

## **St. Josemaría's Love for the Poor**

By Martin Schlag

Few themes raise as much passion as that of socio-economic poverty and the material misery in which individuals and large swaths of the population find themselves. Revolutions, protests, and class struggles have been and are still today social convulsions grounded in conditions of indigence: the human sense of justice rebels against the gravely unequal distribution of the goods of the earth and even more so a Christian heart, imbued with the spirit of justice and charity proclaimed and lived exemplarily by Jesus of Nazareth.

Likewise, poverty, in its ascetical and spiritual aspect, as a personal and collective virtue, has raised enduring controversies even within the ecclesial community; for instance, within the Franciscans of the 13th century. Perennial tensions arise on the question of poverty: How to live it? In what measure is an absolute lack of possessions necessary in order to live “evangelical” poverty and identify in this way with Jesus Christ? And in what measure is a Christian obliged to give alms to the poor? Only from surplus? Or even from what is necessary? What is necessary?

All these questions are not just academic; they get into the daily life of each Christian, conscious that, at the final judgement, Christ will judge us according to our works of love and mercy.

It can be categorically affirmed that St. Josemaría lived and taught a “preferential but not exclusive option for the poor,” a phrase coined in 1968 that has since become one of the basic principle of Catholic social teaching. Yet demonstrating this affirmation presents a complex challenge. The Founder of Opus Dei never used the term itself due to its immediate co-option by the Marxist interpreters of liberation theology (the term was only rehabilitated after his death when St. John Paul II used it at Puebla in 1979), so showing the correlation of his own words with the term “preferential option for the poor” we must correctly interpret his words without making the author say things he didn't or, on the contrary, failing to discover his richness of content when dressed in unfamiliar clothing.

### Christocentric Love for the Poor

In order to orient our exploration, let's clarify that the concept we want to examine here is that of the love of the poor in the socio-economic sense, i.e., the poor understood as a social group, distinct from the powerful and owners of goods. Therefore, this article does not deal with detachment, except that it is impossible to speak of love for the poor according to the mind of St. Josemaría without mentioning the virtue of poverty, because both values, love for the poor and poverty, spring from the same source: the desire of the Christian to imitate Christ, our Lord, to the point of becoming one with Jesus, our model. In other words, the source, motive and propelling force of love for the poor is the love for Christ. First comes love for the Lord and, later, love for the poor. Certainly, when one speaks of “love for the poor” one is speaking of them in the socio-economic sense, i.e., the class of persons in society who suffer for their lack of material means, and not of persons who are personally striving to live detachment. The two aspects, nevertheless, are entwined: the preferential option for the poor requires interior poverty. The generosity of the donation presupposes the generosity and the freedom of heart detached from possessions and capable of helping.

## Seeing All of Reality with the Eyes of Jesus

The starting place for an analysis of the social responsibility of the Christian, according to the mind of St. Josemaría, is unity of life. The founder of Opus Dei organizes his teaching on the sanctification of ordinary life around this definitional aspect of the condition of the faithful Christian in the middle of the world; a unity of life which also comprises social life and the effort to configure society in a just way. St. Josemaría's concept of unity of life is composed of three elements lived simultaneously:

- Ordinary life in the world, with all it comprises: relations, desires, dreams, hopes, joys, obligations, tasks, and, above all, professional work done with a spirit of service; in one word, "secularity."
- The ordering of all this reality toward God, Father and Creator, from whose hands the world has come to us good and worthy of love.
- The sense of the apostolic mission which, springing from the sacraments of Christian initiation, illumines all existence and converts it into an encounter with God and occasion to make him known through one's own life and word.

In summary, unity of life, as St. Josemaría understood it, implies the unity of the secular dimension with the ascetical and the apostolic, to the point that the three form only one thing in the person who, going deeply into his faith, recognizes that ordinary, daily life can and ought to be lived in communion with God and in an attitude of love and service to those around him.

