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New Mediterraneans (II): "Jesus is my dear Friend"

For Saint Josemaria, Jesus was always the "great Friend," the one who truly understands us, since he is perfect God and perfect Man.

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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.[1] 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?"[2]

He had learned this truth years before; his biographers connect it with some advice received in spiritual direction in the seminary.[3] 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."[4]

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."[5] 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."[6] 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."[7] 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.[8]

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.'"[9]

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." [10] 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!'" [11]

These words contain echoes of Saint Augustine's aspiration *Noverim Te, noverim me* – Lord, let me know you and know myself. [12] And also of Saint Teresa's description of a "conversation between friends: often speaking one-to-one with the person we know loves us." [13] 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." [14] 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." [15]

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.”[16]

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.”[17] 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.”[18]

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.”[19]

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?”[20]

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.”[21] 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).”[22]

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.”[23]

Our Lord awaits us in the Tabernacle

“When you approach the Tabernacle remember that *He* has been waiting for you for twenty centuries.”[24] 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.”[25]

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.”[26] 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.”[27]

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.[28] 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.”[29]

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.”[30] Another young man, not a particularly sentimental type, said that “he cared for us even better than our mothers.”[31]

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.’”^[32] 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.”^[33]

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

[2] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 88.

[3] See commentary on point no. 88 in *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*, ed. Pedro Rodriguez.

[4] *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*.

[5] Letter dated 29 December 1947, quoted in Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 231.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 169.

[7] *The Way*, no. 422.

[8] See *The Way*, nos. 244, 436.

[9] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 495.

[10] Salvador Canals, *Jesus as Friend*, Chapter One.

[11] *The Way*, no. 91.

[12] Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies II*, 1, 1.

- [13] Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, Chapter 8, 5.
- [14] *The Forge*, no. 738.
- [15] Saint Josemaría, quoted in *Dos meses de catequesis* vol. 2, p. 651.
- [16] Scott Hahn, "Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Reader of Sacred Scripture," *Romana*, 40 (2005), p. 176.
- [17] F. Botella, quoted in J. L. González Gullón, *DYA. La Academia y Residencia en la Historia del Opus Dei*, p. 429.
- [18] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 253.
- [19] Blessed Alvaro de Portillo, *Christ is Passing By*, Foreword.
- [20] Pope Francis, Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 153.
- [21] *Friends of God*, no. 253.
- [22] Pope Benedict XVI, Ap. Exhort. *Verbum Domini*, 30 September 2010, no. 87.
- [23] Javier Echevarría, "San Josemaría Escrivá, maestro de oración en la vida ordinaria." *Magnificat* (Spanish edition) 2006.
- [24] *The Way*, no. 537.
- [25] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* vol. II, pp. 394-5.
- [26] Francisco Ponz, cited in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* vol. II, p. 294.
- [27] *DYA. La Academia y Residencia*, p. 342.
- [28] See *Mt* 10:40; 25:40; *Lk* 10:16.
- [29] *Christ is Passing By*, 111
- [30] *DYA. La academia y residencia*, p. 431.
- [31] Juan Jiménez Vargas, in *DYA. La academia y residencia*, p. 443.
- [32] Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, p. 223.
- [33] Pope Francis, *Way of the Cross*, World Youth Day, 29 July 2016.