

LITTLE THINGS

1. On the occasion of some canonizations, the Magisterium of the Church has taught that holiness does not require carrying out extraordinary actions rather it “consists only in the conformity with the Will of God, expressed in the continuous and exact fulfillment of the duties of one’s state.”¹

This is also the simple path of sanctity that St Josemaría proposes: *Do you really want to be a saint? Carry out the little duty of each moment: do what you ought and concentrate on what you are doing.*²

The words above indicate two demands of holiness: one is material: (*do what you ought*: fulfill the little task of each moment and carry it out without delay: *hodie, nunc*, today, now); and the other is formal (*concentrate on what you are doing*: carry it out with perfection and zeal, for love of God). These two demands converge into just one: the loving care of little things. This is because, in practice, one’s obligations are not materially big things, but “little duties” of each moment; and because the perfection of their fulfillment also consists in “little things” (in acts of virtue in little things).

At the root of these two demands one finds the idea that, to achieve sanctity, priority should be given to love with respect to the materiality of the tasks. *A little act, done for Love, is worth so much!*³ The value of works in the field of sanctification and apostolate is not derived principally from the human dimension (in that they are important in their materiality) but rather from the love of God with which they are carried out. That love is manifested many times in “little things” in one’s dealings with God and with others: from a detail of piety such as saying a vocal prayer well or a genuflection done well before the Blessed Sacrament, to a gesture of good manners or of kindness. Love transforms into something big, those things that appear insignificant to human eyes. *Do everything for Love. Thus there will be no little things: everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism.*⁴ *Anything done out of love is important, however small it might appear.*⁵

2. This priority of love should not lead one to think that the objective, external perfection of the tasks that are carried out is of little importance. St Josemaría also insists on this point. To better understand his teaching, it is worthwhile reflecting more on the meaning of the expression “little things”.

Above all, one should not imagine “little things” principally as realities that are external to us. For example, in the case of “an open door that ought to be shut”, the “little thing” is not the open door, but the act of closing it, practising the virtue of order out of love for God. In other words, “little things” are above all virtuous interior acts that are described as “little” not because of the intensity of the act (which as such could be very great) but for another reason, such as, its short duration or its little relevance from a human point of view (just as it happens with many details of order. This is independent of the fact that, besides, they could have had notable consequences: for instance, the implications of leaving the door of a fridge badly shut).

¹ BENEDICT XV, *Decree on the heroic virtues of Venerable Antonio Gianelli*: AAS 12 (1920) 173. Cf. PIUS XII, Homily 5 April 1948: AAS 40 (1948) 149.

² ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 815. This article limits itself to dealing with the importance of “little things” in the teachings of St Josemaría.

³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 814.

⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 813.

⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 44.

When St Josemaría speaks of the importance of “little things”, he sometimes refers to “little spiritual things” that are solely interior acts, although they are carried out on the occasion of external activities (e.g saying an aspiration while closing a door, or renewing in one’s heart the offering of work to God); at other times, he thinks of “little material things”: acts that have for their object an external detail that contribute to objectively improving the state of things around us, even though it may be to a small degree (for example repairing something, so as to serve others out of love of God).

In the case of these later things – “the little material things” – St Josemaría also attributes importance to their exterior effect even though their value for sanctity resides primarily in the love with which they are carried out, as has already been said. It is clear that little things are valuable due to love, thanks to which they become great. But this – within the “logic of the Incarnation”, which dominates the doctrine of St Josemaría – is inseparable from the value that lies in “doing things well”, putting care into their execution. In fact, no supernatural merit is lost when, in spite of one’s good will to work with perfection, using all the means to make sure that things will turn out well, one does not obtain the desired result. But without real interest in striving for results to be good, the will would not be good.

That interest is continuously present in the writings of St Josemaría. We have already seen him teaching that one should *concentrate on what you are doing*. Other times he urges the carrying out of one’s duties with perfection until one places *the last stone*⁶ or *finishing things well, achieving human perfection*⁷ in such a way that it becomes *a perfect job of work, finished like filigree and pleasing in every way*.⁸ And in this sense, he brings to mind the verses of a Castillian poet: “doing things well is more important than doing them”.⁹

While the emphasis has classically been placed only on love and not on the very perfection of the work done, St Josemaría also insists on this objective sense. The “care for little things” is key not only because of what it confers on interior acts of virtues *so as to acquire the regular, polished and firmly gentle form of charity, of perfection*¹⁰ – which continues being the main point – but also because it contributes to ordering earthly things as God wants, making them reflect objectively, in some way, the divine perfections.

3. Throughout history, numerous saints and masters of the spiritual life have taught the value of little things, the “little spiritual things” above all – from St Augustine (5th century)¹¹ and St Gregory the Great (6th century),¹² to St Teresa of Avila (16th century),¹³ St John of the Cross (16th century)¹⁴ and St Therese of Lisieux (19th century).¹⁵

For all of them, the care of little things is very important for holiness. The reason is easily understood if one bears in mind that holiness implies a growth in divine grace and that *God refuses the proud and will always favour the humble* (cf. 1 Pet 5:5; Jas 4:6). In this, they draw attention to the great value of little things because the fact that they are “little” favours humility, contributing to removing the obstacle of pride that prevents one from receiving the grace of God. When one is dealing with important actions, it is easier to fall into vainglory. But the little things usually pass

⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 489.

⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 50.

⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 63.

⁹ ANTONIO MACHADO, *Proverbios y cantares*, XXIV: quoted in ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 116.

¹⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 20.

¹¹ Cf. ST AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, c. VIII, 18; *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 12, 14 (PL 35, 1491-1492); *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 39, 22 (PL 36, 447-448); *Sermo* 58, 10 (PL 38, 398); *Sermo* 69, 1, 2 (PL 38, 442) *Ep. 265 ad Seleucianae*, 8 (PL 33, 1089).

¹² ST GREGORY THE GREAT, *Regula pastoralis*, III, 33 (PL 77, 116).

¹³ This can be seen in various texts: E. HENNESSEY, *La noción de “cosas pequeñas” en cuatro autores espirituales del Siglo de Oro español*, Theology Faculty of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome 2009, cap. 2

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, c. 3

¹⁵ ST THERESE OF LISIEUX, *History of a Soul*, chaps. 7, 9, 11.

unnoticed by others and thus do not receive any human reward: only God sees them and rewards the love that one has put into those details.

The doctrine of St Josemaría is in continuity with the tradition of the saints, but at the same time, he renews this tradition thanks to the light to proclaim holiness in ordinary life that God granted him on 2 October 1928, the date of the foundation of Opus Dei. For this reason, in his teaching, the importance of little things is intimately united to two essential features of the spirit that he transmits: the sense of the divine filiation, “foundation” of the Christian life, and the sanctification of professional work, “hinge” of sanctity in the middle of the world.

On the one hand, divine filiation: what can a son of God offer to his Father but “little things”? *Some people could perhaps imagine that ordinary life contains very little that can be offered to God: it's made up of trifles or worthless things. But small children who want to please their parents give them whatever they've got: a lead soldier with its head missing, an empty cotton-reel, a few pebbles, a couple of buttons: everything they value, their 'treasures'. And a father doesn't consider how babyish the present is: he thanks his child for it with the tenderest of hugs. Let's act in the same way towards God, because these silly little things become great deeds, when our love is great. That is what we are here for, to make something heroic out of the little details of every day and every moment, by our Love.*¹⁶

On the other hand, the care of little things is indispensable to sanctify work because the perfection of work – an essential prerequisite of its sanctification – consists in “little things”. Going by the example of Jesus Christ during the years he spent in Nazareth, we see that he did not carry out extraordinary actions but small, ordinary ones. *Carry out your work knowing that God sees all: laborem manuum mearum respexit Deus: God saw the labour of my hands (Gen 31:42). Therefore our work should be something holy and worthy of Him: not only finished down to the last detail, but also done with a right intention, with integrity, honestly, faithfully and with a sense of justice.*¹⁷

4. Holiness always requires heroism. In the ancient classical antiquity ‘heroes’ were personalities – real or mythical – to whom extraordinary feats were ascribed. Heroism was a privilege of a few and it was beyond ordinary life. For Christians this is not so. *Today, as yesterday, heroism is expected of the Christian;*¹⁸ *sanctity is never a mediocre thing.*¹⁹

Heroism refers to struggle. Christian life demands heroic struggle against all that is opposed to sanctity, for the love of God. This is not only against mortal sin but, also against venial sin. *Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 5:19). Venial sins do a lot of harm to the soul. –Therefore, ‘Capite nobis vulpes parvulas, quae demoliuntur vineas’, God says in the Canticle of Canticles: ‘Catch the little foxes that destroy the vine.’*²⁰

It is also necessary to struggle against the inclination to sin that is present in every person, and to fight against it in little things. In this regard, Sacred Scripture warns that *he who despises small things will fail little by little (Sir 19:1)*. The efficacious strategy is to situate the combat in little things. *That supernatural mode of conduct is a truly military tactic. You carry on the war – the daily struggles of your interior – far from the main walls of your fortress. And the enemy meets you there: in your small mortifications, your customary prayer, your methodical work, your plan of life: and with difficulty will he come close to the easily-scaled battlements of your castle. And if he does come, he*

¹⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 24 March 1930*, 19 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. II, cap. VI, apartado 4. 6.

¹⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 15 October 1948*, 26 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. III, cap. VII, apartado 2.3.1. b1

¹⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 82.

¹⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 24 March 1930*, 19 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. I, Parte preliminar, apartado III, 1.c.

²⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 329.

comes exhausted.²¹ This is the way to be faithful to the love of God in what is great: *He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much (Lk 16:10).*

The means to fight that inclination to sin (also called concupiscence) is mortification. The advice of St Josemaría in this respect is that *mortification has to be looked for in small, everyday things: in work that is intense, constant and methodical. Little things that won't harm our health but will keep our love of God alight. Mortifications at meals. Heroic minutes throughout the day. Punctuality. Tidiness. Guarding our sight on the street, without doing anything odd, which isn't part of the spirit of the Work. We have to walk naturally; and when there is something harmful, or which could cause our love grow cold, then we have 'to see without looking'. Dozens and dozens of features and opportunities to take advantage of!*²² He points out as examples *small conquests, such as smiling at those who annoy us, denying the body some superfluous fancy, getting accustomed to listening to others, making full use of the time God allots us...*²³

The ascetical struggle of the children of God is not merely a defence. Rather, above all, it lies in attack, a conquest. In manifesting love for God in little things it is necessary to exert oneself. He who loves discovers a multitude of details that he can take care of, a multitude of occasions for carrying out little acts of service, *offering up both great and small things for love, without putting on a show,*²⁴ thinking of the Church, of the Pope, of souls. The Lord witnesses those details, which could cost a lot of sacrifice, just as he witnessed the generosity of that woman who gave “two small coins” for worship in the temple: *Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury, for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on' (Mk 12:43-44).*

Heroism in little things has as a reward a great crown. God rewards the struggle in “little things” out of love for Him with the glory of heaven: *Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness (Mt 25:21: cf. Lk 19:17). Because you have been in pauca fidelis, faithful in small things, come and join in your master's happiness. The words are Christ's. In pauca fidelis!... Now will you neglect little things, if heaven itself is promised to those who mind them?*²⁵

5. Ordinary life is the battle-ground where the heroism of the Christian has to take place. It is possible to live daily life heroically: *turning the prose of each day into heroic verse.*²⁶ Just as the simplest actions of the Lord during his life in Nazareth – daily work, family life, dealings with other people – were heroic through the love with which he carried them out, so also the ordinary life of a Christian can be heroic, with the heroism of “little things”.

Spectacular events are not necessary. St Josemaría usually said that since our life is common and ordinary, to serve God with big things would be like trying to go hunting lions in the corridors. *That is what happened to Tartarín of Tarascón, whose story I have told you so often before. You will not find lions in the corridors of the house. On the other hand, there are a multitude of little things that require heroism. Some, because they always have to be done, while others precisely because they seem to be so humanly unimportant.*²⁷ “What is small, is small; but he who is faithful in small things, is great.”²⁸

²¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 307

²² ST JOSEMARÍA, Notes taken from a meditation, 13 April 1954 (AGP, P18, p.61): in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. III, cap. VIII, apartado 2.5.1.

²³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 37.

²⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 784.

²⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 819.

²⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 50.

²⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 29 July 1965*, 55 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. II, cap. VI, apartado 4. 6.

²⁸ ST AUGUSTINE, *De doctr. christ.*, 14, 35.

Virtuous acts in ordinary life usually consist of details that are easy to accomplish if they are taken singly. What is heroic is their number and silent continuity without the reward of admiration. *True heroism is found in ordinary things, daily events, done again and again, perseveringly, in God's sight and with unshakeable dedication.*²⁹ It is *the heroism of persevering in the ordinary things of every day,*³⁰ because *perseverance in little things, for Love is heroism.*³¹

Heroism in ordinary things is the heroism of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *teacher of the sacrifice that is hidden and silent!*³² It is the heroism of Jesus during the years of hidden life, supreme model of virtue in ordinary life. Without doing anything out of the ordinary, he worked heroically at every moment, with a total self-surrender to the Will of the Father that would lead him to give his life on the Cross. On Calvary, he would manifest his love and his perfect human virtues through his Passion and Death, but that love and those very virtues were already present in all he was doing in Nazareth. Therefore, the Christian ought to look at Christ on the Cross to learn how to practise the virtues in carrying the cross of each day.³³

6. St Josemaría has taught the importance of “little things” with the example of his life, not only through his writings and preaching. Blessed Alvaro del Portillo testifies that the care for little things is a “basic line”³⁴ of his spirit and comments: “It was marvellous that a man who was a protagonist of formidable divine enterprises, could be capable of penetrating with such intensity in what, as he used to say, is *only noticed by pupils dilated by love.*”³⁵ He wanted, with all his soul, to imitate Christ who, as God, always had present from great things to the smallest ones: the flowers in the field (cf. *Mt 6:28*), the hair on our head (cf. *Mt 10:30*), etc. “He taught us with his example to take attentive care of many details: from the conservation of buildings to the good functioning of the smallest instrument of work. He would repeat that each object should be used for the purpose for which it has been made.”³⁶ He gave importance to the decoration of the house, he insisted on taking care of things for personal use – clothes, tools for professional work, etc. – he made people see the value of material order, of punctuality, of cleanliness...³⁷

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²⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 8 August 1956*, 40 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. II, cap. VI, apartado 4. 6.

³⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 24 March 1930*, 19 in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. II, cap. VI, apartado 4. 6.

³¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 813. Cf. *The Forge*, 85.

³² *Ibid.*, 509. Cf. *Christ is passing by*, 172.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 277; *Christ is passing by*, 58; ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Symbolum Apostolorum*, c. 6

³⁴ BLESSED ALVARO DEL PORTILLO, *40 Years with a Saint*, New York 2016.

³⁵ *Idem*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³⁷ Cf. PILAR URBANO, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter 2003, chap. 15.