

PRIESTS FOR A NEW EVANGELIZATION (*)

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The present considerations, under the title “Priests for a New Evangelization,” make direct reference to the new evangelizing endeavor—new and at the same time old, because it began in Christ twenty centuries ago—which the times demand and to which the Holy Father John Paul II is calling us. We all are well aware that the Second Vatican Council directed all its teaching to the cause of renewing the Church, particularly its Decrees on the ministry and life of priests, and on priestly formation.

1. Need for a new evangelization

This new evangelization, especially in the West, is not directed to a world which has never heard the preaching of Christ, but, on the contrary, to a world in which the message of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed, believed and loved, although now it seems to be cutting itself off from its own roots. Western society is evolving, to a great extent, in a direction paradoxically opposed to its own spiritual and cultural roots, and together with material progress we clearly see a grave moral regression.

People often speak of our society today as “post-Christian.” Perhaps in some cases this description is opportune, when used to reflect a *de facto* situation and the intellectual and practical deformation seen in many Christians. However, the term “post-Christian” is entirely inadequate if it is meant to imply that Christ’s doctrine has lost its capacity to shape the contemporary world. Nothing is further from the truth, which by God’s grace we can see in so many surroundings and, above all, in the souls of countless people.

Therefore, the present urgency for a new evangelization should place before our eyes the Church’s “*ongoing mission of bringing the gospel to the multitudes—the millions and millions of men and women—who as yet do not know Christ the Redeemer of humanity.*” In a specific way this is the missionary work that Jesus entrusted and again entrusts each day to his Church.” It is precisely this universal evangelizing mission that needs a renewed Church, revitalized with the perennial message of Christ, so imbued with an imperishable timeliness; in other words, it requires a new awakening of Christian consciences that will attract the world to the light of our Christ. As Msgr. Escrivá stressed so strongly, “Christ is not a figure that has passed. He is not a memory that is lost in history. He lives! *Jesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula*, says Saint Paul. —‘Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever.’”

The decision to take up the apostolic responsibilities that are ours today as Christians is not compatible with a pessimistic or negative vision of the present-day world. Proclaiming Christ’s kingdom effectively and working for its spread requires loving the world in which we live, and loving it “passionately,” as the Founder of Opus Dei liked to say: Therefore we are asked to contemplate this historical situation and the persons that make it up “with the eyes of Christ himself,” as Pope John Paul II wrote in his first

encyclical. Amid the lights and shadows of passing events, one also sees today the restlessness of the human soul yearning for God, expressed in St. Augustine's famous words: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." The accelerated pace that marks our own era is deeply marked by the restlessness of so many hearts that lack a clear guide for their own life and for the meaning of human history. It is right there, in the midst of all that restless unease, where we have to proclaim loudly that the one they are seeking is Christ, and that what they don't know and yearn for is God's fatherly love, which is offered to everyone in Christ and in the Church.

We have been witnessing in recent months great transformations in many parts of the world, above all in the Old Continent, which seem to announce a new era of freedom, of responsibility, of solidarity, of spirituality, for millions of people. We cannot forget, however, and we say this with sorrow, that many sectors in our Western society are closed and hostile to the saving Cross, with eyes that refuse to contemplate God's beauty reflected in the face of Christ.

2. The Mission of Everyone in the Church

Confronting this world of ours, I stress once again that the evangelization will be new not because of the essential content of the teaching that is proclaimed, nor for the way of life that is held up to our contemporaries. The novelty has to reside in the new spiritual and apostolic energies put into play by all the faithful, for we all share in responsibility for the Church's mission. Particularly important is the consistent witness of the lay faithful, who are called, in the words of John Paul II, "to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response . . . to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society. This will be possible" the Pope continues, "if the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to again take up in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel."

Msgr. Escrivá insistently proclaimed this teaching right from the 1930's, always with renewed vigor and appeal: "Through baptism all of us," these are words of his from the year 1960, "have been made priests of our lives, 'to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (*1 Pet* 2:5). Everything we do can be an expression of our obedience to God's will and so perpetuate the mission of the God-man." The richer understanding of the Church's doctrine, through which the baptismal vocation has been understood and presented with the ecclesiological importance it deserves, is undoubtedly one of the pillars on which the Church can rely to confront its evangelizing future.

