

# NEW MEDITERRANEANS

DISCOVERIES WHICH CHANGE  
THE LANDSCAPE IN THE INTERIOR LIFE,  
UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF ST JOSEMARÍA



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## CONTENTS

- Foreword
- I. «That First Prayer of a Child of God»
- Interlude: «Having the Cross means being identified with Christ»
- II. «Jesus is my dear Friend»
- III. «From the Wound of the right hand»
- IV. «Don't speak: listen to him»
- V. «To Jesus, Through Mary»
- Epilogue

## FOREWORD

The lives of the saints act as a light that illuminates the path of our lives when night falls. They have travelled the same path as us, and have known how to reach the goal: the Love of God which is in our origin, and which desires to embrace us for all eternity.

In these pages we are going to look at the holy life of St Josemaría Escrivá; in particular, at some of the discoveries he made during his years as a young priest. As many people who knew him pointed out, he was a lover of God who taught many souls “to understand more profoundly the love of God, so that we are able to show that love to other people through what we do and say.”<sup>1</sup> This is the path of the Christian life, which we too wish to undertake.

Now, there is something special about this *inward journey*. It does not go from a known place to an unknown place: it consists rather in going deeper into what is already known, into what seems obvious, what we have heard many times. Then we discover something which we in fact already knew, but which we now perceive with a new strength and depth. In *The Forge* he says:

“In the interior life, as in human love, we have to persevere. Yes, you have to meditate often on the same themes, keeping on until you rediscover an old discovery.

—“And how could I not have seen this so clearly before?” you’ll ask in surprise. Simply because sometimes we’re like stones, that let the water flow over them, without absorbing a drop.

—That’s why we have to go over the same things again and again — because they aren’t the same things — if we want to soak up God’s blessings.”<sup>2</sup>

Going “over the same things again and again” to try to open ourselves to all their richness and thus discover that “they aren’t the same things.” This is the path of contemplation to which we are called. It is about sailing a sea that, at first sight, is not new, because it is part of our daily

landscape. The Romans called the Mediterranean *Mare nostrum*: it was the known sea, the sea with which they lived. St. Josemaría speaks of rediscovering the Mediterranean because, as soon as we enter those seas that we think we know well, wide, unsuspected horizons open up before our eyes. We can then say to God, in the words of St. Catherine of Siena: “You are like a deep sea, in which the more I seek the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek you.”<sup>3</sup>

These discoveries respond to lights that God gives us when and how he wants. Nevertheless, our calm consideration puts us in a position to receive these lights from God. “And as a man, who being previously in darkness then suddenly beholds the sun, is enlightened in his bodily sight, and sees plainly things which he saw not, so likewise he to whom the Holy Ghost is vouchsafed, is enlightened in his soul, and sees things beyond man’s sight, which he knew not.”<sup>4</sup> In these pages we will review some of the *Mediterraneans* that St. Josemaría discovered in his interior life, in order to delve, with him, “into the depth of God’s love.”<sup>5</sup>

[Back to contents](#)

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<sup>1</sup> St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 97.

<sup>2</sup> St Josemaría, *The Forge*, 540.

<sup>3</sup> St Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 167.

<sup>4</sup> St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 16, 16.

<sup>5</sup> The texts included in this book, except the *Interlude* and the *Epilogue*, have been published in the Opus Dei website [www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org) during 2018.

# I

## «That First Prayer of a Child of God»

One of the most deeply rooted convictions in the first Christians was that they could address God as beloved children. Jesus himself had taught them: *Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven... (Mt 6:9)*. He had presented himself to the Jews as the beloved Son of the Father, and had taught his disciples to act in like manner. The Apostles had heard him address God with the term the Hebrew children used to address their own fathers. And on receiving the Holy Spirit, they themselves had begun to use that term. It was something that was radically new, with respect to the piety of Israel, but Saint Paul made reference to it as something familiar to everyone: *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:15-16)*.

It was conviction that filled them with confidence and gave them an unexpected boldness: *if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17)*. Jesus is not only the only-begotten Son of the Father, but also the firstborn among many brethren (cf. *Rom 8:29; Col 1:15*). The new Life brought by Christ was shown to them as the life of God's beloved children. This was neither a theoretical nor an abstract truth, but rather a reality that filled them with overflowing joy. We see this reflected in the joyful words of the Apostle Saint John in his first letter: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are (1 Jn 3:1)*.

God's fatherhood, his very special and tender love for each one of us, is something that we Christians learn about right from childhood. And nevertheless we are called to discover it in a personal and lively way that transforms our relationship with God. On doing so, a Mediterranean of peace and trust opens up before our eyes, an immense horizon into which we can go more deeply throughout our

whole life. For Saint Josemaría, this was an unexpected discovery, the sudden opening up of a panorama that was hidden in something he already knew quite well.

This happened in the autumn of 1931, as he recalled many years later: “I can tell you when, to the very moment, and where my first prayer as a son of God took place. I had learned to call God Father, as in the Our Father, from my childhood. But feeling, seeing, being amazed at that desire of God that we be his children... that was on the street and in a streetcar. For an hour or an hour and a half, I don’t know, I had to shout *Abba, Pater!*”<sup>7</sup>

In the following months, Saint Josemaría repeatedly came back to this consideration. In the retreat he made a year later, for example, he wrote down: “*First day.* God is my Father. And I’m not departing from this consideration.”<sup>8</sup> The whole day spent considering God’s Fatherhood! Although such an extended period of contemplation might at first surprise us, in fact it shows how deeply the experience of his divine filiation took hold in his heart. We too, in our prayer and whenever we turn to God, should first foster an attitude of trusting abandonment and gratitude. But for our relationship with God to take on this tenor, we need to personally discover once again that he truly wishes to be our Father.

## **Who is God for me?**

Like Saint Josemaría, perhaps we too learned when very young that God is our Father. But we may still have a long way to go before we actually make the radical truth that we are God’s children an integral part of our life. How can we facilitate this discovery?

In first place, to truly discover God’s fatherhood, we will often need to *restore his authentic image*. Who is God for me? Consciously or unconsciously, some think of God as Someone who imposes laws, and threatens punishments for anyone who doesn’t obey them. Someone who expects his will to be followed and grows angry when disobeyed; in a word, a Master with us merely as his unwilling subjects. In other cases (and this holds true also for some Christians), God is viewed basically as the reason why we have to behave well. He is seen as the reason we need to strive for a goal we *ought* to seek but don’t really *want* to.

Nevertheless, God “is not a tyrannical Master or a rigid and implacable judge: he is our Father. He speaks to us about our lack of generosity, our sins, our mistakes; but he does so in order to free us from them, to promise us his Friendship and his Love.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty in grasping that *God is Love* (*1 Jn 4:8*) is also due at times to the crisis that fatherhood is undergoing in various places. Perhaps we have seen this when speaking with friends or colleagues; the thought of their own father doesn’t stir up good memories in them, and a God who is Father does not particularly attract them. When speaking to them about the faith, it is good to help them see how their pain over this lack in their life shows how deeply the need for fatherhood is engraved on their heart: a fatherhood that precedes them and calls out to them. A friend, or a priest, can help them by their closeness to discover the love of the *Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name* (*Eph 3:14*); and also to experience this tenderness in “the vocation of being a ‘protector’”<sup>10</sup> that everyone’s heart harbors, and that finds expression in the father or mother that *they themselves already are*, or would like to be one day. Thus they can continue to discover in the depth of their soul the authentic face of God and the way we his children are called to live, knowing that we are looked upon by him with infinite affection. A father doesn’t love his child for what he or she *does*, for the results shown, but simply *because it is his child*. He wants his child to do well in life and tries to draw the best out of each one, but is always aware of how much value the child already has in his eyes.

It can help us to remember this, especially when we fail in something or when the gap between our own lives and the “models” the world holds up for us results in low self-esteem. “That is our real ‘stature,’ our spiritual identity: we are God’s beloved children, always. So you can see that not to accept ourselves, to live glumly, to be negative, means not to recognize our deepest identity. It is like walking away when God wants to look at me, trying to spoil his dream for me. God loves us the way we are, and no sin, fault or mistake of ours makes him change his mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Realizing that God is our Father also involves letting ourselves be looked upon by him as *dearly beloved children*. Then we come to understand that our “worth” doesn’t depend on what we have—our talents—or on what we do—our successes—but rather on the Love that has created us, that has “dreamed about” and affirmed us *before the*

*foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).* Given the cold idea of God that is found at times in the contemporary world, Benedict XVI wanted to recall right from the beginning of his pontificate that “we are not the accidental and senseless product of evolution. Each of us is the fruit of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”<sup>12</sup> Does this idea truly influence our daily lives?

## **The trusting hope of God’s children**

Saint Josemaría frequently reminded the faithful of Opus Dei that “the foundation of our spiritual life is the sense of our divine filiation.”<sup>13</sup> He compared it to the “thread that unites the pearls of a marvelous necklace. Divine filiation is the thread tying together all the virtues, because they are the virtues of a child of God.”<sup>14</sup> Thus it is very important to ask God to open for us this “new Mediterranean,” which sustains and gives shape to our whole spiritual life.

The “thread” of divine filiation leads to “a daily attitude of hopeful abandonment,”<sup>15</sup> an attitude found in children, especially when they are small. Therefore in the life and writings of Saint Josemaría, divine filiation is frequently closely tied to spiritual childhood. What importance does a child give to the frequent falls he undergoes when learning to ride a bicycle? None at all, as long as he sees his father nearby, encouraging him to try again. That’s what his hopeful abandonment means. “Dad says that I can... so let’s go!”

