

SOMETHING GREAT THAT IS LOVE (IX): We are apostles!

The apostolic adventure inaugurated by Jesus in the world began in Capernaum. We know that at least four of the twelve Apostles were fishermen from that town. “The first Apostles, when our Lord called them, were by the side of an old boat busy mending the torn nets. Our Lord told them to follow him and *statim*, immediately, *relictis omnibus*, they left everything—everything! —and followed him...”¹

Jesus’ words when calling the first Apostles marked out a path that will forever change the course of history: “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men” (*Mk* 1:17). He doesn’t go into more detail. They will continue being fishermen, but from now on they will catch another type of “fish.” And they will come to know different “seas,” but the skills they have learned in their work will still be useful. Days of favorable winds and an abundant catch will come, but also slow days, without any fish, or with such a small catch that they will return to shore with the sensation of being empty-handed. But the decisive thing is not the amount of fish, or what men judge to be a success or failure; the important thing is what they are going to be. Right from the beginning, Jesus wants them to be aware of their new identity, since He is calling them not only *to do something*—a beautiful and extraordinary undertaking—but *to be someone* who carries out a mission: being “fishers of men.”

“All for the sake of the gospel”

In responding to God’s call, our identity is reconfigured. “It is a new outlook on life,” Saint Josemaria said. Realizing that Jesus Himself is inviting us to share in his mission enkindles in each person the desire “to dedicate their noblest energies to an activity that, over time, becomes a way of life.” Thus, little by little, “vocation leads us, without realizing it, to take a position in life that we preserve eagerly and joyfully right to the moment of death. And it gives our work a sense of mission.”² Over time, it shapes our way of being and acting and of looking at the world, and makes us happy.

As Monsignor Ocáriz said forcefully: “we do not ‘do apostolate,’ we are apostles!”³ The apostolic mission doesn’t occupy a specific time or place in our personal life; rather it affects everything we do and reaches every corner of our life. Saint Josemaria insisted right from the beginning to the people in the Work: “Do not forget, my sons, that we are not souls who have

¹ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 356.

² Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 9 January 1932, no. 9.

³ Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9.

joined with other souls to do a good thing. That is a lot... and yet it is little. We are apostles *who fulfil an imperative command from Christ.*"⁴

"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" Saint Paul exclaimed (cf. *1 Cor* 9:16-23). It was a conviction that he bore deep in his soul. This loving impulse was both an invitation and a duty for him: "if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me." Hence the only reward he seeks is "that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge," since he sees himself as "the servant of all, that I might gain the more." Paul opens his heart to us: he is the last of the apostles, unworthy and without merits, but he *is* an apostle. Hence there is no circumstance that is not apostolic for him: "I do it all for the sake of the gospel." This is his "letter of introduction," and how he wants to be seen: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (*Rom* 1:1).

In a similar way, apostolate for a Christian is not simply a "task" or an activity that takes up certain hours every day, nor even something important that needs to be done. It is a need that stems from a heart that has become "one body, one spirit in Christ,"⁵ in union with the whole Church. Being an apostle "is not and cannot be an honorary title. It involves concretely and even dramatically the entire life of the person concerned."⁶ At times we will need the encouragement and advice of other people in our efforts to make Christ known. But since we know our calling is a gift from God, we should ask Him that the apostolate may flow from our heart as naturally as water from a fountain (cf. *Jn* 4:14).

Salt, light and leaven for the world

Our Lord often made use of parables to explain to his disciples the role they were going to carry out in the world. "You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world" (cf. *Mt* 5:13-14). On another occasion, Jesus spoke to them about leaven—about how a small amount leavens the whole batch (cf. *Mt* 13:33). For that is how Jesus' apostles have to be: salt that brings joy, light that helps guide others, leaven that makes the whole mass rise. And that is how Saint Josemaria envisioned the apostolate of his daughters and sons: "You have a call from God to a specific path: to place yourselves at all the crossroads of the world, with your heart placed in God. And to be there leaven, salt, light for the world. In order to illumine, to give savor, to leaven, to raise up."⁷

The faithful of Opus Dei, like so many other ordinary Christians, carry out their apostolate in the middle of the world, with naturalness and discretion. Although this may sometimes have given rise to misunderstandings, what they are trying to do is simply to make these parables of our Lord a reality in their own lives. Salt isn't seen, when mixed in well with the meal; it gives

⁴ *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, no. 27 (italics in the original), cited in *The Way, Critical Historical Edition*, note to no. 942.

⁵ *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer III.

⁶ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 10 September 2008.

⁷ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a meditation, April 1955, in *Obras* 1956, XI, p. 9.

flavor to food that might otherwise be insipid, even though of good quality. The same is true of leaven; it gives bulk to the bread, without being noticed. The light, in turn, is “placed on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house,” and is always “before men” (*Mt* 5:15-16). It doesn’t call attention to itself, however, but to what it seeks to illumine. Christians should enjoy being with others, sharing in their dreams and plans. “We, who are salt and light of Christ, ought to feel uncomfortable when we are not surrounded by people.”⁸ This openness, moreover, means interacting with those who don’t think like we do, with the serene desire to leave in their hearts the “mark of God.”⁹ We will do so in the way the Holy Spirit suggests to us: at times saying a short prayer for them; other times, with a friendly word or gesture...