The necessary insistence that the lay faithful take up their responsibilities to make the Christian light shine more fully in society, should go hand in hand with the insistence on the need for an abundant, generous, humble, and daring exercise of the public ministry of priests: "Alongside Christian families and lay Christians who assume to a greater degree...their multiple apostolic commitments, there is a greater need for priests who are fully priests, precisely by the vitality of their Christian life. And the more de-Christianized the world is and lacking in maturity of faith, the greater need there is for priests who are totally dedicated to giving testimony to the fullness of Christ's mystery."

The Church that we want to see flourishing anew and giving new fruit, “the Church of the new Advent,” as we read in the Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, “the Church that is continually preparing for the new coming of the Lord, must be the Church of the Eucharist and of Penance. Only when viewed in this spiritual aspect of her life and activity is she seen to be the Church of the divine mission, the Church *in statu missionis*, as the Second Vatican Council has shown her to be.” The “Church of the Eucharist and of Penance” is necessarily the Church of the vigorous priestly ministry. It is the Church of the holy priest, of the priest who deeply loves, with all his being, the call he has received from the Master, to conduct himself at every hour as *alter Christus, ipse Christus*.

There is no need to stress here the need for the ministerial priesthood in the new evangelization, or the mutual harmony between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of all the faithful. It is very clear to all of us that without an abundant dispensation of those great mysteries of God, the Eucharist and Penance, and with them the nourishment of the divine word, the supernatural life of the faithful will languish. The new evangelization depends essentially on there being ministers who generously dispense, with a hunger for their own holiness and that of the faithful, the word of God and the sacraments. They must be men formed by the Church, who always “think and feel with the mind of the Church,” in order to be one hundred percent priests to the measure of the self-giving of Christ, always closely united to their respective Ordinary, with veneration for the entire hierarchy of the Church and especially for the Roman Pontiff.

3. The need for holy priests

The new evangelization confronts numerous difficulties which, added together, can seem quite daunting. In the face of this wave that tries to sweep all before it, Christians, and perhaps in a special way priests, can experience quite acutely the radical insufficiency of their own human strength.

This reality calls vividly to mind the marvelous priestly example of the Founder of Opus Dei. I raise my heart in an act of thanksgiving, closely united to millions of souls who do the same throughout the world, for the Holy Father’s decision to issue the Decree of heroic virtue on the ninth of this month. At the age of twenty-six he received from God an immense evangelizing mission: that of spreading throughout the world, among people of all walks of life, a lively realization, both theoretical and practical, of the universal call to holiness. As he wrote back in 1930: “We have come to say, with the humility of one who knows himself to be a sinner and of little worth—*homo peccator sum* (Lk 5:8), we say with Peter—but with the faith of someone who allows himself to be led by God’s hand, that sanctity is not just for the privileged few. God calls us all of us, he expects Love from us all; from everyone, wherever he may be; from everyone, in whatever situation, profession or job. For one’s normal, ordinary life, apparently unimportant, can be a path to sanctity ... All the paths of the earth can be an occasion for an encounter with Christ.” The difficulties our Founder faced throughout his whole life were also gigantic. Nevertheless, the efficacy of God’s grace in his life, a life spent willingly—at times with great suffering—in heroic correspondence to God’s gift, was astonishing.

I recall an episode that took place in August 1958. The Founder of Opus Dei was

walking one day through the City of London and, when passing by the famous banks and great commercial and industrial enterprises, before the panorama of a world that was humanly powerful but indifferent and even hostile towards God's concerns, he felt with special force all of his own weakness, his incapacity to carry out the mission he had received thirty years earlier to imbue all human realities with the spirit of the Gospel, to place Christ at the summit of all human activities. But immediately he felt a clear divine locution within him: "You can't do it, but I can."

It was a new confirmation of what had always been embedded in his soul and in his conduct: a sure faith, a supernatural certainty, that it was Jesus Christ himself—the true and eternal Priest of the New Covenant, established definitively in his Blood—who brings about the loving communion of God with men, from which is born the communion of men with one another. It was the faith, then, that his priestly work, like every priestly action in the Church, is efficacious precisely because it is carried out *per Christum et cum Christo et in Christo*.

