

## **SANCTIFYING ORDINARY WORK**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

In this month of October, we will celebrate another anniversary of the founding of Opus Dei. And as we know, one of the central messages that St. Josemaria understood in this message that he received, he always said that it was something he saw, and he saw it as coming from the hands of Our Lord, was that everyone in the world can become a saint in and through the realities of the ordinary, and especially with great emphasis on sanctifying ordinary work. When we open the gospel, we realize how often Our Lord uses examples of ordinary work to communicate divine, and at the same time, human wisdom to his disciples, and all this with great naturalness.

If we look at the parable of the sower, we see how he uses the example of an ordinary person sowing seed in the field. Or, in order to explain how we should search for the Kingdom of God, he uses the example of the merchant in search of fine pearls, you know, or the fisherman who casts the net into the sea, and so many other examples. The Lord esteems our work so much, the work that we do every single day with our hands, or with our mind, with all our heart that, despite being God and having created everything that exists, he wants it to go unnoticed for almost thirty years working with his own hands in a profession of little human significance - this is extraordinary.

There is not much written about this period of his earthly life, actually, that's something St. Josemaria noted. It's the hidden life of Jesus when he worked. But for those who are in tune with God's logic, this silence is actually very eloquent. The silence in the gospel is actually very eloquent. It means a lot. And it actually forms part of what the Holy Spirit wants to reveal to us. The greater part of Jesus's life is certainly a life that is hidden and silent, but not inactive or ineffective. Since he is God, everything that he does through his humanity has a divine dimension. We can even call it a redemptive dimension. He could have redeemed us with one action, any free action of his could- could have been redemptive, even if the world doesn't perceive it that way, because they only, you know, the world only wants to pay attention to that which is showy, to the miracles and- and all that. In this sense, the activity of Jesus, and that to which he calls us, specifically through our professional work, can be compared, I think, to the way in which the woman who puts, or literally hides, the yeast in the dough to transform it into bread.

If we turn to St. Luke, we actually have the shortest parable of the whole Gospel. It's one line, it's a one liner, but it has so much in it. "Again," he said, "to what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? It is like the leaven that a woman takes and puts in three measures of flour until it is all leavened." She kneads it with a K- kneads, she kneads it into the dough. Let's take a look at this parable in this meditation. Even though it's brief, it contains a profound teaching of how we should understand and carry out our professional work so that the Kingdom of God may spread throughout society. Certainly, in this parable, Our Lord compares the way in which the Kingdom of God spreads in souls to the way in which the leaven acts and transforms a mass of flour. But he does not intend to simply compare the leaven to the Kingdom, and the flour to the world, you know. It's not like the world is this big lump of dough. And the people who are Christian are baptized, or they're the leaven and they, you know, they have to simply make disciples out of all these other people. And that's like- that's how the leaven acts in the dough.

I think the Lord, actually, is doing something more subtle than that because, what he's saying is, he's not saying, I will compare the Kingdom of God, how the Kingdom of God spreads to- to how leaven acts in the dough, but how a woman takes the leaven and puts it in the dough in three measures until it's completely leavened. And so it's the point of comparison is the woman's work. Actually- actually, if we notice that. So there's an anthropological or personal dimension that is evident in the figure of the woman. And it is actually key to penetrating the sense of what Jesus can achieve through our daily work if we let him act. In comparing the ordinary work of a humble woman to how the kingdom of God develops in the world, Our Lord is already, from the very beginning, just by the very mention of this woman, giving dignity to that kind of hidden work. And I would say, by extension, any kind of work, great or small.

