

Some aspects of spiritual direction related to life in society

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1. Questions concerning professional ethics

All human activity has an ethical or moral dimension. When carrying out professional work, this entails specific virtues and ethical norms that any well-intentioned person, especially a Christian, has to live faithfully and coherently. These ethical norms are not an extrinsic imposition on professional activity but rather an intrinsic and integral component of any human work.

Ethical rules have an essentially positive character. They are a necessary element for the successful accomplishment of work and, consequently, for making it a means of sanctification. No one can rightly consider these principles an obstacle to his or her professional activity, as though a dichotomy were to exist between ethics, which Catholics are in a position to know with special clarity, and the competent exercise of one’s profession.¹ The human value of work does not consist solely in its technical effectiveness, nor can it be attained without taking ethical

¹ Many people need to be forewarned about the possible temptation of thinking that the social implications of natural morality and hence of Christianity are incompatible with the effectiveness of work in any setting, in a world unfortunately dominated by economic criteria (cf. II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 63; John Paul II, Encyclical *Centessimus annus*, nos. 24 & 35; Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, nos. 31 & 34). No well-intentioned person who is guided by natural moral law could subordinate everything, including family life, to the pursuit of economic benefits or employ morally illicit means, even though others use them, to obtain material advantages. It would also be wrong to conceive Christian morality as a collection of obstacles and to overlook its eminently positive character in fostering all the virtues, many of which, such as loyalty, industriousness and magnanimity, have immediate repercussions on the human effectiveness of work.,

norms into account, precisely because the free exercise of any human task affects those who carry it out, either positively or negatively, making the person morally good or bad.²

The loss of the Christian meaning of life is at present leading many people to forget and abandon these standards in their professional activity, to the point that immoral conduct of different varieties has often become the general rule. An upright person cannot allow himself to be dragged down by his surroundings and feel justified to act in this mistaken way, not even with the excuse that he has to do so in order not to be left behind or be at a disadvantage in the practice of his profession. On the contrary, “endowed with the skill and experience so absolutely necessary for them, let them preserve a proper sense of values in their earthly activity in loyalty to Christ and his Gospel.”³ Personally living the norms of professional ethics with a unity of life, and teaching others to do so, is an indispensable and effective way to help Christianize society.

In order to live these precepts of professional ethics in one’s work, one first needs to know them well. It is not enough to be guided by a vague “common sense” when resolving questions in this area. One must have a serious desire to form one’s conscience correctly, and thus use the means to study the corresponding moral principles, with a thorough knowledge of the Church’s teaching, which is the authentic interpreter of the requirements of the natural moral law. In addition, one needs to strive to practice the necessary virtues to fulfill one’s obligations as perfectly as possible.

Even then it frequently happens that, in carrying out one’s profession, moral problems arise that seem to lack a clear-cut answer or about which one’s own judgment might be clouded. For example, when it is a question of judging the moral rectitude of a particular economic activity, or ascertaining the obligations of justice and charity towards employees, or assessing certain cases of reparation for damages, or in forming a moral evaluation in areas of scientific

² Hence it would not make any sense to call someone a “good Christian” simply because he fulfills the precepts of God’s law, even though he is unjust towards his subordinates or neglects his work. The human person is an organic whole. Thus the moral virtues cannot be considered in isolation. They are all connected, because they all share in prudence and develop in harmony with it. Moreover, each virtue makes the whole person good and not simply in a single aspect. Also, from the Christian viewpoint, they all share in charity (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1827). “Your Christian vocation requires you to be in God and, at the same time, to be concerned with the things of the earth, using them objectively, just as they are: to give them back to him” (*Furrow*, no. 295).

³ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 72.

research in which the dignity of the person and human life itself are at stake. In these and many other questions which a person might be faced with, there is often a *duty to seek advice*. This is a clear prudential norm that stems from the obligation to always act with an upright conscience.

Naturally, advice in these matters should be sought from persons with a sound moral background and competence in the specific problem, which will enable them to apply the principles of moral theology to the particular case.⁴ When someone, in the context of spiritual direction, asks for advice in these matters, he should realize (and often it will be necessary to remind him explicitly) that the opinion he receives refers *exclusively* to the moral evaluation of the problem in order to help him form a right judgment. It must never constitute an intrusion in professional matters as such. After having consulted, the person who sought advice must consider in conscience, before God, the advice he has received and then act on his own responsibility. The request for advice must never imply an attempt to shift responsibility for one's own actions onto the person consulted.