If the new evangelization, like the first one, like every truly supernatural work, is impossible for our human strength, both our own and that of everyone in the Church, it is possible for God, for Christ. Therefore, by that very fact, it is possible for us, to the extent that each one of us is—I think it is necessary to insist on this point, since it is always timely—"not simply *alter Christus*: another Christ, but *ipse Christus*: Christ himself!" Here is the deep theological reason for the need for personal holiness, both for every specific apostolic work and for the re-Christianization of the world as a whole. Identification with Christ is a *gift*, but it is also a *task*. Every Christian, and in a proper and special way, each priest is *ipse Christus* "in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament." But we must never forget that this identification also constitutes the definitive goal, the object of a task, a personal responsibility to make a reality in each of us St. Paul's words: *For me to live is Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*. We are called to set an example for the men and women of today and of all times, so that they too can fully take up this responsibility.

Therefore, today as always, when faced with the needs of every epoch, the question "What kind of priests does the Church and the world need today?" always has this answer: the Church and the world need holy priests, that is priests who, knowing their own limitations and weaknesses, make a decided effort to follow the path of holiness, of the perfection of charity, of identification with Jesus Christ, in faithful correspondence to divine grace. The Second Vatican Council said clearly: "Priests are bound, however, to acquire that perfection in a special fashion. They have been consecrated by God in a new manner at their ordination and made living instruments of Christ the Eternal Priest that they may be able to carry on in time his marvelous work."

Identification with Jesus requires a life of prayer and penance—not as a "private concern" of the priest, but as a condition for his pastoral effectiveness, precisely because the priest, by himself, *cannot do it*, but to the extent that he is Christ, he *can do it*.

In this context, there also comes to mind a note written by Msgr. Escrivá in 1932. I think it a matter of justice to make these references if we consider that the Venerable Servant of God, impelled by God's action, has brought thousands of priests to the Church, incardinated in so many dioceses and in the Prelature of Opus Dei. Upon contemplating

once again in his prayer the magnitude of the mission God had entrusted upon him, he wrote: “I feel that even if, by God’s permission, I should remain alone in this enterprise, and even if I should find myself dishonored and poor—more so than I already am—and sick ... I will not have any doubt about either the divine origin of the Work or its realization! And I stand by my conviction that the sure means of carrying out the will of God, prior to moving and acting, are to pray, pray, pray, and expiate, expiate, expiate.”

4. Priestly holiness and a life of prayer

Holiness and prayer are so closely linked that it is impossible to have one without the other. “That phrase of St. John Chrysostom is true: ‘I think it is obvious to everyone that it is impossible to live virtuously without the help of prayer’ (*De praecatione*, orat. I).”

“Perhaps in these recent years” wrote John Paul II to all priests, on the occasion of Holy Thursday in 1979, “there has been too much discussion about the priesthood, the priest’s ‘identity,’ the value of his presence in the modern world, etc., and on the other hand there has been too little praying. There has not been enough enthusiasm for exercising the priesthood itself through prayer, to make its authentic evangelical dynamism effective, in order to confirm the priestly identity. It is prayer that shows the essential style of the priest.”

The need to be *men of prayer* brings once again to my mind our Founder and his extraordinary apostolic fruitfulness. It is impossible to adequately describe here, even briefly, his life of continual prayer, of which I was a direct witness (to the extent that one can “witness” a spiritual reality) for forty years. I feel confident in saying that God granted him abundantly the gift of infused contemplation. I recall, among so many other details, how during breakfast, while both of us were reading the newspaper, our Father would scarcely have begun reading when he would become absorbed, caught up in God. He would rest his forehead on the palm of one hand and stop reading the paper, praying instead. I was deeply moved when, after his death, I read in his *Personal Notes* this entry from 1934: “Prayer: although I don’t give it to you ... you make me feel it at odd hours; sometimes, when reading the newspaper, I’ve had to tell you: let me read! How good my Jesus is! While I, on the other hand...”

It would take a long time to adequately depict the rich life of prayer of this priest, always a priest! The Holy Spirit undoubtedly brought him to the highest peaks of mystical union in the midst of ordinary life, while undergoing very severe passive purifications in his senses and spirit. Permit me, nevertheless, to stress that if these and other very numerous facts that we know testify to a specific action of the Holy Spirit in his soul, the depth with which the habit of continual prayer took root in his daily life, both day and night, also reveals the faithfulness and generosity of his dedication to those daily times of meditation and mental prayer and the reading of the Breviary and other vocal prayers. What is more, the extraordinary irruption of God in his soul was frequently like a divine response to his fidelity to mental prayer in moments when it was particularly costly or difficult for him.