And perhaps, at that time, it- no one would have ever considered the work that- that a woman would do in that capacity, important in any way whatsoever, you know, for- for- for society, or- much less the Kingdom of God, you know. I mean, we might think that in order to describe something as great and worthy as the progress of the Kingdom of God and the world that Our Lord would have chosen, I don't know, to compare it to the work of a nobleman of the time or a scribe or pharisee or, you know, somebody you know, that works with religious things, and, you know, a priest of the law or something like that. But since Jesus himself entered the world and freely exercised the kind of hidden and humble work, he considers it, actually, opportune to use, as a point of comparison, the ordinary and effective work of a woman. And in so doing, reveals to us that the dignity of work does not depend on how influential it is for, you name it, politics, or the impressive results it may have on the global economy or the prestige we may achieve through it or whatever- whatever great results it may have in the eyes of the world. If it is honest work, its value depends on the subjective conditions under which the person carries it out and therefore, we should ask ourselves if the Lord is actually revealing something here, you know, with this woman. What is he saying to us? A little clue is, why is the woman working? We can ask that question. Why is the woman putting this leaven into this dough? And why is it this way that Our Lord describes it in this very, very short parable?

Apparently there's no intentionality that he's- she's just doing her work but- but Jesus mentions a very suggestive detail that allows us to intuit the intention that dominates the action of that woman, and that is the amount of flour. If we look to the Jewish world, we see something that's very interesting because in the Jewish world, three measures of flour, or as they call it in Hebrew, three seah, I think, was the name of it or one efa. One efa is equivalent to three measures. This makes bread for approximately 100 people, it's 22 liters of- of- of stuff. I mean, that's a lot of bread. So, given this amount of flour, what does that tell us? It tells us that the woman's task goes beyond what she herself can eat. She's not doing this for herself. There's something being revealed here about the intentionality of the woman in why she is working. Her task is to carry out a big event in the community, in her town. Maybe it's a wedding, maybe it's a homecoming or something like that. I think it's easy to imagine that the expectation of such an event would lead her to think frequently and enthusiastically about those who would eat the bread. In other words, her guests, and that this consideration, actually, is something that puts her into relation with others, you know.

Think about that - when we work, just like this woman is working, she- we are- we enter into a relation with other people, because we are contributing to their good, you know, and this is what we do when whenever we work, even if it's even if we don't deal with people directly, we're somehow doing something for society. And therefore, there is at some level, we are serving others. This is what work always does. And that's why work has to be seen as a service. The fact that the woman has to make so much bread for so many people would also presuppose a sacrifice of money, we can think, or of time, or simply of the effort that the very task implies because she needs to really organize herself. It's not just about doing something trivial here. She's got to, I don't know, set up tables. I mean, this implies a lot of virtue on her part, if you think about it. But whatever the challenge of executing a task of such dimensions is, it seems, that the woman does not care too much about those obstacles. Or, if she does care, she overcomes them because she perseveres until the whole of the masses leaven. So, perseverance, actually, is something that- that is needed for work and so many other virtues.

It is assumed that much of the professionalism with which we work involves finishing the task at hand and finishing it well as this woman does because that's what professionalism means. It means delivering, right? But this requires fortitude, ability to focus, perseverance, punctuality. In other words, it is not compatible with laziness. I don't know if you remember when St. Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonian- Thessalonians. He was- it was brought to his attention that- that they had misinterpreted an earlier letter, his first letter, because he was talking about the second coming of Our Lord as imminent and people misinterpreted that and said, well, if- if the Lord is coming, we don't need to work anymore, you know, because he's coming maybe in two weeks, maybe in a couple of months or whatever, you know. Why- why bother? And in his second letter, he says to them, "And while we were with you, we warned you that if you do not want to work, then you should not eat or, he who does not work should not eat. For we have heard that some live among you in disorder doing nothing, only occupied with snooping around, or whatever, doing nothing, being idle, idling around."

So, the first virtue of work is that we do it well and that we persevere to the end and then we finish it. For St. Josemaria, intense and well done work is a matter- is matter of sanctification, and especially if it is done out of love, even if it is difficult. The Prelate of Opus Dei wrote e a letter a few years ago where he quotes St. Josemaria, "We can joyfully do those duties that may be unpleasant. It is not illicit to think that it is possible to do with joy the work we like. One can do with joy and not only ill will what is difficult, what one doesn't like, if it is done for and with love, and therefore, freely." So he's saying, if we- even if we don't like what we do, we can do it out of love freely, we can offer it up. I think this is true even for those types of difficult- difficulties surrounding our work situation surrounding our unemployment, illness, old age, when it is not possible to work in the primary sense of the word.