In the context of unity of life, the theological value of human existence and of each instant of that existence is seen in a brighter light. Social responsibility is not something added to Christian life from outside, but something that forms part of the Christian vocation. The Christian is not someone who, besides being Christian, has a social responsibility, but someone who, on knowing himself Christian, sees himself in the world to develop there all the implications of the faith; social responsibility being an integral element, a constitutive dimension of the Christian vocation and particularly a part of the mission of the laity, who stay in the world in order to vivify it from within.

Choosing unity of life as the starting point for love for the poor underlines the Christocentric nature of this attitude since unity of life is a consequence of seeing all of reality with the eyes of Jesus. When the Lord observes those putting their alms into the treasury, he sees the poor widow who has just given all she has, and calls the apostles' attention to teach them to see as he does.

Only after looking at Christ, our model, did St. Josemaría preach detachment as "dominion" and unpack its various aspects and consequences in the external forum, elegant and attractive as that of Christ, and radically detached at the same time (cf. *Friends of God*, 122). "My God, I see I shall never accept you as my Savior unless I acknowledge you as my Model at the same time. 'Since you yourself chose to be poor, make me love holy poverty. I resolve, with your grace, to live and die in poverty, even though I may have millions at my disposal'" (*Forge*, 46).

## Poverty and St. Josemaría's Fundamental Mission

St. Josemaría dedicated his life to opening a spiritual path in the middle of the world for Christian laity and secular priests from all social environments. This path included the virtue of poverty, required of every baptized Christian, but lived in a variety of exterior manifestations. The mission of the Founder of Opus Dei carried with it, among many other aspects, the need to distinguish ways of conceiving

poverty specifically appropriate to the secular nature of the woman or man in the middle of the world, of society, and of the family. St. Josemaría remarked: “Rather than in not having, true poverty consists in being detached, in voluntarily renouncing one's dominion over things. That is why there are poor who are really rich. And vice-versa” (The Way, 632).

For St. Josemaría, to live the virtue of poverty, detachment from things which one uses, is to ask oneself: “do I have the same affections and the same feelings as Jesus Christ has, with regard to riches and poverty?” (Forge, 888); because “If we are close to Christ and are following in his footsteps, we will wholeheartedly love poverty, privation and detachment from earthly things” (Forge, 997).

The love of detachment derives from the desire to imitate Christ and of being close to Him and so does the love of the poor. To imitate Christ and love his holy will is to love and see him in every person, especially in the sick, children, the poor and the helpless: “it is precisely with them that He is more at ease” (Furrow, 228). To be Christian requires “a clear vision and a strong will to act as God wants” overcoming “petty objectives of personal prestige and ambition and even possibly nobler aims, like philanthropy and compassion for the misfortunes of others. It means setting our mind and heart on reaching the fullness of love which Jesus Christ showed by dying for us.” (Christ Is Passing By, 98). To be Christian, therefore, means to see everything with the eyes of Jesus.

St. Josemaría clearly denounces as false a spirituality closed in a “personal” piety, separate from the demands of social justice. “We do not love justice if we do not wish to see it fulfilled in the lives of others. In the same way, it is wrong to shut oneself up in comfortable religiosity, forgetting the needs of others. The man who wishes to be just in God's eyes also tries to establish the reign of justice among men; not only for God's glory, but because to be a Christian means to work at fulfilling all the noble yearnings of men. Paraphrasing a well-known text of St John, we can say that the man who says he acts justly toward God, but does not do so with other men, is a liar: and there is no truth in him.” (Christ Is Passing By, 52)

It is easy to understand the impatience, anxiety and uneasiness of people whose naturally Christian soul stimulates them to fight the personal and social injustice which the human heart can create. So many centuries of men living side by side and still so much hate, so much destruction, so much fanaticism stored up in eyes that do not want to see and in hearts that do not want to love!