For example, in one of his notes, among many others written in 1931, we read: “Yesterday, at three in the afternoon, I went to the sanctuary of the church of the

Foundation, to spend some time praying before the Blessed Sacrament. I didn't feel like it. But I stayed there, feeling like a fool. From time to time the thought came to me: You see, good Jesus, that if I am here, it is for you, to please you. Nothing else. My imagination ran wild, far from my body and my will, just as a faithful dog, lying at the feet of its master, dozes off dreaming of running and hunting with his friends (dogs like himself), and he stirs and barks softly. . .but without leaving his master. That's how I was, just like that dog, when I noticed that, without meaning to, I was repeating some Latin words that I had never paid any attention to and had no reason to recall. Even now, to remember them, I have to read them off the small sheet of paper I always carry in my pocket to write down whatever God wants....

The words of Scripture that I 'found' on my lips were: *et fui tecum in omnibus ubicumque ambulasti, firmans regnum tuum in aeternum*. Repeating them slowly, I applied my mind to their meaning. And later, yesterday evening and again today, when I read them again (for, I repeat, as though God wanted to assure me that these words are his, I can't recall them from one moment to the next), I well understood that Christ Jesus was telling me, for our consolation: *The Work of God will be with Him everywhere, affirming the kingdom of Jesus Christ forever.*"

It is in the persevering prayer of each day, whether done with ease or with dryness, where the priest, like any Christian, receives from God—even in an extraordinary way if necessary—new lights, a firm faith, a sure hope in the supernatural efficacy of his pastoral work, a renewed love: in a word, the strength to persevere in his work and the root of effectiveness of the work itself. Without prayer, and without prayer that one strives to make continuous, in the midst of one's daily occupations, there is no identification with Christ, in so far as this is a "task," grounded on the "gift" received. Moreover, I dare to affirm that a priest without prayer, if he doesn't falsify the image he gives of Christ (who is the Model for everyone), will present it in a nebulous way that neither attracts nor gives orientation, that fails to serve as a compass for the people who see or hear us.

I often heard Msgr. Escrivá say that "the Work of God has been built with prayer." By these words he was not expressing a theoretical principle of the spiritual life, but rather a reality deeply assimilated and felt in his own life, fully equivalent to the affirmation, also frequently on his lips, that it was God who had done and was doing the Work. Thus he prayed out loud on March 27, 1975: "How has Opus Dei come about? You, Lord, have done it all, with a handful of good-for-nothings... *Stulta mundi, infirma mundi, et ea quae non sunt (1 Cor 1:26-27)*. St Paul's teaching has been fulfilled to the letter. You have laid hold of instruments that were utterly illogical and in no way suitable, and you have spread the work all over the world."

5. Priestly holiness and A life of penance

Following and identifying oneself with Christ requires, together with prayer, taking up the Cross each day, freely sharing in the mystery of the redeeming Cross. Specifically, "the priest," in the words of Pope Pius XII, "should, therefore, study to reproduce in his own soul the things that are effected upon the Altar. As Jesus Christ immolates himself, so his minister should be immolated with him; as Jesus expiates the sins of men, so he, by

following the hard road of Christian asceticism, should labor at the purification of himself and of others.” A priest has to be a *man of penance*, and perseveringly penitent, not just mortified. He has to make expiation, in union with Christ’s Cross, for his own sins and those of the whole world. He has to be able to say with St. Paul “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.”

The Founder of Opus Dei not only accepted the Cross with joy in sickness, in persecution, in all sorts of external difficulties and interior purifications that God allowed him to traverse, but he also sought it with the deep conviction that to find the Cross is to find Christ. This is how he expressed it, with words of great theological and mystical depth, in a meditation given on April 28, 1963, recalling especially difficult moments more than thirty years earlier: “When our Lord gave me those blows, back around the year 31, I didn’t understand it. And suddenly in the midst of that great bitterness came those words: ‘You are my son’ (*Ps 2:7*), you are Christ. And I could only repeat: *Abba, Pater! Abba, Pater! Abba! Abba! Abba!* And now I see it with new light, like a new discovery: as one sees, as the years goes by, the hand of God, of divine Wisdom, of the All Powerful. You have made me understand, Lord, that to have the Cross is to find happiness, joy. And the reason—I see it now more clearly than ever—is this: to have the Cross is to be identified with Christ, it is to be Christ, and therefore, to be a son of God.”