Realizing we are God’s children gives us the security we need to carry out the mission our Lord has entrusted to us. We will feel like that child whose father says to him: *Son, go and work in the vineyard today (Mt 21:28).* Perhaps our first reaction will be to feel apprehensive, imagining all kinds of possible difficulties. But right away we will consider that it is our Father who is asking us for this, showing such great confidence in us. Like Christ, we will learn to abandon ourselves into the Father’s hands and to tell him from the depths of our soul: *yet not what I will, but what thou wilt (Mk 14:36).* Saint Josemaría taught us with his life to act in this way, in the image of Christ: “Over the years, I have sought to rely unfalteringly for my support on this joyous reality. No matter what the situation, my prayer, while varying in tone, has always been the same. I have said to him: ‘Lord, You put me here. You

entrusted me with this or that, and I put my trust in you. I know you are my Father, and I have seen that tiny children are always absolutely sure of their parents.”<sup>16</sup>

We cannot deny that there will be difficulties. But we will face them with the knowledge that, no matter what happens, our all-powerful Father accompanies us; he is by our side and watches out for us. He will do what we are trying to do, since in the end it is his work; he will do it perhaps in a different way, but a more fruitful one. “As soon as you truly abandon yourself in the Lord, you will know how to be content with whatever happens. You will not lose your peace if your undertakings do not turn out the way you hoped, even if you have put everything into them, and used all the means necessary. For they will have ‘turned out’ the way God wants them to.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Strengthening our “sense of divine filiation”**

Saint Josemaría, we should note, didn’t point to *divine filiation* as the foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei, but rather to the *sense* of our divine filiation. It is not enough to *be* God’s children; we need to *realize* we are children of God, so that our life takes on that “sense.” Having that certainty in our hearts is the most solid foundation possible; the truth of our divine filiation then becomes an active reality, with specific repercussions in our lives.

To strengthen this “sense,” it is good to enter more deeply into that reality with our mind and heart. *With our mind*, first, by meditating in our prayer on the passages in Scripture that speak about God’s fatherhood, about our filiation, and about the life of God’s children. Here we can draw a lot of light from many texts by Saint Josemaría on what it means to be God’s children,<sup>18</sup> or from the reflections of other saints and Christian writers.<sup>19</sup>

*With our heart* we can go more deeply into the reality that we are God’s children by having trusting recourse to God the Father, abandoning ourselves in his Love. We can stir up our filial trust, with or without words, by always trying to be aware of his Love for us. One way of doing so is to turn to him with short invocations or aspirations. Saint Josemaría suggested: “Call him ‘Father’ many times a day and tell him —alone, in your heart—that you love him, that you adore him, that you

feel proud and strong because you are his child.”<sup>20</sup> We can also make use of some short prayer that can help us to confront each day with the security of realizing we are children of God, or to end it with a prayer of thanksgiving, contrition and hope. Pope Francis suggested this prayer to young people: “*Lord, I thank you for loving me; I am sure that you love me; help me to be in love with my own life!*” Not with my faults, that need to be corrected, but with life itself, which is a great gift, for it is a time to love and to be loved.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Returning to the Father’s house**

The family has been described as “the place to which we return,” where we find refuge and rest. As Saint John Paul II liked to say, it is the “sanctuary of love and life.”<sup>22</sup> For there we find once again the Love that gives meaning and worth to our life, because it is at its very origin.

Similarly, sensing that we are God’s children enables us to return to him trustingly when we are tired, when others have mistreated us or we feel wounded... and also when we have offended him. *Returning to the Father* is another way of living “hopeful abandonment.” We should often meditate on the parable of the father who had two sons, recounted to us by Saint Luke (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). “God is waiting for us, like the father in the parable, with open arms, even though we don’t deserve it. It doesn’t matter how great our debt is. Just like the prodigal son, all we have to do is open our heart, to be homesick for our Father’s house, to wonder at and rejoice in the gift which God makes us of being able to call ourselves his children, of really being his children, even though our response to him has been so poor.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps that son gave little thought to the suffering he had caused his Father; what he missed above all was the way of life he had had in his father’s household (cf. *Lk 15:17-19*). He set out for home with the idea of being simply another servant there among the others. Nevertheless, his father received him—he went out to meet him, embraced him and covered him with kisses!—reminding him of his deepest identity: he was *his son*. And right away he gave orders for his clothing to be returned to him, his sandals and his ring—the signs of the filiation that not even his bad behavior could erase. “And yet, after all, it was his own

son who was involved, and such a relationship could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behavior.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though at times we may look upon God as a Master whose servants we are, or as a cold-hearted Judge, he remains faithful to his Love as Father. The possibility of drawing close to him after we have fallen is always a marvelous opportunity to truly discover him. And it also reveals to us our own identity. It is not simply the fact that he has decided to love us, because he wishes to, but rather that we truly *are*, through grace, *God's children*. We *are* children of God: nothing and nobody can ever rob us of that dignity. Not even we ourselves. Therefore, on seeing the reality of our weakness and our conscious and voluntary sin, we should never lose hope. As Saint Josemaría said: “That is not all. It is God who has the last word—and it is the word of his saving and merciful love and, therefore, the word of our divine filiation.”<sup>25</sup>

## **Occupied with loving**

The “sense” of divine filiation changes everything, as it changed Saint Josemaría’s life when he unexpectedly discovered this “new Mediterranean.” How different is the interior life when, instead of basing it on our own progress or resolutions for improvement, we center it on the Love that goes before us and awaits us! If we give priority to what we ourselves *do*, we make our spiritual life revolve almost exclusively around our personal improvement. In the long run, this way of living not only risks leaving God’s love forgotten in a corner of our soul, but also leads to discouragement, since we stand alone in our struggle against failure.

But when we center everything on what God does, on letting ourselves be loved by him, on welcoming his Salvation each day, our struggle takes on a very different tone. If we are victorious, gratitude and praise will spring up quite naturally from within us; and if we suffer a defeat, we will return trustingly to God our Father, asking for forgiveness and letting ourselves be embraced by him. Thus we come to realize that “divine filiation is not a specific virtue with its own acts, but rather the permanent state of the subject of the virtues. All of our activity, the

exercise of our virtues, can and should be the exercise of our divine filiation.”<sup>26</sup>

Defeat does not exist for a person who seeks to welcome God’s Love every day. Even sin can become an opportunity to remember our identity as children and return to God our Father, who insists on coming to greet us saying “Son, my son!” And as it did Saint Josemaría, this realization will give us the strength we need to follow our Lord once again. “I know that you and I will surely see, with the light and help of grace, what things must be burned and we will burn them; what things must be uprooted and we will uproot them; what things have to be given up and we will give them up.”<sup>27</sup> But we will do so without becoming anxious or discouraged, trying never to confuse the ideal of Christian life with perfectionism.<sup>28</sup> Then we will center our lives on God’s Love for us, occupied with loving. We will be like small children who have discovered a little of their Father’s love, and who seek a thousand ways to show their gratitude and respond with all the love, little or much, they are capable of expressing.

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[Back to contents](#)

<sup>7</sup> Saint Josemaría, Meditation, 24 December 1969 (in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 334).

<sup>8</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, no. 1637 (in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 400).

<sup>9</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Mass inaugurating his pontificate, 19 March 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at World Youth Day in Poland, 31 July 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass inaugurating his pontificate, 24 April 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Josemaría, Letter, 25 January 1961.

<sup>14</sup> Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, 6 July 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Friends of God*, no. 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Furrow*, no. 860.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Fernando. Ocáriz, “Filiación divina” in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2013, pp. 519-526.

<sup>19</sup> The Jubilee Year of Mercy has helped to highlight some of these. Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Merciful Like the Father. Resources for the Jubilee of Mercy 2015-2016*.

<sup>20</sup> *Friends of God*, no. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Francis, Homily, 31 July 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Saint John Paul II, Homily, 4 May 2003.

<sup>23</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), no. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 66.

<sup>26</sup> F. Ocáriz and I. de Celaya, *Vivir como hijos de Dios*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1993, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

## INTERLUDE

### «Having the Cross means being identified with Christ»

The fatherhood of God, understood from our divine filiation, is an authentic Mediterranean that opens before us an immense panorama and places us in God and before God in a way that shapes our entire existence. Hence it can be said that “divine filiation is not a particular virtue, having its own acts, but the permanent condition of the subject of virtues. That is why we do not act as children of God with certain actions: all our activity, the exercise of our virtues, can and should be an exercise of divine filiation.”<sup>1</sup> We can therefore live every moment of our life with “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

However, the awareness of our divine filiation is related in a particular way to an aspect of our life: suffering, pain and, ultimately, participation in the Cross of Jesus. It is striking that, in St Mark's Gospel, the Gentiles recognize in Jesus the Son of God precisely at the sight of his death (cf. Mk 15:39). St. John also understands that the Cross is the place where the glory of God shines (cf. Jn 12:23-24). And St. Paul had to learn that the way of glory required identification with Christ crucified, “a stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23).