The good things of the earth, monopolized by a handful of people; the culture of the world, confined to cliques. And, on the outside, hunger for bread and education. Human lives — holy, because they come from God — treated as mere things, as statistics. I understand and share this impatience. It stirs me to look at Christ, who is continually inviting us to put his new commandment of love into practice. (Christ Is Passing By, 111)

Notice in these quotes the constant reference to Christ on dealing with the tremendous human injustices. To struggle for social justice means “to do good without publicity, to help the disadvantaged out of pure love, without feeling obliged to publicize one's efforts to serve others.” (Christ Is Passing By, 69) To love all persons is to “venerate the image of God that is found in each and every man and doing all we can to get them in their turn to contemplate that image, so that they may learn how to turn to Christ.” (Friends of God, 230). Charity which ought to nestle in the human heart is made to the measure of the love of the heart of Jesus: “Charity towards our neighbor is an expression of our love of God. Accordingly, when we strive to grow in this virtue, we cannot fix any limits to our growth” (Friends of God, 232).

## St. Josemaría's Personal Contact of with the Poor

Beginning in the 19th century with the Industrial Revolution and throughout the 20th Century a static economy was transitioning to a continuously growing one, causing severe changes to society and culture. The Magisterium of the Church has continually reflected on these changes in its social teaching. *Rerum novarum* (1891) of Leo XIII focused on the "worker question" and in the course of the 20th century new themes have been added, especially economic development: the distinction between the developed countries and those on the way to development, and the need for integral and not merely quantitative development. The general social perception has passed from the optimism of unlimited technical and economic progress in the 1950s and 60s to the concern for ecology and the problem of an eventual scarcity of natural resources which arose in the 70s which has recently been taken up by Pope Francis.

Some of the nuances of this social teaching have arisen after the death of St. Josemaría, but the fundamental issues were present or began to flourish during his lifetime. In one of his homilies, he recalls that, even in his infancy, he had heard of the "social question" (Friends of God, 170). In his adolescence, St. Josemaría experienced the problems accompanying an economic decline, following the collapse of his father's business which obliged his family to move from Barbastro, where he had been born, to Logroño where the family lived very modestly. The death of his father in 1924 left him economically responsible for his mother, his brother and his sister when he was just a newly ordained priest without financial resources. Later in Madrid, his family underwent true poverty.

During his theological studies in Zaragoza, he was able to study *Rerum novarum* and the pastoral letters of the Spanish bishops dedicated to the problems of the world of work. He also mixed with professors and students of what came to be known as the "Social School of Zaragoza," one of the most significant nuclei of Christian social thought in that epoch.

Once ordained, he was put in direct contact with very hard situations and his priestly heart moved him to constantly bring attention to social changes and problems. Shortly after moving to Madrid, St. Josemaría lavished an exhausting service among the poorest of the poor in and around Madrid which was in a period of rapid expansion, leaving great numbers with inadequate housing and sanitary conditions. He spent many hours of the day walking through the most miserable neighborhoods, attending shut-ins and those afflicted with incurable and contagious diseases. He threw himself body and soul into the care of these poor sick people. He gave them the sacraments and solace as was his priestly obligation. To all of them he brought affection and fortitude in their sufferings, but, he went much further. With great self-denial, he washed them, changed their bedpans and clipped their nails. As he came to know their sorrows, he also learned of the Christian fortitude many of them demonstrated. On more than one occasion, he commented that Opus Dei had been born in the hospitals and among the poor of Madrid; he affirmed that it had been these people who had been the strength of Opus Dei, words with which he emphasized the redeeming value of pain and also the dignity of human being in extreme poverty.

In Madrid in the early 30s, when he began his apostolate with university students, he initiated what became universal in Opus Dei: the custom of visiting poor or sick people to accompany them, serve them in a small way, and show them some affection to alleviate their loneliness. These visits were an authentic means of formation for these students, who learned to see Christ in persons in need and to take notice of the seriousness of life. In this "school" of generosity, they learned that charity consists

not in giving an anonymous and cold help, but in noticing the problems of the others and making them one's own.