The apostolic effectiveness of a person’s life can’t be reduced to numbers. Much of the fruit remains hidden, and we will never know about it in this life. But on our part we need to foster the desire, ever renewed, to live closely united to our Lord. “We have to go through life being apostles, with God’s light and God’s salt. Without fear, with naturalness, but with so strong an interior life and such close union with our Lord that we give light, and avoid the corruption and darkness.”¹⁰ God himself will make our efforts fruitful, and we won’t waste time worrying about our own shortcomings or external difficulties: that people don’t seem to understand us, that they have begun to criticize us, that the path is tiring, that the lake is too big, that I can’t make headway in this storm....

Self-starters

When we consider once again the list of the twelve Apostles, we realize how different they were from each other, with quite distinctive personalities. The same is true when we think about the men and women who have been canonized by the Church. And also when we consider the lives of so many ordinary people who follow our Lord with a discreet but determined self-giving. All of them different, and at the same time, all of them apostles, faithful, in love with our Lord.

In giving ourselves to God we don’t lose our own personal gifts and qualities; on the contrary, since “when the Lord thinks of each of you and what he wants to give you, he sees you as his close friend. And if he plans to grant you a grace ... it will surely be a gift that will bring you more joy and excitement than anything else in this world. Not because that gift will be rare or extraordinary, but because it will perfectly fit you. It will be a perfect fit for your entire life.”¹¹ Hence those who decide to follow our Lord realize, as the years go by, that grace, accompanied by their personal efforts, transforms even their character, making it easier for them to love and serve all men and women. This isn’t the result of will-power and striving for an ideal of perfection. Rather, it is the result of Christ’s Love in an apostle’s life.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Alone with God*, no. 273.

⁹ Cf. Javier Echevarria, Homily, 5 September 2010 (*Romana*, no. 51, July-December 2010).

¹⁰ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 969.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit* (25 March 2019), no. 288.

Soon after his election as Prelate, Msgr. Javier Echevarría was asked if he had had a personal life alongside the Founder and his first successor: “Have you been able to be yourself?” His answer is quite moving, reflecting the viewpoint of someone who looks back at his life and sees all that God has done there. “Yes, I certainly have lived my own life. I would never have dreamed of such a fulfilled life as I have had. On my own, my horizons and goals would have been much narrower ... I, as a man of my time, as a Christian and priest, have had a very rich personal life. And my heart is open to the whole world, thanks to having lived alongside two men [Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro] with such a big Christian heart.”¹²

A person who is sent by Christ and who lets Him set the course for their life should never forget that He expects a response that is *deeply free*. Free, in the first place, from selfishness, from pride and the desire to stand out. But free also to place at his service all our talents, initiative and creativity. As Saint Josemaria said, “one of the clearest characteristics of the spirit of Opus Dei is its love for freedom and for the need to understand others.”¹³

But this spirit of freedom doesn’t mean “acting in accord with one’s caprices and without restraint by any law,”¹⁴ as though everything that doesn’t come from ourselves were an imposition we had to free ourselves from. Rather, it means acting with the same Spirit as Jesus: “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (*Jn* 6:38). If apostolate were viewed as simply another “activity,” there would be the risk of feeling restricted by the indications of those who coordinate the apostolic initiatives. In contrast, a person who realizes they have been sent by Christ is grateful for the help and impulse that God provides through his many instruments. Living with freedom of spirit means letting the Holy Spirit be the one who shapes and guides us, and who also makes use of those He has placed at our side.

Freedom of spirit leads to us to be “self-starters” when facing challenges in the apostolic mission: that is, doing so not with a passive attitude, but with the conviction that this challenge is what God is asking from us right now, and what corresponds to the apostle who we are. Thus continually, in the small circumstances of our daily life, we can sense the “fresh breeze” of the Spirit, who impels us to set out “into the deep” (*Lk* 5:4), in order to continue with Him the marvelous history of God’s Love for us.

If our mission were to “do apostolate,” we could be tempted to set it aside when faced with an absorbing work project or an illness, or to take apostolic “vacations.” But “we are apostles!”—it is our life! Therefore it would make no sense to head out into the street and leave at home our eagerness to evangelize. Certainly, the apostolic mission will often require an effort, and courage to overcome our fears. Nevertheless, this interior resistance shouldn’t unsettle us,

¹² Interview by Pilar Urbano with Don Javier Echevarría, *Época*, 20-IV-1994, cited in Alvaro Sánchez León, *En la tierra como en el cielo*, Madrid, Rialp 2019, pp. 349-350.

¹³ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 31 May 1954, no. 22.

¹⁴ Fernando Ocariz, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

since the Holy Spirit fosters, in the hearts of those who are docile to Him, an authentic apostolic spontaneity and creativity, where everything in our life becomes an opportunity for apostolate.