Similarly, in the life of St Josemaría, the awareness of his divine filiation was awakened by the experience of the Cross. It was in the early thirties. According to his biographers, the young priest suffered when he saw the pain of his mother and his siblings, who were having a hard time for lack of financial means; he suffered because he was still in Madrid in a precarious situation; and he also suffered because of the difficult situation that the Church was going through in Spain. In those circumstances, he wrote:

“When God dealt me those blows around 1931, I could not understand it. And then suddenly, in the midst of all that immense bitterness, came

those words: *You are my son* (Ps 2:7), you are Christ. And all I could answer was, *Abba, Pater! Abba, Pater! Abba! Abba! Abba!* ... You, Lord, have helped me understand that having the Cross means finding happiness and joy. And the reason, which I now see more clearly than ever, is this: that having the Cross means being identified with Christ, means being Christ, and so being a child of God.”<sup>2</sup>

This experience left a profound mark on the soul of St. Josemaría. It was not only a matter of discovering his condition as a son, but also of his intimate union with the sacrifice of Jesus. It is paradoxical: that our condition as children of God – of small children, even – goes hand in hand with the Cross. That paradox found its expression many years later in the *Way of the Cross*, where he wrote: “Just as a feeble child throws itself contritely into the strong arms of its father, you and I will hold tightly to the yoke of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> If we know ourselves children of God, the Cross will be the sure sign of our filiation, and therefore the greatest assurance that he is at our side.

Although at first glance it may seem crazy, the Cross – pain, suffering, setbacks – is, for those who follow Christ, a sign of their filiation, and the safe place where they take refuge. That is why we Christians kiss the Cross, the Holy Cross, and we always have a crucifix at hand, while we try to discover every day the hidden joy of the one who carries the holy wood with the help of Jesus.

[Back to contents](#)

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<sup>1</sup> F Ocariz, I Celaya, *Vivir como hijos de Dios*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1993, 54.

<sup>2</sup> St Josemaría Escrivá, *notes taken from a meditation*, 28 April 1963. Quoted in E Burkhardt and J Lopez, *Ordinary Life and Holiness in the Teaching of St Josemaría Escrivá*, Vol 2.

<sup>3</sup> St Josemaría Escrivá, *Way of the Cross*, 7<sup>th</sup> Station

## II

### «Jesus is my dear Friend»

The Gospels show Jesus in constant contact with a great variety of people: sick people looking for a cure, sinners seeking forgiveness, the merely curious, and even spies. But closest to the Master are his friends. That is what Jesus calls his disciples: *my friends* (*Lk 12:4*). Contemplating Jesus at Lazarus' tomb is very moving; seeing him there in tears makes the Jews exclaim: *See how he loved him* (*Jn 11:36*). A few days later, at the Last Supper, Jesus will explain the meaning of his death on the Cross. *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*. And, maybe seeing their surprise, he insists, *No longer do I call you servants; for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you* (*Jn 15:15*).

Because of his Love for us, Jesus makes us his friends. The gift of the Holy Spirit places us in a new relationship with God. We receive the very Spirit of Christ, making us children of God the Father and introducing us into a special intimacy with Jesus. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, we are identified with Jesus, without dissolving our individuality or losing our personality. Thus our identification with Christ is closely tied to our friendship with him. The life of grace brings about a face-to-face relationship with God. We get to know him better in his mysteries and can act as he does. This deep unity of knowledge and intentions makes it possible for us poor creatures to experience God, as Saint Augustine said, deep within us.<sup>1</sup> We can want and seek the same things. This is what true friendship means: *idem velle, idem nolle*, to love and reject the same things.

#### “Another Mediterranean”

When still quite young, Saint Josemaría learned that Jesus was a friend, and a very special friend. This early experience found expression in one

of the points in *The Way*: “You seek the friendship of those who, with their conversation and affection, with their company, help you to bear more easily the exile of this world – although sometimes those friends fail you. I don’t see anything wrong in that. But how is it that you do not seek every day, more eagerly, the company and conversation of that great Friend who will never fail you?”<sup>2</sup>

He had learned this truth years before; his biographers connect it with some advice received in spiritual direction in the seminary.<sup>3</sup> As the years went by he deepened in his discovery of Christ’s friendship. An important step in this development may have been the period in his life when his eyes were opened to the immense panorama of his divine filiation. While doing a retreat in Segovia he wrote: “First day. God is my Father – and I’m not departing from this consideration. Jesus is my intimate Friend (another Mediterranean), who loves me with all the divine madness of his Heart. Jesus... My God... who is also man.”<sup>4</sup>

He described his growing sense of Christ’s friendship as “another Mediterranean,” another marvelous discovery (the first one had been God’s fatherhood). It was something he already knew, but which he now saw with new eyes. This discovery was for Saint Josemaría a great source of consolation. In the early 1930s he was facing the huge task of carrying out what God had shown him on 2nd October 1928. He had a message to bring to all mankind, and to bring to fruition in the Church. But he had to do it “with a complete lack of material means. I had only twenty-six years of age, the grace of God, and good humour. But that was enough.”<sup>5</sup> The panorama opened by this new discovery assured him that he was not alone in his mission. Jesus accompanied him, his Friend, who understood perfectly all his worries and anxieties, because he “is also man.”

For Saint Josemaría, the Heart of Jesus was a double revelation. It was a revelation of “the immense charity of our Lord,” since “Jesus’ Heart is the Heart of God made flesh.”<sup>6</sup> And it brought home to him Jesus’ understanding and tenderness when faced with our limitations, difficulties and falls. In his personal prayer he may have felt what he poured out into a point in *The Way*: “Jesus is your friend – the Friend – with a human heart like yours, with most loving eyes that wept for Lazarus. And as much as he loved Lazarus, he loves you.”<sup>7</sup> This Love, both divine and human, infinite and near at hand, was a firm support

that enabled him to keep going forward under all circumstances. Moreover, it gave realism and a new urgency to his interior life.<sup>8</sup>

## **A path open to everyone**

Saint Josemaría encouraged the people who came to him to follow the path of friendship with Christ. He explained to them that drawing close to the Master does not require formalities or complicated methods. It is enough to talk to him simply, as to any other friend. After all, this was the way he was treated by those who loved him most, when he was living with them. “Have you seen the affection and the confidence with which Christ’s friends treat him? In a completely natural way the sisters of Lazarus blame Jesus for being away. ‘We told you! If only you’d been here!’ Speak to him with calm confidence: ‘Teach me to treat you with the loving friendliness of Martha, Mary and Lazarus and as the first Twelve treated you, even though at first they followed you for perhaps not very supernatural reasons.’”<sup>9</sup>

The young people who came to Saint Josemaría were very impressed by the natural way he talked to our Lord, and he encouraged them to do likewise. Throughout his life he tirelessly tried to get people to follow this path. One of the first persons to write a commentary on Saint Josemaría’s teachings said, “To achieve this friendship you and I must approach Jesus and get to know him and love him.”<sup>10</sup> Friendship requires getting to know another person, and this is the first thing that discovering Jesus as our Friend leads to. “You wrote to me: ‘To pray is to talk with God. But about what?’ About what? About him, and yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, great ambitions, daily worries – even your weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions – and love and reparation. In short, to get to know him and to get to know yourself – ‘to get acquainted!’”<sup>11</sup>

These words contain echoes of Saint Augustine’s aspiration *Noverim Te, neverim me* – Lord, let me know you and know myself.<sup>12</sup> And also of Saint Teresa’s description of a “conversation between friends: often speaking one-to-one with the person we know loves us.”<sup>13</sup> In short, a personal relationship with Jesus is the core of the interior life. And for those who seek holiness in the middle of the world, this means learning

to find him in all the circumstances of daily life, so as to keep up a continual conversation with him.

This is not an impossible ideal. It is something that many people have learned to do in their lives. In daily work, in family life, on city streets and in the country, on mountain trails and out at sea, everywhere, we can recognize Christ waiting for us as a Friend to keep us company. Saint Josemaría often stressed that “we children of God have to be contemplatives: people who, in the midst of the din of the throng, know how to find silence of soul in a lasting conversation with our Lord, people who know how to look at him as they look at a Father, as they look at a Friend, as they look at someone with whom they are madly in love.”<sup>14</sup> Every aspect of our life has a place in our prayer, just like in conversations between friends when they talk about everything. “The *Acts of the Apostles* tell us that after the Resurrection, our Lord joined his disciples and they talked together, *in multis argumentis*. They spoke about many things, everything that they asked him; they had a get-together.”<sup>15</sup>

Together with this ongoing personal conversation which makes our own life the topic of our dialogue with God, we can also try to *get to know him* better all the time, by seeking him in certain places where he has wanted to dwell more explicitly. We can now look at three of these “places.”

## **The accounts of our Lord’s friends**

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the evangelists present the principal events in Christ’s life. Saint Josemaría was in love with our Lord, and so “the Holy Bible, especially the Gospel, was, in his hands, not only a book filled with useful instruction, but a place to encounter Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

From the beginning, those who approached the Work realized that this young priest lived in close union with God, as they saw so clearly in his preaching. “When talking to God, he addressed the Tabernacle with the same directness as when he was talking to us, and so we felt we were there among our Lord’s apostles and disciples, just like one of them.”<sup>17</sup> This is the approach to Scripture he always recommended later on. “My advice is that, in your prayer, you actually take part in the different scenes of the Gospel, as one more among the people present. First of all,

imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next, apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Master's life you are considering – his merciful heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfils his Father's will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because he may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands.”<sup>18</sup>

With this advice he was opening up to us a secret of his soul. Commenting on his way of approaching Scripture, Blessed Alvaro wrote: “He is very familiar with our Lord, with his Mother Mary, with Saint Joseph, with the first twelve Apostles, with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, with the disciples of Emmaus and the holy women. He has come to know them through constant conversation, by placing himself in the Gospel, becoming one more among the participants in the scenes.”<sup>19</sup>

The validity of praying like this is confirmed by the lives and teachings of many saints. It has also been recommended by recent Popes when talking about the importance of approaching the Gospels in an attitude of prayer, with the practice of *lectio divina*. This means approaching the Gospels calmly, taking our time. When reading a passage we can pause and think, “What must that have been like?” Putting ourselves into the scene like another of the persons there, we can imagine what the people were like, and picture Jesus’ face. We will then try to understand what his words mean, knowing that we will often need some kind of explanation, because this is an ancient text, originating in a culture different from our own. Hence it is important to use an edition with appropriate notes, and to refer to good books about the Gospels and the Scriptures.