The exemplary manner in which Christians ought to strive to live the ethical demands of their profession is an essential part of the professional prestige and morality necessary to carry out a deep apostolate in their work setting. St. Josemaria called that prestige one's "bait" as a "fisher of men."⁵ Sometimes it may be necessary to go against the current when in a given professional activity frequent ways of acting occur that are clearly immoral and that a person who is trying to act in accord with the natural moral law, and even more so a good Christian, could never accept. Yet one also has to avoid the deformation of a scrupulous conscience. Real problems are to be resolved through study and, when necessary, by consulting.

⁴ In consultations on these matters it should also be clear to both parties that there is a strict obligation to observe the moral norms concerning professional secrets. For instance, the one who consults can pose the problem in hypothetical terms if he is under an obligation not to reveal certain data. The person consulted has, on his part, the strict obligation not to reveal to anyone the matter consulted without the permission of the party who has made the consultation.

⁵ Cf. *The Way*, no. 372.

2. On duties stemming from Christian solidarity and the use of material goods

The reception of baptism by itself entails a calling to the fullness of Christian life in the midst of the world, with all its consequences. These include the obligation to know, live and disseminate in our surroundings the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person and on the social dimension of human conduct.⁶ Sensitivity to social problems is inherent to the Gospel.⁷ From here stems the mission of all the lay faithful to place Christ at the center of the human activity he or she carries out, bringing Christ's light to professional duties and family and societal relations.⁸

In social, political and economic matters, each person can adopt the attitude and solution he deems best within the broad boundaries set by Catholic doctrine and moral teaching. What a consistent Christian can never do, however, is to dispense himself from his social responsibilities or turn his back on the insistent challenges of the Church's magisterium. No one, especially a Christian, can remain indifferent to his neighbor's material and human needs, to situations of poverty, ignorance and suffering.⁹ Each must do what he can to remedy these sufferings or injustices, because "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."¹⁰

St. Josemaria stressed the need for "unity of life,"¹¹ which requires an authentic coherence between the faith we profess and our behavior in society.¹² Sanctifying social duties entails transforming them into an occasion for personal apostolate and for intervening actively in society, according to one's personal circumstances, through many different channels, including one's professional work and family. For instance, by undertaking social works, or by participating in associations that foster the common good and shape public opinion; these could

⁶ Cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2419-2425.

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, no. 79; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church*, nos. 60-68.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, nos. 15-17.

⁹ Cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2443-2449. Although it is true that faith leads us to see poverty and suffering as treasures that can and ought to be offered to God, co-redeeming with Christ, nevertheless this is never an excuse for being passive in the face of others' needs.

¹⁰ St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 167.

¹¹ Cf. For instance in *Christ is Passing By*, no. 126; and *Conversations*, no. 114.

¹² "Your task as a Christian citizen is to help see Christ's love and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life: culture and the economy, work and rest, family life and social relations" (*Furrow*, no. 302).

range from a neighborhood association, a cultural group or an association of parents, to a direct participation in the political life of a locality or nation. In this area especially, one should be on guard against the fear of “complicating one’s life.”¹³

The effort to work for justice and remedy the poverty and ignorance in which so many live ought to be a consequence of an authentically Christian life, shown in one’s personal detachment, sobriety, temperance and general tone of life. We must be very careful not to be adversely influenced, even unwittingly, by a materialistic society that urges the satisfaction of every need and unchecked consumerism: the capricious accumulation of material goods, the need to get “the latest” model, etc.

This does not mean that we should have a negative outlook on the use of material goods; but we have to be watchful and form our judgment correctly so that in practice our personal life corresponds faithfully to these Christian demands. We belong to the world but we must not be worldly.¹⁴ Hence we cannot be afraid of going against the current. God relies on Christian example to move many people, helping them change their behavior. Thus we have to show them the beauty of Christian doctrine in a positive manner, helping them to get down to specifics and not simply to know the general principles.¹⁵

A person who guides others has to help those seeking advice to be sincerely open and sensitive to the requirements of the virtues, so that they can discern God’s will in all their actions on their own responsibility. Therefore in matters of social responsibility and the virtue of poverty it is not enough to transmit general ideas. Rather, one needs to teach people how to apply these principles in practice, without of course imposing solutions that are a matter of opinion, helping them to form a correct conscience in matters related to the Christian duties of solidarity and detachment from material goods.

¹³ There are people who try to accommodate their concern for social problems with the passivity of a bourgeois existence. They act as though a just social order were the automatic result of civil laws having little or nothing to do with private initiative and individual activity.