We acquire the “awareness of being on guard duty at an outpost,”¹⁵ in a constant “vigil of love, remaining awake and alert, working diligently.”¹⁶ It is a “vigil of love,” so we shouldn’t become anxious or nervous. We have in our hands a marvelous mission that makes us happy and brings happiness to those around us. We are working in the Lord’s vineyard and are certain that the undertaking is His. So if we ever sense a lack of peace in our soul, an excessive tension, then is the moment to draw close to Him and say: I am doing this for You; help me to work calmly, with the certainty that You will do everything.

Divine light that gives warmth

In the parable of those invited to the wedding feast, when the father learns that some of the invited guests have sent excuses for not coming, he orders his servant to bring in “the poor and maimed and blind and lame” (*Lk* 14:21). The banquet hall starts to fill up, but there is still room for more guests. So he tells his servant: “Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (*Lk* 14:23). “Compel people to come in,” *compelle intrare*: his eagerness went to this extreme.

The command is categorical because the call to salvation is universal. Saint Josemaria said: “It is not a physical push but an abundance of light, of doctrine. It is the spiritual stimulus of your prayer and work, which bear authentic witness to doctrine. It is all the sacrifices you offer. It is the smile that comes to your lips because you are children of God: your filiation, which imbues you with a serene happiness (although at times your life will also have setbacks), which the others see and envy. Add to this your human bearing and charm, and here we have the content of the *compelle intrare*.”¹⁷ Hence it is not a question of forcing anyone; rather it is an ever-new combination of prayer and friendship, witness and generous sacrifice—a joy that is shared, a human warmth that draws others freely.

God acts “by attraction,”¹⁸ reaching souls through the joy and appeal in the life of Christians. Therefore apostolate is love that overflows. A heart that knows how to love knows how to draw others: “we attract everyone with our heart,” Saint Josemaria said. “Therefore I ask that everyone may have a very big heart: if we love souls, we will attract them.”¹⁹ Indeed, nothing attracts as strongly as an authentic love, especially in a day and age when many people have never known the warmth of God’s Love. True friendship is “the mode of doing apostolate that Saint Josemaría found in the Gospel narratives.”²⁰ Philip drew Bartholomew; Andrew

¹⁵ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 31 May 1954, no. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 24 October 1942, no. 9; cf. *Friends of God*, no. 37.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, Homily, 13 May 2007; Francis, Homily, 3 May 2018.

¹⁹ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 10 May 1967, in *Crónica* 1967, p. 605.

²⁰ Fernando Ocariz, *Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9.

brought Peter; and the men who brought the paralytic to Jesus at Capernaum must have been good friends of his.

“In a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity form a single thing: divine light that gives warmth.”²¹ Having friends requires diligent personal contact; example and sincere loyalty; the readiness to help others, to mutually assist one another; empathy and listening; the ability to take on others’ needs. Friendship is not an instrument for the apostolate; rather apostolate itself is, at heart, friendship: the generous desire to share one’s life with others. Of course, we want our friends to draw closer to God, but we are ready to let this happen when and how God wants. Although it’s only natural that an apostle wants to see good results and to be influential with others, we should never forget that the apostles continued following Jesus even when almost everyone else went away (cf. *Jn* 6:66-69). The results would come with the passage of time (cf. *Acts* 2:37-41).

A young fellow once asked Saint Josemaria: “Father, what can we do to get many people to ‘whistle?’”²² Saint Josemaria answered right away: “A lot of prayer, loyal friendship and respect for freedom.” The young fellow wasn’t satisfied, so he said: “But doesn’t that mean going too slowly, Father?” “No, because the vocation is su-per-na-tu-ral,” he replied, emphasizing each syllable. “A second was enough to turn Saul into Paul. Then, three days of prayer, and he became an ardent apostle of Jesus Christ.”²³

It is God who calls and the Holy Spirit who moves a person’s heart. The apostle’s role is to accompany their friends with prayer and sacrifice, not becoming impatient on receiving a “no” to their suggestions, nor getting angry when someone refuses to be helped. A true friend relies on the other person’s strong points to help them grow, and tries not to criticize. He or she knows when it is best to keep quiet, and when a different “tack” is needed, not dwelling on the negative but rather striving to draw out the best in each person.

Without becoming bothersome, and always with a smile, we can quietly offer polite suggestions, as our Lord did. And we will always keep enkindled in our heart the eager desire that many people may come to know Him better. “You and I, children of God, when we see people, we need to see souls: here is a soul, we should say to ourselves, a soul who has to be helped, a soul who needs to be understood, a soul we have to live alongside, a soul who has to be saved.”²⁴

²¹ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 565.

²² In Madrid back in the 1930s, “to whistle” was a slang term that meant “to function well.” Saint Josemaria used it to refer to the fact that someone had asked for admission to Opus Dei. This has now become a family expression in the Work.

²³ Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 24 April 1967, in *Crónica* 1967, p. 506.

²⁴ Saint Josemaria, Meditation, 25 February 1963, in *Crónica* 1964, IX, p. 69.