And reading the passage again we ask, “Lord, what do these words say *to me*? What is it about my life that you want me to change? What troubles me about this passage? Why am I not interested in this?” Or perhaps: “What do I like about it? What is it about these words that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps it brings to mind someone close to us who is in need, or that we need to say sorry to someone... Finally we should consider: How can I respond in my own life to what Jesus is suggesting to me in this

passage? “Be attentive, because he may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands.”<sup>21</sup> Sometimes it will draw forth from us our love, a desire for self-giving, and always the certainty that Jesus is with us. Contemplating our Lord’s life like this is essential for a Christian, for it “aims at creating within us a truly wise and discerning vision of reality, as God sees it, and forms within us the ‘mind of Christ’ (*1 Cor 2:16*).”<sup>22</sup>

There are undoubtedly many ways of drawing close to Jesus through Scripture. Saint Josemaría did not aim to offer a method, but to give practical pieces of advice that could be useful for meditation and contemplation, until “we break into acts of love or sorrow, acts of thanksgiving, requests, resolutions... which are the ripe fruit of true prayer.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Our Lord awaits us in the Tabernacle**

“When you approach the Tabernacle remember that *He* has been waiting for you for twenty centuries.”<sup>24</sup> The Eucharist is undoubtedly the privileged “place” to find Christ and become friends with him. This is also the path Saint Josemaría followed. His faith in the Real Presence could be seen in everything he did with regard to the Blessed Sacrament. Encarnita Ortega, who first met him in the 1940s, remembered the first meditation she heard him preach, which she went to with a certain degree of curiosity. “His recollection, totally natural, his genuflection before the tabernacle, the way he put his whole self into the preparatory prayer before the meditation, encouraging us to be aware that our Lord was there and looking at us and listening to us, made me quickly forget my desire to hear a great speaker. Instead I understood that I needed to listen to God and be generous with him.”<sup>25</sup>

The same thing happened to those who saw him celebrate Mass. “The way the Father celebrated Mass, the sincere tone of voice, the full attentiveness with which he prayed the different prayers, without a trace of affectation, his genuflections and other liturgical rubrics, all impressed me deeply. God was there, really present.”<sup>26</sup> It was not that he did anything special, but rather the tone of his gestures, the intensity of his prayers, his recollection. We will do likewise if we are convinced

that Christ, our “dear Friend,” is truly present in the Eucharist. When at last it became possible to reserve our Lord in the Tabernacle in the first student residence, Saint Josemaría reminded the students living there that God “was another resident, the first of all, and so he encouraged each of us to spend time keeping him company, to greet him with a genuflection on coming in and going out of the DYA, or to go to the Tabernacle in our thoughts when we were in our rooms.”<sup>27</sup>

When we put our heart into them, these small details express and at the same time nourish our faith: turning our thoughts to God when we see a church, paying him brief visits during the day, following Mass closely and with a spirit of recollection, going to the Tabernacle in our imagination to greet our Lord or offer him our work... These are small details of attention, the kind of thing we do for our friends when we go to see them or send them a message during the day.

### **Christ present in those around us**

The Commandment of Love is the distinctive mark of those who follow Christ. It is born of our conviction that Christ himself is present in the people around us, and is deeply rooted in our Lord’s teaching. He often reminded us that when we care for the needy – and everyone needs us, each in their own way – we are in reality taking care of him.<sup>28</sup> This is why it is so important “to recognize Christ when he comes out to meet us in our brothers and sisters, the people around us.”<sup>29</sup>

Saint Josemaría tried to find Christ in the first place among the most needy. In the early 1930s he spent many hours visiting needy families in the poorest parts of Madrid, caring for patients in the hospitals, and giving catechism classes to destitute children. Later on he passed on a sense of the urgency for this concern to the young men who drew close to the Work. Moreover, these young people experienced the Father’s human and divine affection for them. Francisco Botella, for example, remembered that at their first meeting, the Father greeted him as though “he had always known me. I still remember his intense look that penetrated my soul and his cheerfulness that filled me with joy and peace. It seemed to me that he knew me on the inside and at the same time he treated me so naturally and simply that I felt as if I was among

my own family.”<sup>30</sup> Another young man, not a particularly sentimental type, said that “he cared for us even better than our mothers.”<sup>31</sup>

In those young people, as in the poor and sick, Saint Josemaría “found” his Friend. Years later, “pensively, with his sons around him, he asked them, ‘My sons, do you know why I love you so much?’ There was silence and the Father went on, ‘Because I see the Blood of Christ coursing in you.’”<sup>32</sup> Jesus, his Friend, had led him to find Him in the people around him, and especially in the most needy. We too, besides finding Him in the Gospels and the Eucharist, “are called to serve the crucified Jesus in all those who are marginalized, to touch his sacred flesh in those who are disadvantaged, in those who hunger and thirst, in the naked and imprisoned, the sick and unemployed, in those who are persecuted, refugees and migrants. There we find our God; there we touch the Lord.”<sup>33</sup>

[Back to contents](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11: *interior intimo meo*, “You were deeper within me than my inmost self.”

<sup>2</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 88.

<sup>3</sup> See commentary on point no. 88 in *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*, ed. Pedro Rodriguez.

<sup>4</sup> *Apuntes Intimos* no. 1637 (quoted in *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on no. 422). The first day of his retreat was 4 October 1932. This text was the basis for point no. 2 in *The Forge*.

<sup>5</sup> Letter dated 29 December 1947, quoted in Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 169.

<sup>7</sup> *The Way*, no. 422.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Way*, nos. 244, 436.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 495.

<sup>10</sup> Salvador Canals, *Jesus as Friend*, Chapter One.

<sup>11</sup> *The Way*, no. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies II*, 1, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, Chapter 8, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *The Forge*, no. 738.

<sup>15</sup> Saint Josemaría, quoted in *Dos meses de catequesis* vol. 2, p. 651.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Hahn, “Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Reader of Sacred Scripture,” *Romana*, 40 (2005), p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> F. Botella, quoted in J. L. González Gullón, *DYA. La Academia y Residencia en la Historia del Opus Dei*, p. 429.

<sup>18</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 253.

<sup>19</sup> Blessed Alvaro de Portillo, *Christ is Passing By*, Foreword.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 153.

<sup>21</sup> *Friends of God*, no. 253.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Ap. Exhort. *Verbum Domini*, 30 September 2010, no. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Javier Echevarría, “San Josemaría Escrivá, maestro de oración en la vida ordinaria.” *Magnificat* (Spanish edition) 2006.

<sup>24</sup> *The Way*, no. 537.

<sup>25</sup> Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* vol. II, pp. 394-5.

<sup>26</sup> Francisco Ponz, cited in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* vol. II, p. 294.

<sup>27</sup> *DYA. La Academia y Residencia*, p. 342.

<sup>28</sup> See *Mt* 10:40; 25:40; *Lk* 10:16.

<sup>29</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 111

<sup>30</sup> *DYA. La academia y residencia*, p. 431.

<sup>31</sup> Juan Jiménez Vargas, in *DYA. La academia y residencia*, p. 443.

<sup>32</sup> Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, p. 223.

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, Way of the Cross, World Youth Day, 29 July 2016.

### III

## «From the Wound of the right hand»

Saint John recounts that on the day of the Resurrection, in the evening, the disciples were gathered in a house with *the doors being shut ... for fear of the Jews (Jn 20:19)*. *And Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."* When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side (Jn 20:19-20). Suddenly their discouragement was transformed into a deep joy. They were filled with the peace our Lord brought, and then received the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 20:22).

Many details in this Gospel scene draw our attention. What were the apostles waiting for? Jesus appeared unexpectedly among them, and his presence filled them with joy and peace. We know some of his words and gestures. But how would he have looked at them? They had abandoned him, and left him alone. They had fled out of cowardice. Yet our Lord didn't reproach them. He himself had foretold what would take place. He knew that their weakness could be the source of a deep conversion. Before suffering his Passion, Jesus told Peter: *I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren (Lk 22:31-32)*. Now that their hearts were contrite, they were able to receive more fully the Love that God offered them. Otherwise perhaps they, and Peter as their head, would have continued to rely too much on their own strength.

But why did Jesus show them his hands and his side? These were still marked with the torment of the crucifixion. Yet the sight of his wounds did not fill them with sorrow but peace; it did not cause dejection, but joy. Rightly viewed, these marks of the nails and the lance are the seal of God's Love. Jesus wanted the wounds of his Passion to remain in his body after he rose from the dead, to remove any trace of mistrust. He did not want us to think that he could ever repent of what he had done, even in light of our often mediocre and even cold response. Christ's love is strong and unwavering.