¹⁴ Cf. *Jn* 17:15.

¹⁵ In keeping with personal circumstances, there is a need to study the documents of the Church’s social teaching and to read other books that it would be good to know and recommend.

Through spiritual direction and fraternal correction, it is especially necessary to teach those who are better off financially that their sense of social responsibility should be shown in the tone of their life. Those who offer spiritual advice have to know how to make demands upon the people they advise, in a gradual manner along an inclined plane as it were, but addressing clearly anything that might constitute a disordered love or a selfish use of wealth that would be in contradiction to the behavior of Christians who are aware of their social obligations.¹⁶ When the person being advised has children, he needs to teach them in a positive way what temperance really means in the various facets of their behavior, helping them to form solid criteria.¹⁷

These irresponsible ways of acting would be even more serious and inconsistent in countries with widespread poverty, which Christians can never turn their back on. In pastoral work with people who are financially well off, one needs to help them recognize possible excuses for extravagant spending based on false “demands” of the society in which they live or of their spouse. These people may include friends of ours who are generous in providing financial support for apostolic works in the parish or who assist various institutions in the Church. Our friendship with them should serve as an incentive, and never a deterrent, to remind them clearly of their Christian duties towards the poor.

¹⁶ Cf. *I Tim 6: 17-19*: *As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, not to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.*

¹⁷ The following are a few examples that would be inconsistent in a Christian who wants to live his vocation to holiness, precisely because they are a living contradiction with being a follower of Christ, who *being rich became poor for your sakes, that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor 8:9)*:

—making long and costly trips for superficial reasons (besides, when these trips are organized by travel agents they often involve visiting or staying at frivolous places); indiscriminate purchases in other countries out of whim or vanity; etc.;

—imitating practices current in “high society” that involve an obvious lack of temperance, as in extravagant and objectively expensive celebrations of family anniversaries or graduations, with disproportionate gifts and inexcusable luxury;

—superfluous expenses out of whim or under the pressure of a consumer society that lead, for example, to purchasing the latest merchandise (televisions, videos, appliances, clothes or footgear of a specific brand), using credit cards irresponsibly, or letting children have whatever they want, whatever the cost.

3. “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27)

“Politics are a demanding manner—but not the only one—of living the Christian commitment to the service of others.”¹⁸ “The Church praises and esteems the work of those who for the good of men devote themselves to the service of the state and take on the burdens of this office.”¹⁹ A spiritual director should encourage lay people who feel called and have the abilities for political tasks to dedicate themselves to this work, which is an act of charity and a service to the common good. On his part, the spiritual director needs a special capacity for understanding the difficulties politicians might encounter, as well as fortitude to help them with firmness when necessary. These special difficulties might include, for instance, pressures that are at times unjust, slander, a demanding work schedule that could lead to activism and neglect of prayer life, superficiality in making decisions owing to a lack of time, a need to seek compromises, etc.

Political tasks require special abilities and entail a special way of reasoning. As a result, a spiritual director needs to understand the special characteristics of political life. Both the spiritual director and the person seeking advice should read the doctrinal note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dated November 24, 2002 “on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in public life,” and reread it from time to time. Building on the necessary distinction between individual ethics and political ethics, that document summarizes the matters on which a politician with an upright conscience must remain firm, and gives advice on how to act in situations where compromise might seem inevitable.²⁰

However, the task of a spiritual director in this area is not limited to the spiritual accompaniment of Christians who are professionally engaged in politics. All Christians; in fact, ought to be ever more aware of their responsibilities as citizens in civil society. “The common opinion that participating in politics is an absolute moral danger does not in the least justify either skepticism or an absence on the part of Christians in public life.”²¹ Therefore Christians “*are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life,’* that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas which are intended to promote

¹⁸ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens*, no. 46.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 75.

²⁰ Cf. also John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, no. 73.

