beloved.”

### **Universal Vocation**

Marriage is only one way of living the universal vocation of every Christian, indeed of every person—a total gift of oneself to God who is Love. One can give oneself to God in other ways too, but each of these involve a gift of self to others as well. For married persons, giving oneself to God is realized in and through giving oneself to one’s spouse. There is no either/or here; it’s not a matter of choosing one or the other. Rather, the vocation to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength is one with the vocation to love this man, this woman, with a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things—a love that never fails.

In his play *The Jeweler’s Shop*, written when he was a young priest, John Paul II follows the lives of two couples from their courtship and marriage to the time when their respective children are grown and, as it happens, fall in love with each other. One of the young husbands was killed in the war, so his wife has raised their son to manhood on her own. The other couple has a daughter, but their marriage has grown cold and bitter over the years, and the wife, Anna, often dreams of escaping. She has visions of meeting the man who will embody her ideal image of a husband—the Bridegroom, as she calls him. But when at one point the man in her visions turns and comes towards her, she finds to her dismay that his face is

that of her husband, Stefan. Taking up this theme many years later in his *Letter to Families* (19), the Holy Father asks: “Could we even imagine human love without the Bridegroom [Jesus Christ] and the love with which he first loved to the end? Only if husbands and wives share in that love and in that ‘great mystery’ can they love ‘to the end.’ Unless they share in it, they do not know ‘to the end’ what love truly is and how radical are its demands.” Our love is not like Christ’s love unless it lasts to the end. One of saint Josemaría’s prayers was: “May you seek Christ; may you find Christ; may you love Christ.” The prayer of a married person must be: “May I seek Christ in my spouse; may I find Christ in that face; may I love Christ in that heart.”

### **III. Implications – Public and Private**

#### **Defending marriage**

We cannot give up on our culture. Even when fundamental requirements of human nature and human love are forgotten or trampled upon, we must continue to defend and support them. One of the most basic and necessary features of marriage is its indissolubility. In recent addresses to the Roman Rota (the highest marriage tribunal in the Church), the Holy Father keeps insisting that the permanence of marriage is not based on the will of human beings (of the man and woman who commit themselves to this)—rather it is based on the will of God in creating us as *persons*. The love that perfects a husband and wife, the love they long for *from* one another, the love they long to *give* to one another, must have this kind of permanence. It cannot have term limits. This is simply built into the nature of marriage and the purposes of marriage—into the kind of union it is. Hence, Christians have a right and a duty to defend the indissolubility of marriage within the public square. The sacraments of the Church add graces to enable a couple to live out their wedding promises, but here as elsewhere, grace builds on nature—the promises themselves are required by the nature of the union being entered into.

I believe we can also make a difference in our culture simply by living our own vocation faithfully, leaning on the strength of Jesus Christ. Speaking to the Council on the Laity in 1974, Pope Paul VI reminds us that “Contemporary man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he listens to teachers it is because they are witnesses.”(Cited in *Letter to Families*, 23). Never underestimate the influence you have on those around you, especially those closest to you. Children are particularly hard to fool. But so are siblings, roommates, close friends, the people we see day after day. People we don’t even know will be observing our lives. The good news is that the Holy Spirit wants them to find Christ—yes, even in us.

## Living the Little Things

We need to get used to the idea that our lives consist almost entirely of things that seem to have little significance. If we don't learn to offer these to God, to find him in them, we may not find him at all. saint Josemaría was adamant about the importance of the details. As he well knew, there's no point in waiting for a great crisis or a vivid religious experience or some other dramatic moment in order to seek God out; he is as present to us in this moment as in any other. It's like us to want to do great things for God, and perhaps for others to know we have done them; but God is looking for great love from us.<sup>1</sup>

The same principle applies to those who are especially entrusted to our care in one way or another. Most of our dealings with others, even with those dearest to us, are small-scale—routine things, almost unnoticeable, but sending a message all the same. Regardless of what the ads say, diamonds are not a girl's best friend. The gifts that mean the most are much less glamorous—taking out the garbage, even if it's not your turn; paying the bills; reading to the children; and thousands of other small actions of the same kind. *Time* is one of the most important things we can give to others, and one of the things we are most reluctant to part with; here again, even a few minutes time for a phone call or a conversation can mean so much. Whatever we do for others, Jesus tells us, we do for him. Keeping this before our minds adds a deeper dimension to the apparently trivial details of our lives. It's as though we were watching a 3-D movie and then someone gives us the special glasses that make the images jump off the screen.

It's possible, of course, that we will be called upon to do great things: to give our lives in defense of the Christian faith or to follow in the steps of the great saints in some other way. But I want to close by reflecting on a saint we know very little about. She appears in the devotion of the Stations of the Cross—Veronica, a follower of our Lord who loves him dearly. When he passes near her on the road to Calvary, carrying his cross, she reaches out to wipe his face with her veil. From the time of his arrest in Gethsemene until his last breath on the cross, this is the only time Jesus experiences a human touch motivated by tenderness and love.

He is the same Lord yesterday and today and forever, and he still passes by in the person of those close to us. With Veronica, we can offer them a touch of kindness that lightens their burdens and gives them encouragement for the journey. If we ask what prompted Veronica toward this act of courage and love, no doubt the answer would be that she was moved by the sight of Jesus' face. In a recent apostolic letter on the Rosary, the Holy Father recommends that prayer as a way of contemplating Christ along with Mary. "To look upon the face of Christ, to

recognize its mystery amid the daily events and the sufferings of his human life, and then to grasp the divine splendor definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father: this is the task of every follower of Christ and therefore the task of each one of us.” (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 9) No other task is as important as this one; so let’s put it at the top of that list of things to do and see what a difference it makes to all the others.

**Laura Garcia**, Ph.D. gave this address at a conference at Bentley College, November 16, 2002, entitled “Among Family and Friends: The American Legacy of a New Saint, Josemaría Escrivá.” Professor Garcia teaches philosophy at Boston College.

#### Note

1. This is a paraphrase of M. Eugene Boylan’s point in *This Tremendous Lover*, Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1987 [first published in 1947], p. 243.