The visits enabled these students to confront life with a responsible and generous attitude and know how to help without humiliating but on the contrary, elevating. St. Josemaría greatly insisted on this aspect, which constitutes one of the characteristic aspects of his preaching and teaching. “Christian charity cannot be limited to giving things or money to the needy. It seeks, above all, to respect and understand each person for what he is, in his intrinsic dignity as a man and child of God.” (Christ Is Passing By, 72) He proclaimed that authentic charity is not official nor dry, nor can it be confused with a hand-out or a service performed heartlessly. To act in such a way would be a distortion of charity which was “well expressed once by a sick woman when she commented with sad resignation, 'Yes, here they treat me with *charity*, but my mother used to look after me with affection.' A love that springs from the Heart of Christ could never countenance such distinctions.” (Friends of God, 229) Nor would St. Josemaría countenance a reduction of love for the poor and needy to a political program, a class warfare, as those who take the approach of the radical type of liberation theology. The sensibility that the Christian has to have in light of social injustices is urged on by charity and, therefore, cannot turn to violence.

#### Universal Charity Without Excluding Anyone

In line with the above, it is appropriate to mention another characteristic of St. Josemaría's on love for the poor: he strongly emphasized the need to live solidarity without considering classes or excluding any group. Jesus Christ has come to earth to bring peace to all of us “not just the rich, not just the poor, but everyone: all the brethren. We are all brothers in Jesus, children of God, brothers of Christ. His Mother is our mother. There is only one race in the world: the race of the children of God.” (Christ Is Passing By, 13) And on another occasion he wrote: “We Christians cannot exclude anyone; we cannot segregate or classify souls. ‘Many will come from the East and West.’ All find a place in Christ's heart. His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the cross drawing all men to himself” (Christ Is Passing By, 38).

The response of St. Josemaría to the crisis of contemporary society is the “rebellion of men, who refuse to live like animals, who are dissatisfied and restless until they know their Creator and are on intimate terms with him.” (Friends of God, 38) It is the revolution of one who refuses to submit to the ‘logic’ of egoism and avarice, or facile shortcuts which ultimately trample on the rights of others. Over 200 years ago, the French Revolution failed to establish fraternity as a social principle but the Christian revolution will configure society according to the principles of the equality of the sons of God, bringing about that “great miracle of brotherhood” (Christ Is Passing By, 157).

Certainly, the common good of society is governed by justice but, in the long run, justice without pardon and mercy, i.e., without charity, is not sustainable. St. Josemaría, in some paragraphs particularly illuminating on this aspect of social ethics writes

Be convinced that justice alone is never enough to solve the great problems of mankind. When justice alone is done, don't be surprised if people are hurt. The dignity of man, who is a son of God, requires much more. Charity must penetrate and accompany justice because it sweetens and deifies everything: 'God is love.' Our motive in everything we do should be the Love of God, which makes it easier for us to love our neighbor and which purifies and raises all earthly loves on to a higher level.

There is a long road to travel from the demands of strict justice to the abundance of charity. And there are not many who persevere to the end. Some are content to go as far as the threshold: they leave aside justice and limit their actions to a bit of welfare work, which they define as charitable, without realising that they are doing only a small part of what in fact they have a strict duty to do. And they are as satisfied with themselves as the Pharisee who thought he had fulfilled the law perfectly because he fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all he possessed. (Friends of God, 172)

The reality of injustices, struggles and violence, of the cloud of evil that exists in the world, can make one think that fraternity is a beautiful ideal but unattainable. St. Josemaría teaches that fraternity is possible, but miraculous. In other words, a cultural achievement which will transcend mere human strength. The liberation of altruistic energy has been the principal contribution of religion to the secular society. It is one of the reasons the Christian faith has become recognized as something essential even for the political world which, reasonably, is understood as a secular process.

The perception of injustice, poverty, misery, etc. ought to wound the Christian in the depths of his being, since not in vain is he a disciple of a master, Jesus of Nazareth, who showed he had a heart capable of suffering and compassion for the suffering of others. The Christian faith does not numb us to the repulsion of injustice. On the contrary, this reaction will be even deeper, the more closely we contemplate the life of Christ. This is the way Jesus was and this is the way a Christian ought to be. Social responsibility is an intrinsic dimension of what it is to be human, and even more so, what it is to be Christian.

