

NATURALNESS

1. Naturalness is a virtue that stands out especially among the early Christians. Ordinary citizens before they came to know the Gospel, they continued being so once they embraced the faith. The light of Christ that had penetrated their hearts led them to sanctify their activities, and not to abandon or change them. “Let us not stop going to the forum, wrote Tertullian at the end of the 3rd century, nor to the market-place, the baths, the shops, the offices, nor the inns; let us not stop relating and living together with others We sail the seas with you, join the army with you, work the land with you and trade with you from its harvest. We sell the products of our sweat for you to use.”¹ “Christians – we read in another document of the same century – are not distinguished from other men of their land, neither by their language nor by their customs. Because they don’t live in their own towns, nor speak a strange language, nor lead a life-style exclusive to them. (.....) Living in Greek or barbarian towns, according to their circumstances, and adapting themselves in clothing, meals and the other usages and customs of each country, they display a special kind of conduct to the surprise and admiration of everyone.”² They are of the world, but not worldly: they live Christian naturalness.

In their ordinary lives they tried to spread their faith in order to carry out their apostolic mission. They did this with such determination that the pagan philosopher Celsus accused them of using their professions – shoemakers, teachers, whatever it was – to sow the seed of the Gospel in their homes and the whole of society³. In short, they were Christians who were trying to implant Christ’s doctrine in their daily work and spread it wherever they went, with their actions and their words, following the Master’s teaching: “*Let your light so shine among men that they see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father*”⁴. “Good deeds”, not external signs, bore witness to their faith. They acted like leaven in the dough, naturally, not attracting undue attention in any way that could have made them stand out from their fellow citizens and so made their apostolic zeal ineffective.

This spirit of sanctification and apostolate in the middle of the world shows in the clearest way possible the message of St Josemaría. *If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism.*

¹ TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum*, c. 42, 1-3.

² *Ep. ad Diognetum*, c. V, 1 ss.

³ Cf. ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum*, 3, 55.

⁴ *Mt* 5, 16.

*Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens.*⁵ In the same way, those who follow the path of holiness taught by St Josemaría *are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world just as they did before they joined. There is nothing false or artificial about their behaviour. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith.*⁶ Hence the importance that St Josemaría gave to Naturalness.⁷

2. Generally speaking, Christian naturalness is a virtue that helps one live his faith coherently by behaving towards others in accordance with how each person is. In this sense it forms part of humility.

Externally it takes on different forms, depending on the person. There is a naturalness proper to priests, who will comport themselves in a way fitting their sacred ministry; there is the naturalness of the faithful, which consists in living their faith in their professional and social environment. In this way they give Christian witness, not as official Catholics, but as citizens and professionals just like everyone else.

When St Josemaría speaks of naturalness, he refers above all to the latter, that of the lay faithful. He says that *in order to prove that one is a Christian there is no need to wear badges and medals, because Christianity is expressed quite naturally by knowing the faith and striving to put it into practice, by trying to live an upright life, by taking delight in the things of God, and by being ready to practise the virtue of charity.*⁸ For a model, he goes to the hidden life of Our Lord during his years in Nazareth: *If we behave normally – like other people – and supernaturally, we only follow the example of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. Think a moment that His whole life is filled with naturalness. He spends thirty hidden years, without attracting attention, as one more workman, and is known in the village as the carpenter’s son.*⁹

3. To grasp this teaching well, we have to understand that what is “natural” or “normal” for a Christian is not always to “just do what the others do,” “not to call attention,” “to adapt to the environment”... What is natural for an ordinary Christian is to live his faith to the full, without inappropriately trying to make the point that God has called him to holiness and apostolate. *Naturalness. –Let your lives as Christian gentlemen, as Christian women – your salt and your light – flow spontaneously, without anything odd or silly: carry our spirit of simplicity with you always.*¹⁰ The Christian does not have to try to be “just like the others”, if the others misbehave; instead, he has to behave as a Christian ought, and “like his fellow-men”¹¹ in his professional and social life, like any other Christian trying to live his faith seriously.

It is to be expected that those who interact with a Christian who seeks sanctity in his work and daily life should notice that he strives to live virtues and practise his faith, that he is a worshipper, without hiding the fact, and that they feel the impact of his apostolate, although all this is in stark contrast to the surrounding environment. *‘And in a paganised or pagan*

⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 376 ss.; *Furrow*, 555 ss.; *The Forge*, 140, 508; *Conversations*, 119; *Christ is passing by*, 53, 148; *Friends of God*, 89-90; etc. In his works published until the year 2002, he speaks on more than 40 occasions about naturalness.

⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid, vol. II, chap. VI, 3.2.2.

⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 121. It is clear that in this quotation, “naturalness” is equivalent to “normality”. Cf. also *The Way*, 840.

¹⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 379.

¹¹ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 21, 111-112; *Friends of God*, 121.