Msgr. Escrivá’s life of penance consisted, above all, in constant self-denial in the thousand incidents of ordinary life; but also a strong corporal penance. Among other manifestations of his union with the Cross of Jesus, I could highlight, for example, the years when, because of the Spanish Civil War, discomforts and shortages of every type were so prevalent that any one, including the most mortified person, would have considered it enough just to endure them, offering them to God. Msgr. Escrivá in contrast, responding to God’s loving requirements, saw all this as insufficient in order to follow the call he had received and felt that he should do more.

I personally witnessed this reality, especially during the months I spent with him in the Honduran Legation in Madrid. All of us who had taken refuge there suffered real hunger, but he abstained, in a natural way, even from the little that we had, practicing a very rigorous fasting as he did during many other periods of his life. For example, after his death, I was able to read a note that he made on June 22, 1933, addressed to his confessor, in which he spoke about the resolutions he had formulated regarding penance during a recent retreat. These are his exact words: “The Lord is undoubtedly asking me, Father, that I intensify my penance. When I am faithful in this point, the Work seems to receive new impetus.” And he went on to list his specific resolutions: “Disciplines: Monday, Wednesday and Friday; plus an extra one on the vespers of feasts of our Lord or our Lady; another extra one each week in petition or thanksgiving.

“Cilices: two each day, until the midday meal, then one up until supper. On Monday, one around the waist, and on Friday around the shoulder, as up to now.

“Sleeping: on the floor, if it’s wood [not stone], or without a mattress on the bed on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Fasting: on Saturdays having only what they give me for breakfast.”

It is not a question of necessarily following a particular path of penance, but it is necessary to make clear that identification with Christ, and therefore effectiveness in one’s priestly ministry, requires a strong imprint of the Cross in one’s own flesh and spirit. And this is even more true in our day and age, to carry out the new evangelization in a world that in great part is submerged in hedonism. All of this makes sense only in the light of faith: faith in the mystery of Redemption, in the mystery of the Son of God, made obedient unto death and death on the Cross.

6. Priestly holiness and pastoral charity

There is no need to stress the fact that the priestly ministry requires a priest to also be a *man of action*, since this is evident to everyone. From the point of view of the faith, we can consider it equally evident that the driving force of a priest’s pastoral activity is rooted exclusively in Christ’s charity: *caritas Christi urget nos*, says St. Paul. Christ love is urging us on—a supernatural love that blossoms forth as a fruit of the Cross. For as St. Thomas Aquinas says: “it is a certain participation in the infinite Love that is the Holy Spirit.” Indeed, only charity, which is patient and kind, which excuses everything, which believes and puts up with everything, can provide the strength needed not just to fulfill certain specific pastoral duties, but to undertake a complete dedication shown in incessant activity for the good of souls, going beyond what strict justice might demand in regard to the faithful entrusted to the priest’s care.

Here too, I feel the need to evoke the memory of our beloved Founder. Fatigue, sickness or adverse circumstances were never an excuse for him to lessen his untiring dedication to his ministry. This pastoral concern, which leads to an unconditional dedication to the service of souls, necessarily includes a deep love for a priestly fraternity that is expressed in deeds. A priestly fraternity that does not confuse unity with uniformity, that respects everyone’s legitimate freedom, also in the broad ambit of priestly spirituality.

Much could be said of the Founder of Opus Dei’s truly heroic love and service for his brother priests. I recall, for example, the many retreats he preached to priests throughout Spain at the request of the bishops before he moved to Rome. Among these was a retreat he gave in October 1944 to the Augustinian community in El Escorial. The day before the retreat was to begin he fell sick, with a temperature of 102°. But he went anyway, and I accompanied him. Despite the fever, which the next day had risen to 104°, he finished preaching the retreat, and even managed to hide the fact he was sick from those attending.

7. A life rooted and centered in the Eucharist

Let us now turn our attention to another important aspect, the most radical and central aspect of a priest’s life, and the guarantee of his evangelizing effectiveness.

Prayer, penance, and action guided by an untiring pastoral charity. These are the “coordinates,” as it were, in which we have considered the priest’s identification with Jesus Christ, to the extent that this is a task requiring correspondence to God’s gift. But it would be a grave omission to overlook the fact that the Christian life, and especially these aspects

of priestly life, has to be *rooted, centered*, and therefore *unified* in the Sacrifice of Christ, in the Holy Mass, in the Eucharist.