Moreover, for doubting Thomas the wounds were to be the unmistakable proof of the Resurrection. Jesus is the Son of God, who truly died and rose for our sins. “The wounds of Jesus,” the Pope said, “are a scandal, a stumbling block for faith, yet they are also the test of faith. That is why on the body of the risen Christ the wounds never pass away: they remain, for those wounds are the enduring sign of God’s love for us. They are essential for believing in God. Not for believing that God exists, but for believing that *God is love, mercy and faithfulness*. Saint Peter, quoting Isaiah, writes to Christians: *by his wounds you have been healed* (1 Pet 2:24, cf. Is 53:5).”<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual writers have discovered in our Lord’s wounds a font of delight. Saint Bernard, for example, wrote: “Through these open wounds, I can drink honey from the rock and oil from the flinty stone (cf. Deut 32:13), that is, I can taste and see how good the Lord is.”<sup>2</sup> In these wounds we learn of God’s measureless Love. From his pierced heart flows the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 7:36-39). Our Lord’s wounds are a sure refuge. Discovering the depth of these open wounds can lead us to a “new Mediterranean” in our interior life.

### **“The holy Wound of our Lord’s right hand”**

“Place yourself in the wounds of Christ,” Saint John of Avila advises. “There, he tells us, is where his dove dwells, which is the soul that seeks him with simplicity.”<sup>3</sup> “Hide me in your wounds, Lord,” a well-known prayer beseeches. Saint Josemaría too had recourse to this way of drawing close to the Master, which is so deeply rooted in Christian tradition. As he wrote in 1933: “Place myself each day in a wound of my Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the devotions that he practiced throughout his entire life, and that he recommended to the young people who drew close to him.<sup>5</sup> But it took on special meaning thanks to an experience that opened up a new and immense panorama for him, which took place in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, while he was living in Burgos. It was a time of suffering for him. His children in Opus Dei were dispersed all over Spain: some on the battle fronts, others hidden in various places or living in the zone suffering from religious persecution, including his mother and sister and brother. Almost no news reached him about his

spiritual daughters. And some of the young men who had followed him before the war had already lost their lives.

Confronting these circumstances, Saint Josemaría saw the need to redouble his efforts, his prayer, and especially his practices of penance. But in early June 1938, while walking to the monastery of Las Huelgas, where he was doing research for a thesis, he received a special light from God. He spoke about it in a letter to Juan Jiménez Vargas, written that same day:

“Dear Juanito: This morning on the way to Las Huelgas monastery to do my prayer, I discovered a new Mediterranean: the holy Wound of our Lord’s right hand. There I was all day long kissing and adoring. How truly lovable is our God’s sacred Humanity! Pray that he grant me his true Love to completely purify all my other affections. It’s not enough to say, ‘heart on the Cross!’ If one of Christ’s Wounds cleans, heals, soothes, strengthens, kindles and enraptures, what wouldn’t the Five do as they lie open on the Cross? Heart on the Cross! O, my Jesus, what more could I ask for? I realize that if I continue contemplating in this way (Saint Joseph, my father and lord, is the one who led me there, after I asked him to enkindle me), I’ll end up crazier than ever. Try it out yourself!”<sup>6</sup>

He already had deep devotion to our Lord’s Sacred Humanity and to Christ’s wounds. But now, unexpectedly, he saw it all as a “new Mediterranean.” He grasped more deeply the redemptive Love shown by those wounds, and realized that the best way to respond to such great Love was not a matter of what he could “do,” but rather of placing himself in Christ’s wounded hand, contemplating it and allowing himself to be completely overcome by this Love.

His letter continues: “I’m quite jealous of everyone on the battlefronts, despite everything. The thought goes through my head that, if my own path were not so clearly marked, it would be wonderful to ‘outdo’ Fr. Doyle.<sup>7</sup> But...that would suit me quite well, since penance has never been very hard for me. That’s probably why I’m being led by another path: Love.” His path is to love and let himself be loved. And he concludes: “Take care, my son. *Dominus sit in corde tuo!* Here goes a big hug. From the Wound of the right hand, your Father blesses you.”<sup>8</sup>

That event, that unexpected light, was a sign of hope and a spur for his priestly work. Thanks to this divine illumination, a well-known and often-meditated-on reality—a path he himself had traveled and recommended to others—suddenly became “new,” a font of inexhaustible riches, which he never wanted to separate himself from.

## Defended by Love

The wounds of Jesus are a perennial reminder of his Love, which went to the extreme of his sacrifice on the Cross. God never repents of his love for us. Therefore the contemplation of his Love is a font of hope for us. On seeing the Resurrected Lord with the marks of his Passion, we come to realize that “precisely there, at the lowest point of his abasement—which is also the loftiest point of love—*hope burgeoned*. Should one of you ask: ‘How is hope born?’—‘From the Cross. Look to the Cross; look to Christ Crucified and from there you will receive the hope that never disappears, which lasts to eternal life.’”<sup>9</sup> On the Cross our hope was born and is always reborn. “This is why with Jesus, all our darkness can be transformed into light, every defeat into victory, every disappointment into hope. Every one: yes, every one.”<sup>10</sup> *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom 8:35,37).*

On seeing our weakness and sins, the temptation can come in various guises to lose hope. Something we had consented to in the past, out of frivolity or carelessness, suddenly seems to us an absurd “no,” a blow we struck against the God who loves us. Our lukewarm and feeble response can also be a cause for losing hope. However all this is nothing but a series of temptations from the one who made us fall in the first place. Contemplating our Lord’s wounds can be the best way to react, since thus we are reminded that his love is *as strong as death* (*Song 8:16*). What is more, his Love has conquered death. As a contemporary poet has eloquently written: “Washed by the water from his Side / and inside the Wound defended / from so many ‘nos’ that lead to nothing / from so many feeble ‘yeses,’ from so much surrender.”<sup>11</sup>

Contemplating our Lord’s Sacred Humanity, wounded for our sins and now risen back to life, should be for us a font of hope. Jesus looks at us as he did at the apostles, without resentment. He doesn’t upbraid us for our sins, our weaknesses, our betrayals. Rather he “reaffirms” us, because his love is truly unconditional. He doesn’t tell us: “I’ll love you, if you behave well,” but rather “I love you, you’re a treasure for me; and you will continue being so no matter what happens.”

This realization, which stems from contemplating the open wounds in our Lord’s Body, will fill us with joy and peace. *No matter what happens*, we can find refuge there, welcoming once again God’s forgiveness. “In my own life, I have so often seen God’s merciful countenance, his patience; I have also seen so many people find the courage to enter the wounds of Jesus by saying to him: Lord, I am here, accept my poverty, hide my sin in your wounds, wash it away with your blood. And I have always seen that God did just this—he accepted them, consoled them, cleansed them, loved them.”<sup>12</sup>

Acknowledging our own littleness isn’t a defeat or a humiliation. It could be, if God were someone seeking to dominate us. But that’s not how God is. Love is his driving force: the unconditional Love that he gives us, and that he hopes we will welcome.

## **The path of compassion**

There are many ways to draw close to our Lord’s wounds. “Go as the spirit moves you: unburden in his Wounds all your love, both human and... divine,” Saint Josemaría advised.<sup>13</sup> We know how much he liked to put himself into the Gospel scenes with his imagination. In *Holy Rosary*, for example, when contemplating the first glorious mystery, he wrote: “And before this decade is over, you have kissed the wounds on His feet..., and I, more daring—because I am more a child—have placed my lips upon His open side.”<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Javier Echevarría, in a book he wrote about his years spent alongside Saint Josemaría, recalled how he did the thanksgiving after Mass, renewing each day his personal encounter with the Love of his Life. “He would kneel for some minutes, on the floor or the kneeler. And looking at the pocket crucifix that he held in his hands, he would recite the prayer *En ego, O bone et dulcissime Iesu, Look down upon*

me, good and gentle Jesus. And while saying the words about our Lord's wounds, he would devoutly kiss each one.”<sup>15</sup>

Our Lord's wounds, which Saint Josemaría discovered so deeply on that June morning, not only reveal Christ's Love for us. They are also an invitation to co-redeem with him, as our Lady does; to be his Simon of Cyrene and console him for the many offenses that wound his Heart, above all because they also wound ours. It is a call, in the end, to care for him in *the least of these my brethren* with whom he identifies himself so closely, and in whom he has wanted to remain with us (cf. *Mt 25:40*).

Therefore, Saint Josemaría's discovery of this “new Mediterranean”—certainly a special light from God—should be seen in the context of the many hours he spent caring for the sick and poor in Madrid's impoverished districts. Here we are shown a marvelous way to discover God's Love: getting out of ourselves and drawing close to Jesus in those who are suffering. For Saint Josemaría, this was a sure path.

Touching Christ in those who are suffering offers us a path to draw close to his wounds and respond to his Love with love. Thus we learn to extend to others the same tenderness that God shows us when he sees our personal weakness. By following this path, our own life takes on a renewed sense of mission that spurs us to get out of ourselves, relying not on our own strength but on a call coming from God, who transforms us and counts on us to sow his peace and joy in the world. The Pope insists untiringly on this point: “Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others ... Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people.”<sup>16</sup>

“Placing ourselves” in Christ's wounds, by the path of compassion and contemplation, can open for us an authentic new Mediterranean. We learn to love those around us with our whole heart, beginning with those most in need, who often are right by our side, in our own home.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, canonization homily for John XXIII and John Paul II, 27 April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Bernard, *Sermon 61* (Commentary on the *Song of Songs*), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Saint John of Avila, *Letters*, no. 47. Cf. *Song 2:16*.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, no. 1799b, dated 1933, in *Santo Rosario. Edición crítico-histórica*, Rialp, Madrid 2010, commentary on the first Glorious Mystery, p. 226, note 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Each day, in fulfilment of an old resolution, I will remain within the Wound of my Lord’s Side.” Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, no. 1763, dated 1934; in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter Press, commentary on point no. 288.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Saint Josemaría, Letter to Juan Jimenez Vargas, 6 June 1938, in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, Scepter, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Probably Fr. William Doyle, S.J., Irish priest killed in World War I after many acts of heroic service as chaplain on the battle front. He stressed the need for a cheerful but demanding asceticism in daily life (cf. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 1031).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Saint Josemaría, Letter to Juan Jimenez Vargas, 6 June 1938, in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, Scepter New York, pp. 213-214.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, 12 April 2017.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Julio Martínez Mesanza, “Defendido,” *Gloria*, Rialp, Madrid 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, Homily, 7 April 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 303.