That's why St. Josemaria that illness and old age, when they arrive, are transformed into professional work. When we're in bed and sick in the hospital, that's our professional work to offer that up. And in this way, the search for holiness, he continues, is not interrupted in accordance with the spirit of the work, which rests like the door in the hinge on professional work. That's beautiful. At the same time as working hard and well, we have taken to account that it is possible to persevere in a good and honest task for many reasons. Some of those reasons are actually good, such as serving others, but others may not be so good. Often, we may notice that the good intention with which we began to work crumbles into self-love and ends up manifesting itself, for example, in the desire to appear well to our boss or, or other colleagues, you know.

And in this world of ours that we live in, more than the temptation to not want to work, I think we are tempted to work too hard. This is called perfectionism or workaholism or professional-itis or whatever you want to call it. Undoubtedly, there's something good about all this, because the perfectionist actually tries to do things well, inefficiently. Right? However, we will hardly be able to diagnose these errors in ourselves or in others if we only consider the way in which we work. It's not about how we work. Rather, we have to examine how we value work in the totality of our life- of our life, our vocation. We cannot lose sight of the fact that, although work has a certain importance, it is only a means and needs to be ordered according to the ultimate horizon that gives meaning to the existence of our lives as sons and daughters of God. Here I think the virtue of practical wisdom is important. Traditionally, it's called prudence and it helps us to integrate our work here and now in relation to that end that goes beyond the work itself. It tells us when it would be good to be very effective and when it would not be because we will also, at times, have to fulfill more important duties and we will not be able to work with- with the perfection that we- that we desire that, you know, we can't finish our work perfectly because we have to take care of other family duties for instance. This conflict between work and other responsibilities that we have is resolved only according to a principle which illuminates the whole of life.

If efficient work, and just to give an example, were to become an end to be achieved at all costs, we would not give due attention to people around us, you know. If somebody is walking in the hallway and we don't have time for them at work, you know, we miss the opportunity to greet them, to smile at them, to- to give them some personal attention because, you know, we get into this mode of thinking that, oh, no, I'm

wasting time- I'm wasting time, I'm not efficient. More than achieving efficiency, what we do is dehumanize ourselves. Now, you might say, well, I don't see work as a- as a- as an end, I see it as a means. Okay, fine. But still, you should see it as a means in a way that you also put it in- in a hierarchy with other means, right? Because prayer is also a means or norms are also a means. Our plan of life is also a means to an end, right, to union with God. And so, at sometimes we have to stop the means of work and actually start employing the means of some kind of norm of piety - perhaps the rosary, or prayer, or things like that, a devotion - because we need to give time to Our Lord as well or our family or whatever. In short, prudence leads us by the hand to unity of life because it helps us to determine what we should do according to a hierarchy of order of principles, and that's very important for work. We cannot just think of work, we need to think of the bigger picture.

Having said all this, what is the best reason to work? Well, the answer is undoubtedly love. If we return to the parable of the woman, it is easy to imagine that the mere consideration of the guests would actually give the woman a good reason to work well or even better, and even more so if they were guests that she loves and appreciates very much as- such as family and friends. If the woman does her work for others, and it is precisely because of them that she does it with due human perfection, even if it is difficult, we can say that she not only puts leaven in the dough but also instills love in what perhaps was already her duty of justice. In this way she transforms her work into a gift. More than bread the woman gives love because, when we give someone a gift, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, the first thing we give them is the love with which we wish them well. The woman then goes beyond giving to her neighbor what she does through it, kind of technical contribution born of her ingenuity, or something like that, because now she is working for love and what she really gives is herself at the level of the person, not at the technical level but at the level of the person. St. Josemaria says, "Man does not limit himself to making things or to building objects. Work is born of love and manifests love and leads to love." As long as this woman loves, her work is born of the love she has for her guests, in the same way the fruit of her work, that is the bread well-made, manifests her love since it becomes a sign of her love. So the bread all of a sudden is very important because it's a sign of how much she really loves her guests, you know, it's- it becomes a token of our affection.