The Holy Mass is “the center and the root of the whole life of the Priest,” as the Second Vatican Council reminded us, with words that Msgr. Escrivá had already frequently stressed.

There is no doubt that this centrality of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is a reality in the life of every Catholic, but in the priest it takes on special meaning. As John Paul II said, “Through our ordination—the celebration of which is linked to the holy Mass from the very first liturgical evidence—we are united in a singular and exceptional way to the Eucharist. In a certain way we derive from it and exist for it. We are also, and in a special way, responsible for it.”

I once again turn to the illustrious priestly example of the Founder of this university. For forty years, day after day, I was a witness to his effort to turn each day into a holocaust, into a prolongation of the Sacrifice of the Altar. The Holy Mass was the center of his heroic dedication to work and the root that vivified his interior struggle, his life of prayer and penance. Thanks to his union with Christ’s Sacrifice, his pastoral activity acquired immense sanctifying value. Truly, in each of his days, everything was *operatio Dei, Opus Dei*, an authentic path of prayer, of intimacy with God, of identification with Christ in his total self-surrender for the salvation of the world.

Externally there was never anything extraordinary or remarkable in Msgr. Escrivá’s Mass, although it was impossible not to appreciate his deep devotion. >From the beginning of his priestly ministry he strove never to allow any routine or haste to enter into his celebration of the Holy Sacrifice, despite his habitual lack of time to carry out his many pastoral activities. On the contrary, he tended spontaneously to say Mass with a lot of peace, entering into each text and the meaning of each liturgical gesture, to such an extent that for many years, he had to make a real effort—following what he was told in spiritual direction—to go faster in order to avoid attracting attention and to be at the service of the faithful who expected to spend less time at Mass. In this context, one can understand what he wrote in 1932, like a sigh escaping from his soul: “When saying Holy Mass, the clocks should stop.”

The intensity with which he united himself to our Lord’s Sacrifice in the Eucharist, culminated in an experience that I don’t hesitate to call a special mystical gift. On October 24, 1966, he told us, with great simplicity: “At my age of sixty-five, I have made a marvelous discovery. I love to say Holy Mass, but yesterday it cost me a tremendous amount of work. What an effort! I saw that the Mass is truly *Opus Dei*, work, as the first Mass was truly an effort for Jesus Christ: the Cross. I saw that the action of the priest, the celebration of Holy Mass, is work to confection the Eucharist; that there one experiences suffering, and joy, and tiredness. I felt in my flesh the exhaustion of a divine work.” I have no doubt that this discovery corresponded to a request that he constantly directed to those of us at his side: “Ask our Lord to make me more pious in the Holy Mass, so that each day I have greater hunger to renew the Holy Sacrifice.”

8. The Marian dimension of a priest's life

At the foot of Christ's Cross, on Calvary, stood Mary, his Mother, and together with her the disciple whom he loved. The Church's Tradition has always seen St. John the Apostle as representing all Christians, all the men and women who have received in the Sacrament of Baptism, as an indelible character, a participation in Christ's priesthood. The words of our Lord on the Cross reveal to us an essential dimension of the Christian life: *Behold your mother*. In the words of John Paul II, we find here "the Marian dimension of the life of Christ's disciples. This is true not only of John, who at that hour stood at the foot of the Cross together with his Master's Mother, but it is also true of every disciple of Christ, of every Christian."

Being *alter Christus*, *ipse Christus*—another Christ, Christ himself—necessarily entails being children of Holy Mary. And just as identification with our Lord is both a gift and a task, so filiation to our Lady is a gift: "a gift that Christ himself makes personally to each person"; and also a task, which the Evangelist describes succinctly: *And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home*. By entrusting himself to Mary in a filial manner," the Holy Father says, "the Christian, like the Apostle John, 'welcomes' the Mother of Christ 'into his own home' and brings her into everything that makes up his inner life."