<sup>14</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, first Glorious Mystery.

<sup>15</sup> Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, p. 235.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 270.

## IV

### «Don't speak: listen to him»

Before returning to his Father, Jesus told his Apostles, *Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high* (Lk 24:49). So the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem, waiting for God's promise. In fact, the promise, the gift, was God himself, the Holy Spirit. A few days later on the feast of Pentecost, they received this gift and were filled with God's grace. "The disciples, witnesses of the glory of the risen Christ, were filled with the strength of the Holy Spirit, their minds and hearts were opened to a new light."<sup>1</sup> That same day they started to preach boldly, and Scripture tells us that those who welcomed Saint Peter's words were baptized, and *there were added that day about three thousand souls* (Acts 2:41).

Saint Josemaría often reminded us that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not a memory of the past, but an ever-present reality. "Like the men and women who came up to Peter at Pentecost, we too have been baptized. In Baptism our Father God has taken possession of our lives, has made us share in the life of Christ and has given us the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> First in Baptism, and then in Confirmation, we have received the fullness of God's gift: the life of the Blessed Trinity.

### **Discovering the Paraclete**

God's Gift, the salvation we receive, is not an object but a Person. And so all Christian life is born from a personal relationship with the God who comes to dwell in our souls. This is a well-known truth, the basis of the life of faith. Nevertheless, it may also be something that we still need to discover.

One of the people most familiar with Saint Josemaría's writings says: "Throughout 1932 there was a noticeable growth in Saint Josemaría's devotion to the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> After months of trying to come closer to

the Holy Spirit, he received a special light, opening up a new panorama, as we can see from a note he wrote that day:

“Octave of all Saints – Tuesday – 8 November 1932: This morning, not yet an hour ago, my Fr Sanchez revealed to me ‘another Mediterranean.’ He told me: ‘Make friends with the Holy Spirit. Don’t speak: listen to him.’ And while I was praying on my way home from Leganitos, my prayer was both gentle and filled with light. And I saw how the life of childhood, by making me aware that I was a son of God, had brought me to love the Father; that, even before that, I had gone through Mary to reach Jesus, whom I adore as a friend, as a brother, as his lover, for that is what I am. Up until now, I knew that the Holy Spirit was dwelling in my soul to sanctify it... but I hadn’t grasped the truth of his presence. Fr Sanchez’s words were what I needed. I feel Love within me, and I want to get to know him, to become his friend, his confidant. I want to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting, enkindling. I won’t know how to... but He will give me the strength. He will do everything, if I want him to... and I do! Divine Guest, Master, Light, Guide, Love: may this poor donkey make you welcome and listen to your lessons, and be set aflame, and follow you and love you. Resolution: foster, uninterrupted if possible, friendship and a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit. *Veni Sancte Spiritus!*”<sup>4</sup>

In these notes Saint Josemaría summed up the spiritual journey God had led him on: the discovery of divine filiation, Mary’s intercession with Jesus, the treasure of Christ’s friendship... until becoming aware of the presence of God’s Love within him. As he wrote many years later, there comes a moment when the heart “needs to distinguish and adore each one of the Divine Persons ... And to spend time lovingly with the Father and with the Son and with the Holy Spirit; and to submit willingly to the activity of the life-giving Paraclete who, with no merit on our part, gives himself to us: the supernatural gifts and virtues!”<sup>5</sup>

That the Holy Spirit dwells in our soul in grace was something he already knew, but he had not yet grasped this truth in all its depth as a lived experience. The words of his spiritual director opened up a new horizon before his eyes, not only as something understood, but above all as *lived*. “I feel Love within me.” In the face of this marvelous reality, he ardently desired to respond fully, to place himself at the service of Love. “I want to get to know him, to become his friend, his confidant. I

want to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting, enkindling.” And afraid that he won’t be up to it, he latches onto the certainty that it is God who will do it, if he lets him.

## **Welcoming God’s gift**

The first thing to notice in this “Mediterranean” that opened up before Saint Josemaria is that *God is the one who acts*. A few weeks later it inspired point 57 in *The Way*: “Get to know the Holy Spirit, the Great Unknown, the one who has to sanctify you.”<sup>6</sup> Our sanctity is God’s work, even though the God who sanctifies us is often the “Great Unknown.”

In a world like ours in which the accent is all on human endeavor and the results of our own efforts, we do not always realize that the salvation we receive from God is in the end *a free gift*. In the words of Saint Paul: *for by grace you have been saved through faith* (*Eph 2:8*). Certainly, our own efforts are important, and the way we live really matters. Nevertheless, everything we do starts from the certainty that “Christianity is grace; it is the wonder of a God who is not satisfied with creating the world and man, but puts himself on the same level as the creature he has made.”<sup>7</sup> And this is something that everyone has to discover *personally*. As Pope Francis likes to stress, we need to recognize that “God gets there first. We go in search of him, but he finds us first.”<sup>8</sup>

From this discovery is born “an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the *primacy of grace*.”<sup>9</sup> As the years go by, the words with which Saint John Paul II prepared the Church for the new millennium continue to be fully relevant. In particular, he put us on guard against a temptation that can try to undermine our spiritual life and apostolic mission: “thinking that the results depend upon our ability to act and to plan.”<sup>10</sup> If we fall into this trap, we could easily imagine that the reason our interior life is less intense than we wish is that we are not making enough effort, or that the reason our apostolate does not produce the fruit we expect is that we have not been sufficiently demanding. This may be part of the problem, but it is not the only reason. We Christians know that it is God who makes something successful. “Apostolic

undertakings grow not by human effort, but by the breathing of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Here we have another way of recognizing that our life has value not because of what we do, nor does it lose value because we do less or because of our failures, as long as we return to this God of ours who has wanted to live among us. “To live according to the Holy Spirit means to live by faith and hope and charity – to allow God to take possession of our lives and to change our hearts, to make us resemble him more and more.”<sup>12</sup> The authentic starting point for Christian life, for the good works that our Father God wants (cf. *Eph 2:10*), is gratefully accepting and welcoming God’s gift, which leads us live in the hope-filled self-abandonment that marks the life of God’s children.<sup>13</sup>

### **“Foster a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit”**

To receive the gift of God is to receive a Person, and thus we can understand Fr Sanchez’s advice to Saint Josemaria: “Make friends with the Holy Spirit. Don’t speak: listen to him.” Friendship is between persons, and friendship grows through dialogue. That is why on discovering the personal presence of God in his heart, Saint Josemaria made the specific resolution: “foster, uninterruptedly if possible, friendship and a loving, docile conversation with the Holy Spirit.” We can do this on our part too, in order to *listen to him*.

This is a path open to all Christians: to open themselves continually to the action of the Paraclete, listen to his inspirations, and let themselves be guided *into all the truth* (*Jn 16:13*). Jesus had promised the Twelve: *He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you* (*Jn 14:26*). The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to live according to God’s plans, for it is he who *will declare to you the things that are to come* (*Jn 16:13*).

The first Christians understood this reality, and above all experienced it in their lives. “There is hardly a page in the Acts of the Apostles where we fail to read about him and the action by which he guides, directs and enlivens the life and work of the early Christian community.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, *all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God* (*Rom 8:14*). And we let ourselves be led by him in as much as we train ourselves day after day in the “difficult discipline of listening”.<sup>15</sup> Friendship with the Holy

Spirit means listening to his voice, “which is speaking to you through the events of daily life, through your joys and sufferings, the people who are close to you, the voice of your conscience thirsting for truth, happiness, goodness and beauty.”<sup>16</sup>

In this regard, there is an interesting passage in the recent book of interviews with Benedict XVI. The journalist asked him if he experienced any lonely hours when he felt terribly alone inside. “Certainly,” replied Benedict XVI, “but because I feel so connected to the Lord, I’m therefore never entirely alone.” And right away he added, “One simply knows, I’m not the one doing things. I also could not do it alone. He is constantly there. I must only listen and make myself wide open for him.”<sup>17</sup> The goal of sharing one’s whole life with God and living in friendship with him, is as attractive today as it has always been. But, the journalist asked, “How does one listen and open wide for him?” The Pope Emeritus laughed and the journalist persisted, “How does one do it best?” And Benedict XVI replied, “Well, now, you just beg the Lord – You must help me now! – and recollect yourself inwardly, stay silent. Then one can time and again knock on the door with prayer, and thus, you’re already doing it.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Learning to recognize his voice**

In our prayer life, perhaps not deliberately, we might sometimes hope for something a bit extraordinary that will guarantee we are talking to God, that he is listening to us, that he is speaking to us. But in reality the spiritual life is a more everyday affair. Rather than looking for extraordinary graces, “we should be aware of the work of the Holy Spirit all around us, and in our own selves.”<sup>19</sup>

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:14).* The Holy Spirit usually leads us, not by specific instructions, but by giving us light and guidance for our daily path. In quite varied ways, he sheds light on the small and great events in our life. We see one detail after another in a new, different way, with a light that shows the meaning of something that was clouded and uncertain before.