²¹ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 42.

organically and institutionally the *common good*.”²² Political convictions are, certainly, matters of opinion and do not, as such, form part of spiritual direction. This does not mean, however, that they constitute a sphere devoid of moral standards. If someone seeks advice for resolving specific political problems, they should be advised to consult the documents of the Magisterium in order to form their own opinion in a responsible manner. St. Josemaria was always very clear about this: “I do not act in politics. I do not wish to, and I cannot. But my outlook as a jurist and theologian, and my Christian faith, lead me always to stand up for the legitimate freedom of all men. No one has a right to impose non-existent dogmas in temporal matters.”²³

Spiritual directors should remember the following words from Vatican Council II. “All Christians must be aware of their own specific vocation within the political community. It is for them to give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good. In this way they are to demonstrate concretely how authority can be compatible with freedom, personal initiative with the solidarity of the whole social organism, and the advantages of unity with fruitful diversity. They must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions, and respect citizens, who, even as a group, defend their points of view by honest methods.”²⁴ In this sense, the Church encourages the active participation of Christians in public life, especially in democratic societies, since “every democracy must be participative.”²⁵ There is a pressing need to overcome the abstention, laziness and lack of interest that sometimes impede such participation, even more than external obstacles do. Thus, for instance, it would be a sad state of affairs if a Christian were to abstain from voting as a result of comfort or of not considering the matter important. “A new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. *It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle.*”²⁶

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Conversations*, no. 77.

²⁴ Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 75.

²⁵ Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 189-191. The quotation is from no. 190.

²⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 3.

A free society that becomes immoral is on the path to losing its freedom. As a consequence, Christians who live in a free society, where they can express themselves and speak out, would be morally guilty if they were not to strive to counteract a deterioration in laws and customs. By not doing so, they would contribute to a conspiracy of silence and to what might appear to be a false unanimity on matters deeply affecting human dignity.

When Christians make their voices heard, they are not imposing their religious convictions on non-believers. Rather they are speaking in the name of reason and the natural law. “The Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church’s responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.”²⁷

By the calling that stems from their baptism, all Christians have the duty to participate in the Church’s mission to “purify reason.”

4. Particular aspects of the spiritual direction of persons who are dedicated to study, research or teaching in fields with doctrinal implications

Persons who are dedicated to teaching need to feel a special responsibility to foster in a positive way a search for the truth in their students and to enkindle in them a great love for beauty and for all the good realities in today’s world. The goal of intellectual formation is the good use of one’s freedom in forming ideas and carrying out research. This entails giving students the intellectual tools needed to distinguish between truth and falsity in the many trends present in public opinion. In a society that is predominantly “audiovisual,” it is especially

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, no. 28.

important to encourage the reading of good books that can awaken intellectual concerns and interests.

At the same time, a vigilant attitude is needed to safeguard sound doctrine in the face of widespread errors that may be fashionable. One also needs to be very prudent in studying and getting others to study authors who present doctrinal problems, even more so in the case of secondary school students and other persons who have not finished their university education. In these cases, one needs to be very forthright in providing all the guidelines and criteria needed to discern whatever truth there might be in the various scientific theories or philosophical teachings.

It is very important that teachers and university professors give faithful example in their own lives of the following qualities: humility and docility in asking for advice from those who are able and ought to provide it; prudence to allow the passing of years and the approval of learned and pious persons to confirm the validity of their own hypotheses and opinions; the readiness to measure their own theories by the light of Revelation and the Church's magisterium; a great love for both truth and justice, in order to avoid superficiality; and a special concern to strengthen their own interior life, through a childlike piety and complete sincerity.

Besides providing guidance in doctrinal questions to faithful dedicated to research and teaching in the university, it is important to encourage them in their Christian apostolate with professional colleagues and in building up a sound culture. Those with the suitable abilities can be encouraged to participate in scientific associations or societies for the humanities and in think-tanks; to get involved in writing and publishing; to form disciples who can carry on their work, etc..

Naturally teachers will sometimes have to read works that are confused on matters of faith and morals. In such cases prudence calls for the elementary caution of seeking advice and not undertaking the study of erroneous or doubtful works without first acquiring a solid grasp of

Catholic teachings on the topic, by reading documents of the Church’s magisterium and reliable authors.²⁸

In spiritual direction teachers could be reminded from time to time of the usefulness of recommending good books to their students. God alone knows how much good a sound book does for a soul. Students too should become accustomed to asking for advice about reading material with doctrinal and moral implications.²⁹ Thus they will follow the advice and example of John Paul II, who said “So much has been published and not everything is valuable and useful. It is important to know how to choose and to consult others about what is worth reading.”³⁰

In providing this advice, as in everything, the spiritual director should be very respectful of the complete freedom that Christians have in matters of opinion.

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²⁸ For a more extended treatment of the importance of readings in spiritual guidance, see Angel Rodriguez Luño, “Cultural factors of special relevance in spiritual formation,” section 2, “Reading”.

²⁹ Some web pages, like www.almudi.org, offer reliable bibliographical guidance.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way!*, Warner Books, 2004, pages 93-94.