If this is true for every Christian, it is so by a new title for the priest, who has been called to participate in a new way in Christ's priesthood and to live centered in a special way on the sacrifice of the Cross. As a disciple of our Lord he should entrust himself filially to Mary, going to her as his Mother and learning from her what it means to have a "priestly soul": the eagerness to co-redeem with Christ, a thirst for souls, a spirit of reparation; in short, a desire to acquire the same sentiments as Christ Jesus. As the minister of our Lord, a priest should never forget, when renewing the Sacrifice of Calvary and dispensing the treasures of Christ's grace, that, at the foot of the Cross, the Virgin Mary "dedicated herself totally to the mystery of the Redemption of mankind," and that the Body and Blood of Christ that are made present on the altar have been received from his Most Holy Mother.

The last Council exhorted priests to "love and venerate with filial devotion and veneration this mother of the Eternal High Priest, Queen of Apostles and Protector of their own ministry." How deeply the Founder of Opus Dei experienced this marvelous reality of the Blessed Virgin's maternal assistance in his priestly ministry! As he recalled on the feast of St. Joseph in 1975, a few months before his death, glancing back at his pastoral work in the 1930s: "How many hours walking through that Madrid of mine, every week, from one side to the other, wrapped up in my cape! ... Those entire Rosaries, prayed in the street, anyway I could, but without omitting them, every day ... I never thought that to carry the Work forward would bring with it so much suffering, so much pain, physical and moral: especially moral ... *Iter para tutum!* My Mother! Mother! I had no one except you! Mother, thank you ... Mother, *Cor Mariae Dulcissimum!* O how much I have gone to you!

"And at other times, speaking and preaching, realizing that I was not worth anything, that I was nothing, but with one certainty. Mother! My mother! Don't abandon me! Mother, My Mother!"

These were deeply sincere exclamations of a son, which burst forth from his priestly soul, precisely on the last feast of St. Joseph that he celebrated here on earth, because in his heart, and also in his name, Mary and Joseph were indissolubly united. They were the pathway to an intimate conversation with Jesus, and through Him, with Him, and in Him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Attaining a deep devotion and a tender love for our Lady has to be one of the primary objectives of priestly formation. There are deep theological reasons for saying that this devotion can never be seen as a pious addition to the priest's formation. Rather it is rooted in the "gift" received by the priest at his ordination, which is destined to grow and to develop in his life. Our Lord wanted to associate his Mother in a special way with his work of Redemption. And thus the priest too, who has received the power of acting *in persona Christi Capitis*, needs the motherly help of our Lady in his ministry. Without Mary he would not be able to attain a truly priestly life.

9. Conclusion: Formation for holiness

Present-day circumstances in society and the new evangelization in which we are all involved demand that we strive to take a qualitative leap forward in our priesthood, and therefore also in our priestly formation. In his recent Letter to priests on Holy Thursday, Pope John Paul II wrote: "Today, as the third millennium of the coming of Christ draws near, we perhaps experience more deeply the immensity and the difficulties of the harvest: The harvest is great; but we also see the scarcity of workers: *The laborers are few (Mt 9:37)*. Few: and this not only in respect to the quantity but also to the quality. Hence the need for formation."

The priests need to acquire in their years of preparation, and later in their ongoing permanent formation, a clear awareness of the identity between the realization of their personal vocation—being a priest in the Church—and the exercise of their ministry *in persona Christi Capitis*. Their service to the Church consists essentially (other ways of priestly service can be legitimate, but are secondary) in making present actively and humbly among their brethren Christ the Priest, who gives life to and purifies the Church, Christ the Good Shepherd, who leads it in unity towards the Father, and Christ the Teacher, who gives comfort and encouragement with his word, and with the example of his life.

A priest's formation is something that lasts his entire life because, in its various aspects, it should lead to forming Christ in him, making that identification a reality as a task, in response to the sacramental gift received. A task that requires above and beyond an incessant pastoral activity, and as a condition for its effectiveness, an intense life of prayer and penance, a sincere spiritual direction of one's own soul, frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Penance lived with extreme refinement, with one's whole existence rooted, centered and unified in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

A new evangelization, yes, but with the clear awareness that, in the words of Msgr. Escrivá, "in the spiritual life nothing needs to be invented; one only needs to struggle to identify oneself with Christ, to be other Christs, *ipse Christus*, to fall in love with him and live Christ's life, who is the same yesterday and today and forever: *Iesus Christus heri et*

hodie, ipse et in saecula (Heb 13:8).”

The Church sings of Christ the Eternal High Priest: *Ave verum corpus natum de Maria Virgine*. I beseech God that the Marian path by which the Son of God came to mankind always be present in priestly formation.