

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

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 of a study published in the journal *Romana*, we will consider some key ideas from the homily "Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom" and the practice of forgiveness in contemporary society in

striving to foster a culture of peace.

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This study published in no. 53 of the journal Romana, it focuses on some aspects of St. Josemaría's teachings on forgiveness and their relevance in fostering a peaceful co-existence.

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.

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1. The homily “Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom”

This homily, a meditation on “Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom,” 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.” St. Josemaría referred to this progressive transformation of the person who draws close to Christ as “good divinization,” which enables us to overcome evil with good.

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.” 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.”

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.”

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 and a certain jealousy regarding the Founder's apostolic work. 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.

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.”

(...)

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 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.”

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.”

2. Attitude in the face of calumnies

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.”

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.”

b) Forgiving and praying

St. Josemaría strove to react to calumnies by always forgiving from the first moment and praying for those who attacked you. Well aware of his human weakness and knowing that he was capable of “every horrible deed and mistake,” 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.”

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 praying for the aggressor: it displaces the center of attention from oneself to the other person. 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

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: Jesus autem tacebat.”

St. Josemaría wrote in *The Way*: “Jesus remains silent. Jesus 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?”

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.

d) A time to speak

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.”

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.”

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,” 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."

3. Forgiveness and a culture of peace

Forgiveness has to be practiced in one's daily life, in marriage, in the family, in school, in one's friendships, at work, in all situations. Forgiveness should be a daily experience in one's "lifestyle" as a Christian.

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.

It has sometimes been said that one needs to "learn to forgive." 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. A person who doesn't forgive doesn't know how to love.

“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 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.”

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