How does this light come to us? In a thousand different ways: reading Scripture, the writings of the saints, or a book of spiritual reading; in unexpected circumstances, a conversation between friends, or reading a

piece of news. There are countless specific moments when the Holy Spirit can be suggesting something to us. But he relies on our understanding and our freedom to give shape to his suggestions. It is good to bring these lights to our prayer; to meditate on them slowly, day after day; to pause in our prayer and ask our Lord, “This thing that worries me, this thing that has happened, what do you want to tell me here? What does it mean for my life?”

In this patient listening it is good to bear in mind that the voice of the Holy Spirit can reach our heart mixed with other very different things: our selfishness, our appetites, temptations from the devil... How are we to recognize what comes from the Holy Spirit? In this, as in so many other things, there are no hard and fast rules, but there are signs that can help us discern his presence. First, we have to remember that God does not contradict himself; he will not ask us for anything that goes against Jesus’ teaching, as found in Holy Scripture and taught by the Church. Nor will he suggest something opposed to our vocation. Secondly, we have to consider what the inspirations imply. A tree is known by its fruits (cf. *Mt 7:16-20*); and as Saint Paul said, *the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (*Gal 5:22-23*).

The spiritual tradition of the Church has been constant in its teaching that “the Spirit of God unfailingly produces peace in our souls, and the devil unfailingly produces agitation.”<sup>20</sup> In the course of the day so many “good thoughts” may occur to us: thoughts of service, of caring for others, of forgiving them. Often, these good thoughts do not come from ourselves, but from the Holy Spirit in our heart. Acting on these inspirations from the Paraclete will fill us with *gaudium cum pace*, with joy imbued with peace.

Hence we need to foster a serene docility to the Paraclete, with the help of spiritual guidance. It is significant that this new horizon was opened up to Saint Josemaría precisely in the context of spiritual direction. The advice he received – “listen to him” – also reveals the awareness that Fr Sanchez had of his mission as a spiritual director: to make it easier for the Holy Spirit to take on progressively more of the guidance of Saint Josemaría’s soul, “to facilitate his work of polishing, uprooting enkindling.” This is the job of those who accompany others in their spiritual lives: helping them to get to know themselves so that they can

discern more clearly what the Paraclete may be asking of them. Thus little by little each soul learns to see God in what happens to them and in events in the world around them.

### **Anchored in God's Love, with the breath of the Holy Spirit**

Ever since our Lord's Ascension into heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we have been living in times of mission. Christ himself has given us the task of taking salvation to the whole world. Pope Francis has often talked about this reality, speaking of "how God challenges those who believe in him 'to go forth,'"<sup>21</sup> and pointing out that, together with this mission, our Lord has given us the strength to fulfill it. Indeed, this dynamism "is not a strategy, but the actual strength of the Holy Spirit, uncreated Charity."<sup>22</sup>

In his catechesis about hope, Pope Francis reminded us of the importance of letting ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, using an image much loved by the Fathers of the Church. "The Letter to the Hebrews compares hope to an anchor (cf. 6:18-19); and we can add to this image that of a sail. If the anchor is what gives the boat its stability and keeps it 'anchored' amid the undulations of the sea, the sail is instead what makes it move and advance on the waters. Hope is truly like a sail; it gathers the wind of the Holy Spirit and transforms it into a driving force that propels the boat, as the case may be, out to sea or to the shore."<sup>23</sup>

Being anchored in the depths of God's Love gives us security; while being docile to the Holy Spirit allows us to go forward with God's strength, and in the direction he suggests. As Saint Josemaria insists, we have "to fly" very high, "without the support of anything here on earth, relying on the voice and the inspiration of the Spirit."<sup>24</sup> Hence we see why "the Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer."<sup>25</sup> Recent Popes have often reminded us that if we want to fulfill the mission Christ entrusted to us with the same Spirit that moved him, there is no other way than prayer – continual, trusting conversation with the Paraclete.

Thus we will discover the Mediterranean of the living presence of God in our hearts, and set out into the deep, guided by the Holy Spirit, who

is “light, fire, and driving wind which sets the flame alight and makes it capable of enkindling a great fire of love.”<sup>26</sup>

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[Back to contents](#)

<sup>1</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 128.

<sup>3</sup> Pedro Rodríguez, *Critical-Historical Edition of The Way*, commenting on point no. 57; pp. 251-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 306.

<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez, *Critical-Historical Edition of The Way*, commenting on point no. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), no. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in S. Rubin and F. Ambrogetti, *El Papa Francisco: Conversaciones con Jorge Bergoglio*, Barcelona 2013, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Saint John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 134.

<sup>13</sup> See Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 127.

<sup>15</sup> Saint John Paul II, Address, 5 June 2004.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Pope Benedict XVI with Peter Seewald, *Last Testimony: In His Own Words*, 2016, pp. 234-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, no. 130.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, Scepter, New York, 2007, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, Apost. Ex. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, 31 May 2017.

<sup>24</sup> *The Forge*, no. 994.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 262.

<sup>26</sup> *Friends of God*, no. 244.

# V

## «To Jesus, Through Mary»

At the foot of the Cross, only his Mother, Holy Mary, some other women and John, the youngest disciple, accompanied our Lord. Only these few people were at his side during those terrible hours. These few... and a crowd of onlookers and opportunists, the handful of soldiers who brought him to Calvary, and the accusers who continued to mock him, perhaps savoring their “victory.” And the rest of the disciples? They had fled.

John himself tells us: *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother’* (Jn 19:25). The Evangelist concludes: *And from that hour the disciple took her into his home* (Jn 19:27).

In the young apostle, the Mother of Christ “is given as mother to every single individual and all mankind.”<sup>1</sup> From that moment on, Mary is the Mother of all Christians. The first disciples understood this right away. Feeling sorrow at our Lord’s absence, they gathered around Mary after his Ascension into Heaven: *All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers* (Acts 1:14).

We too are called to experience Mary’s motherhood personally, and to respond like John, who “welcomes” the Mother of Christ ‘into his own home’ and brings her into everything that makes up his inner life, that is to say into his human and Christian ‘I.’<sup>2</sup> Each of us has to undertake this personal journey in our own way... and at our own pace.

### “I am also a son of my Mother Mary”

Saint Josemaría had devotion to our Lady since his childhood. In May 1970, during a novena at the feet of Our Lady of Guadalupe, he said: “I

recommend that all of us, at this moment especially, relive our childhood, and recall, as I do quite clearly—try your hardest, if you need to, to remember—the first time you turned to our Lady knowing what you were doing and wanting to do just that.”<sup>3</sup> We know that when he was a small child, his mother offered him to Our Lady of Torreciudad in gratitude for having cured him of a life-threatening illness. He also learned from his parents to pray to Holy Mary. He would recall this as the years went by: “I still renew, morning and evening, and not just occasionally but habitually, the offering I learned from my parents: ‘O my Lady, my Mother! I offer myself entirely to you, and in proof of my filial love, I consecrate to you this day my eyes, my ears, my tongue, my heart...’”<sup>4</sup>

While living in Saragossa, Saint Josemaría made daily visits to Our Lady of Pilar. He entrusted to her intercession the inklings he was sensing that our Lord wanted something special from him. We still have a small replica of Our Lady of Pilar, poorly made of plaster, on the base of which Saint Josemaría engraved with a nail “*Domina, ut sit!*” and the date 24 May 1924. “That was the materialization of what my prayer had been like for years, he said years later, which I have told you about so many times.”<sup>5</sup>

In Madrid he had an image that he called “Our Lady of the Kisses,” because he never failed to greet her with a kiss upon entering or leaving the house. “Not just that one, but all images of our Lady moved him. This was especially true of those he found thrown out on the street and covered with grime, or those he caught sight of in his travels through Madrid, such as a picture in glazed tile that attracted his attention every day as he was leaving Santa Isabel.”<sup>6</sup>

Through contemplating the Gospel, he also learned how to stay close to Mary and turn to her, as the first disciples had done. In his book *Holy Rosary*, fruit of this loving contemplation of Christ’s life, he comments on the second Glorious mystery: “Peter and the others go back to Jerusalem—*cum gaudio magno*: with great joy (*Lk 24:52*) ... But you and I feel like orphans: we are sad, and we go to Mary for consolation.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite all of this, Mary’s motherhood was another “discovery” that Saint Josemaría would make while still a young priest. In one of his personal notes dated September 1932, he writes: “Yesterday I

discovered another Mediterranean: if I am a son of my Father God, then I am also a son of my Mother Mary.”<sup>8</sup>

This was not something new. It was a truth that he had meditated on and experienced in his own life, and yet it suddenly took on new meaning. Recalling his spiritual trajectory, he adds: “I will explain myself: through Mary I went to Jesus, and I’ve always had her as my Mother, even though I have been such a bad son. (From now on I’ll be good).” Our Lady brought him to Jesus. Mary had been his main intercessor in his insistent petition that he might see what our Lord was asking of him. Then what was new about this discovery? He explains: “I saw this reality of my filiation to my Mother in a clearer light, and felt it more distinctly yesterday. That’s why, during Holy Communion in my Mass, I told our Lady, my Mother: put a new suit on me. My petition was only natural, since I was celebrating one of her feasts.”<sup>9</sup>

The image of “putting on a new suit” has strong Pauline echoes: *Put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth (Eph 4:22-24)*. Thus this new discovery of Mary’s motherhood had all the flavor of a personal conversion. It was a reality that he *saw* with greater clarity, that he *felt* in a new way, and that led to a simple but profound resolution: *From now on I’ll be good*.