*environment, when the atmosphere clashes with my life, won't my naturalness seem artificial? you ask me. –And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs: and that contrast, because you're confirming your faith with deeds, is exactly the naturalness I want of you.*¹²

4. The faithful of Opus Dei must live this virtue as what they are, ordinary faithful, or – *mutatis mutandis*, secular priests – because the call to Opus Dei does not imply a change in one's state or condition, and does not have any public significance in one's social and professional life. One's dedication to God rules out any formal, external manifestations, such as uniforms or decorations. *You must dress according to who you are, and where you are, your family, your work..., just like your companions, but to please God, and to create a genuine and attractive image of the life of a true Christian. Naturally, without showing off.*¹³ The spiritual and theological fact of the call to sanctity in the world requires naturalness: what would be strange for any other member of the faithful would be equally strange for a member of the faithful of the Work. Hence St Josemaría taught: *Live as the others around you live, with naturalness, but "supernaturalising" every moment of your day.*¹⁴ The faithful of Opus Dei, he explains elsewhere, *live with naturalness, like any other conscientious Christian, without considering themselves special. Blended into the mass of their companions, they try, at the same time, to detect the flashes of divine splendour which shine through the commonest everyday realities.*¹⁵ Each one must live naturalness appropriately, without anything artificial that can separate him from the others. Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, usually passed unnoticed for thirty years. As St Josemaría explained: *There is no need for others to know you are dedicated to God, striving to imitate Jesus Christ [...]. Nevertheless, they should experience it; they should feel helped to be clean and honest when they see your behaviour, for example, how you respect other people's legitimate freedom; and when they hear doctrine from your lips, backed up by the consistency of your example.*¹⁶

5. Since the call to Opus Dei does not imply any change in civil society, naturalness in this case, requires its faithful to demand the respect due to conscience and to the intimacy of the Christian home that Opus Dei is. To paraphrase St Josemaría: one's personal intimacy is not something to go trumpeting in the streets; simplicity must go together with prudence. It is evident that there are things of one's family that we don't share with strangers, because what may be dear to us can be a motive of jokes and derision for others. It is a norm of behaviour dictated by common sense, as happens – or ought to – in any family anywhere in the world. Family intimacy is not brought into the open; anything else would be vulgar exhibitionism.

6. Such demands of naturalness have nothing to do with secrecy. *Discretion is not being mysterious, or secretive. –It is, quite simply, naturalness.*¹⁷ Precisely because the faithful of Opus Dei try to do apostolate wherever they are, they don't hide their association with the Work. In their public dealings they don't introduce themselves as faithful of the Prelature

¹² ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 380. Cf. *The Way*, 842.

¹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 122.

¹⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 508.

¹⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 119.

¹⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, Notes from a meditation, 9 January 1959.

¹⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 641. In this point of *The Way*, and in general in the teachings of St Josemaría, discretion is situated "in the life of ordinary Christians, of citizens equal to the others, who strive to sanctify their work and give unequivocal witness to their Catholic faith, but without 'advertising' it, and trying to live a 'life hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3) in a secular way." (P. RODRÍGUEZ, *The Way, Critical-Historical edition*, London 2009, comment on point 641). Later, St Josemaría decided not to use the word "discretion" so that it would not be misunderstood (cf. *ibidem*).

because it would be irrelevant, but the normal thing would be that their friends and colleagues know it. St Josemaría's criterion is clear: *I hate secrecy. I only allow the secrecy of Confession and whatever else is prescribed by moral theology, for good reason.*¹⁸

Clearly and forcefully he makes the distinction between naturalness and secrecy. He says that *a discrete reserve – never secretive – which is nothing but a remedy against bragging; defends the spirit of humility which God wants to be also collective.*¹⁹ It would be wrong to regard naturalness or collective humility as secrecy. It is easy to acquire plenty of information on Opus Dei, its history, the names of the Directors and where they live, and the apostolic activities carried out. These are available on the internet²⁰ and in many publications, such as *Romana*, the official Bulletin of the Prelature.²¹

7. The same respect for intimacy that we have the right to ask for, must also be lived in our relations with others. Clearly, in the apostolate we must enter the lives of our friends – as our Lord once entered ours – but always with a refined respect for their freedom, as well as honouring their confidences loyally, as they do ours.

Silence of office is a duty of prudence and, often, of justice, and does not contradict in any way one's straightforward relations with others.

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Bibliography

ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 376-380; *Furrow*, 554-566; *The Forge*, 140 and 508; *Conversations*, 30; *Christ is passing by*, 53 and 148; *Friends of God*, 89-91

P. RODRÍGUEZ, *The Way, Critical-Historical edition*, Scepter, London 2009, comment to points 376, 379, 380 and 641

E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio Teología espiritual*, Rialp, Madrid 2010, vol. II, chap. 6., 3.2.2 and 3.2.4

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¹⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid, vol. II, chap. VI, 3.2.4.

¹⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, in E. BURKHART–J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid, vol. II, chap. VI, 3.24.

²⁰ Cf. www.opusdei.org, www.es.josemariaescriva.info and www.isje.org (St Josemaría Escrivá Historical Institute).

²¹ In *Conversations*, 30, the founder of Opus Dei replies to those who suggest that, under the pretext of collective humility, it attempts to cover up secrets. This calumny – which is what he calls it – has its origin in the difficulty some have in understanding that the members of Opus Dei are ordinary faithful and that their incorporation into the Prelature does not change their condition in the Church or in civil society. This is why they do not present themselves officially with the qualification as members of the Work, nor do they use badges. The Work does not publish data and statistics of a professional, social or family nature, data which it does not have. There is no secret in this: it simply conforms to the reality of the situation as regards their link with Opus Dei. In their own environment, with their professional colleagues, among family and friends – that is to say where their way of living out their Christian faith in a coherent way impacts on others – the faithful of Opus Dei show in a natural way their bond with the Prelature (cf. also *Conversations*, 34 and 41).