#### Professional Work: Preferentially Opting for the Poor

The charism of the sanctification of work which the Founder of Opus Dei received attributes to work and more concretely to professional work, a great importance, a decisive factor regarding the organization and development of human society.

St. Josemaría saw professional work as a privileged means to carry out love for the poor and to build a more just society because it is precisely in professional work that decisions are made which affect other persons (employees, customers and suppliers); decisions that must be informed by justice and charity. It is a source of the creation of new goods and therefore of employment and progress. To fully obtain its value, work ought to be well done, conform to ethical principles and informed by a spirit of service and of solidarity. Work, therefore, has an intrinsic social value; and from this derives the importance of education and of formation, in order to train persons not just to improve their position but also to contribute, in their turn, to the growth of the others. The poor, writes St. Josemaría, “need earthly bread to sustain them in their lives on earth; they also need bread from heaven to enlighten their minds and inflame their hearts. With your work, taking advantage of the opportunities it offers, in your conversations and your dealings with others, you can and should carry out this apostolic precept” (Christ Is Passing By, 49).

In this context St. Josemaría accentuates both the responsibility of the laity before social injustice and their freedom. He strongly felt that, as a priest, he ought not to suggest or to judge concrete solutions: these have to be found by the lay faithful who are called to humanize and sanctify the earthly realities from within, through dialogue and skilled work. Nevertheless, he made a great effort to stimulate the social responsibility of Christians, promoting a variety of initiatives for human and social advancement around the world: urban technical assistance programs, rural farming schools, and formational activities for business managers. “A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and

makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart. While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind. Otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus; it will be a fraud, a deception of God and man” (Christ Is Passing By # 167).

St. Josemaría also elicits an original vision of the idea of gratuity in connecting professional work with help for the poor. Through his splendid imagination, fruit of his rich interior life, he presents his own conviction of the right order of the economic dimension of professional work by tying aspects of work with the character of St. Joseph. “Sometimes, in the case of people poorer than himself, Joseph would charge only a little — just enough for his customer to feel that he had paid. But normally he would charge a reasonable amount — not too much or too little. He would demand what was justly owed him, for faithfulness to God cannot mean giving up rights which in fact are duties. St Joseph had to be properly paid, since this was his means of supporting the family which God had entrusted to him” (Christ Is Passing By 52).

Provoking our magnanimity, he adds “A Christian cannot be content with a job that only allows him to earn enough for himself and his family. He will be big-hearted enough to give others a helping hand both out of charity and as a matter of justice... Just ask yourselves, how much does it cost you, in financial terms as well, to be Christians?” (Friends of God, 126).

*A propos* of this touchstone of economic sacrifice St. Josemaría cited another proof of authentic love for the poor: the order of charity. He used this idea to emphasize that charity begins with the persons with whom one lives. This certainly does not condone closing oneself in a tight circle but, rather, understanding/experiencing the obligations of love, the lover becomes more open to all. I don't believe, he said, “that you are genuinely concerned about the poorest of the poor, if you persist in mortifying the people you live with” (Friends of God, 227).

## Conclusion

“A secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of men 'of his own' in every human activity. And then... *pax Christi in regno Christi*, the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ” (The Way, 301). These words of St. Josemaría presuppose a distinction and a relationship between individual ethics and social ethics. Authentic personal sanctity configures society, customs, laws, structures, in a word, culture, both humanly and in a Christian way. It would be a delusion to think that sanctity can be achieved by a mere human effort or that by some invisible mechanism the effort to reach one's own perfection automatically contributes to the common good. Men and women, living the spirit of Christ and being present in all human activities will contribute to changing structures if they know how to direct them toward the earthly common good: peace, freedom and social justice. In order to offer fraternity to all human beings, in the first place the poor, there is needed a motivation which exceeds mere philanthropy: the love of the heart of Christ. If we let Him, He will perform, through us, the miracle of brotherhood.

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