Those who have studied Saint Josemaría’s writings in greater depth have highlighted the itinerary of this discovery. Eight days after describing this new Mediterranean that had opened up before him, he wrote another note that would later appear in *The Way*: “We go to Jesus—and we ‘return’ to him—through Mary.”<sup>10</sup> It was a reflection that had been brewing in his soul for quite some time, but he suddenly understood it with new depth, and it clarified for him anew the importance of Mary in his relationship with God. Four days after this note, he wrote: “To how many young people I would like to shout in their ears: Be Mary’s... and you will be ‘ours’!”<sup>11</sup> Years later, when asked what this meant, he answered: “I want to say what you understand perfectly well... On the one hand, if there is no devotion to Mary you cannot do anything; it’s as if these souls had no foundation for spiritual life. On the other hand, when there is filial devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, souls find themselves well-disposed to serve our Lord in

whatever state they may be: single, married, widowed, and the priests as priests.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately it is Mary who leads us to Jesus; and Jesus brings us to the Father. Our Lady is simply the one who “facilitates” our access to God.

### **“Returning” to Jesus through Mary**

In that same September 1932, Saint Josemaría meditated over and over again on the role that our Lady plays on our path to Jesus. Now he wasn’t focusing on finding Christ or discovering his will for us, but about “returning” to him when we have strayed. This way of expressing things was new for those who heard him speak in this way. For example, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo remembers that he was surprised by it himself: “I asked the Father: Father, why have you written this? That we go through Mary, I understand, but that one ‘returns’... And he told me: My son, if someone has the misfortune of separating himself from God by sin, or is at the point of separation because he has become lukewarm or apathetic, then he appeals to the Blessed Virgin and finds strength again; the strength to go to the confessional if necessary, to go to the Confidence and bare his conscience with great sincerity, without keeping dark spots in his soul, without sharing secrets with the devil, and through Mary he goes to Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

Getting up again after a fall can be hard, and it gets harder as the years goes by. Physically speaking, this is obvious; we only need to think of the problems that can come when an elderly person falls down in the street. But this also holds true in the spiritual life. As we grow older, it can happen that it becomes harder for us to say we are sorry. It humiliates us to keep falling in the same ways; we are ashamed to commit such sins “at this stage of the game!” The constant evidence of our own weakness can become too much for us, and sometimes we can even give in to a loss of hope that takes away our joy.

Despair is a subtle enemy that leads us to close in on ourselves. We think that we have let God down, like someone who buys an electronic device and realizes it is not as good as it was made out to be. Nevertheless, on seeing us in this state, God wants to remind us that *he knows us perfectly!* He could say to each of us, as to Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you (Jer 1:5)*. Therefore his Love for us

gives us a firm sense of security: knowing what we are like, God loved us to the extreme of giving his life for us... and it wasn't a mistake.

When even this truth, which is so consoling, becomes hard for us to grasp, remembering our Mother can be, as it were, the “shortcut” that facilitates our path back home.<sup>14</sup> Mary draws us in a special way to the Mercy of this God who awaits us with open arms. In his last general audience, Benedict XVI confided: “I should like to invite all of us to renew our firm confidence in the Lord, to entrust ourselves like children in God’s arms, certain that those arms always hold us, enabling us to press forward each day, even when the going is rough. I want everyone to feel loved by that God who gave his Son for us and who has shown us his infinite love. I want everyone to feel the joy of being a Christian.”<sup>15</sup> And so that we might truly feel this joy, God wanted to make clear his love for us, a love that is both paternal... and maternal.

The “maternal” love of God is given expression in various places in Scripture; perhaps the best-known passage is that of Isaiah: *Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you* (Is 49:15). Or even more explicitly: *As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you* (Is 66:13). Nevertheless, God wanted to go still further and gave us his own Mother, the woman from whom his beloved Son took flesh. As a result, Christians of all times have discovered in Mary a privileged and especially accessible path to the infinite Love of the God who forgives.

Sometimes we encounter people who find it hard to address a God who seems abstract or distant to them, or who do not dare to look at Christ directly. It’s a bit like children who prefer to go to their mother before facing their father when they have done something wrong or broken an object of great value... Similarly, “a great many sinners cannot say the *Our Father* who can still say the *Ave Maria*.”<sup>16</sup> And thus, through Mary, they can “return” to Jesus.

## To Mary, with the tenderness of children

In Saint Josemaría’s life, the discovery of Mary’s importance goes hand-in-hand with living spiritual childhood. In a point from *The Way* originating from some difficult circumstances in his life, he wrote: “Mother! Call her again and again. She is listening, she sees you in

danger perhaps, and with her Son's grace she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. Call her, and you will find yourself with added strength for the new struggle.”<sup>17</sup> Those who were with Saint Josemaría at the time didn't know how much of his own experience was being reflected in these lines. During those years, Saint Josemaría was also learning how to draw close to God as a little child.

The book *Holy Rosary* is a fruit of this way of praying, as are some chapters in *The Way*. The “discoveries” we have just recalled come from this trusting relationship with God and with Mary. In fact, Saint Josemaría followed this path throughout his whole life. A few days before his last Christmas on earth, he confided to a group of his sons: “Usually I abandon myself; I try to make myself small and put myself in our Lady's arms. I tell our Lord: Jesus, make a little room for me! Let's see if we can both fit in your Mother's arms! And that's all. But you should all follow your own path; mine doesn't need to be your way. Long live freedom!”<sup>18</sup>

Without being the only path to achieve this, *becoming children* facilitates attitudes such as humility and hope-filled abandonment in all of life's circumstances. It's also a way to grow in simplicity and naturalness in our efforts to draw close to God. Furthermore, since it is a path marked by recognizing our own weakness and dependence, it enables us more easily to open to God the doors of our own heart, that is, our own intimacy.

Children are vulnerable, and therefore they are very sensitive to love; they have a deep understanding of the gestures and attitudes of adults. Therefore we need to let ourselves be “touched” by God, by opening the doors of our soul to him. The Pope also suggests this to young people: “He asks us if we want a full life. And in his name, I ask you: do you want a full life? Start right this moment by letting yourself be open and attentive!”<sup>19</sup> Having a heart does not mean falling into affectation or sentimentality, a mere caricature of authentic tenderness. On the contrary, rediscovering one's heart, letting oneself be moved, can be a path to finding God. As Saint Josemaría said in 1932: “My poor heart yearns for tenderness. *Si oculus tuus scandalizat te...* No, it is not necessary to throw them afar; it is not possible to live without a heart ... And this tenderness, which you have placed in us, how it is satisfied and

fulfilled completely, when we seek you with the tenderness (which led you to death) of your divine Heart.”<sup>20</sup>

We can go to Mary, and through her to Jesus, by way of tenderness, which is the way children begin to know their mothers and to trust them for their whole lives. By this and other paths that God may suggest to us, we enter an immense Mediterranean: that of having a Mother in Heaven who is all beautiful, Holy Mary.

[Back to contents](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptoris Mater*, 25 March 1987, 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Josemaría, Notes from his prayer done out loud in the old basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico, 20 May 1970, in Pedro Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, Scepter, 1997, p. 321.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 296.

<sup>5</sup> Notes from a family gathering, 26 July 1974 (AGP, library, Po1). The replica is preserved in a gallery of mementoes from his life, in the central offices of Opus Dei, in Rome.

<sup>6</sup> Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, Second Glorious Mystery.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Apuntes intimos*, 820, 5 September 1932, in *Holy Rosary, Critical-Historical Edition*, introduction to the Second Glorious Mystery.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 495.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Josemaría, Text from Notebook VI, no. 825, dated 17 September 1932, in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on no. 494.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Josemaría Notes from a get-together, Madrid, 23 October 1972, in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on 494.

<sup>13</sup> Notes from a conversation with Alvaro del Portillo, Madrid, 4 September 1977, cited by Pedro Rodríguez, *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on 495. Saint Josemaría called the fraternal chat or conversation of spiritual accompaniment the "confidence," highlighting the trust and discretion that should mark it.

<sup>14</sup> "Mary, Mother of our Lord and our Mother ... provides a short-cut to God" (Javier Echevarría, "Love for Holy Mary in the Writings of Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," *Palabra*, 156-157 (1978), pp. 341-345.

<sup>15</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience, 27 February 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Advent*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1950, p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> *The Way*, 516.

<sup>18</sup> Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, 20 December 1974, in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, vol. 2, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, Speech, 28 July 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Intimate notes*, 1658, 9 October 1932, in *The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, comment on no. 118. Cf. *Mk* 9:47.

## EPILOGUE

The discovery of the different *Mediterraneans* that we have been reviewing in these pages widened the heart of St Josemaría in an ineffable way. As if taking small steps by the hand of the Lord, he understood better the meaning of the Cross, which made him feel like the son of a Father full of Love; he discovered the intimate and close Love of Jesus; he learned to let himself be loved by God, our Comforter, trusting in Him more than in his own strength; and little by little he knew how to let the Holy Spirit take the lead in his spiritual life and in his action on earth. In short, he understood that the fullness of Christian life does not consist in fulfilling a series of tasks, reaching a certain standard or “in carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in being united with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.”<sup>1</sup>

Following in the footsteps of St. Josemaría, we too can ask God to lead us into those *Mediterraneans* of the interior life, landscapes so well known... but at the same time immense, which will allow us to “to understand more profoundly the love of God, so that we are able to show that love to other people through what we do and say.”<sup>2</sup> There is nothing more urgent ... nor more beautiful.

[Back to contents](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience, 13 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 97.

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