And if we do it well, well, what is that bread gonna do? Well, if whoever tastes that bread is gonna say, I got- I got to correspond, you know, because love is- love is with love repaid, as St. Josemaria said many times. So, those guests are going to be so moved by- by this very tasty bread that they're going to be moved to actually give her something in return, you know, so one gift begets another like as one smile begets another. And until all the hearts are transformed, this is how the Kingdom of God, you know, is spread, because she ends up kind of becoming living leaven. That- that is- that's the transforming agent, you know, through her gift.

But let's go back to the quantity of flour. So far, this detail of the quantity of flour and three measures has given us a chance to reflect on the personal dimension of our work. It is clear that an act of love on the human level can be manifested through work and that this love can also transform others into grateful

people who are willing to repay love with love. But the detail of the three measures of flour is not simply quantitative, it is also biblical. It is the same measure, for example, that Abraham and Sarah offered to honor the three mysterious men who visited them with Melchizedek in Genesis. And it is also the same measure that Gideon uses to offer a sacrifice that the Lord consumes with fire of an angel in Judges.

Now, imagine yourself to be a Jew, listening to Our Lord tell this parable. What would you think? I think for a Jew who hears Our Lord, the mere mention of the three measures of flour would evoke a reference to these sacred actions in the Bible. And yet, the same Jew would not say that the activity of the woman in the parable is itself a sacred action. He would be kind of perplexed, saying, well, wait a minute I- you're using the the measure that is typically used for sacrifices. But all those sacrifices are made with, with no leaven, with no yeast, and this woman is putting yeast. So, what are you saying, Lord? I guess we can speculate. But if we can see- if we consider the detail of the three measures of flour as an allusion to the notion of sacrifice as a sacred action, we might think that Our Lord wants to tell us in some way, that the work of this humble woman who loves much is something that can be offered up to God as a sacrifice. And thus, the secular can be transformed into something sacred.

And I think this is the discovery that the St. Josemaria makes in- on October 2 1928, that for a son or daughter of God in grace, we can transform, by means of our priestly soul, all our daily work into something holy and make it be united to the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross. Here's what St. Josemaria says, "We have to live in such a way that the Mass is the center of our interior life so that we know how to be with Christ keeping him company throughout the day, well united to his sacrifice. And this will lead us during the day to tell Our Lord that we offer ourselves for him, with him, and in him, to God the Father, uniting ourselves to all his intentions, in the name of all creatures. If we live like this, our whole day will be a Mass. We will be able to truly say it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

If we let the Lord give supernatural prominence to our work, we will be able to sanctify our own work, sanctify ourselves in our work, and sanctify others through our work. In the case of the woman in the parable, she's actually not just moving at the level of human love. She's also opening up herself to divine action in her life. And if she does that, then she's not only just doing it well or doing it out of human love, she's also offering it up to God as a sacrifice - she's sanctifying her work, sanctifying herself, sanctifying others through her work.

I pointed out earlier that by means of this parable, the Lord does not simply compare the leaven to the Kingdom and the flour to the world. He also includes a personal dimension by introducing the woman who carries out her work with professionalism. At the same time, we see that if this same work becomes a gift out of love, it will be transformative for others as well. And we just saw how all this is elevated to the supernatural plain if it is offered in union with the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross. It is in this light that we can better appreciate what the Lord reveals to us. He uses the natural process that yeast has to transform flour into bread, as if it were like a little mirror that illuminates the sense of what is really

happening through the work of the woman, that it is now not only done well or done with human love, but she herself lets her person be soaked with God's love.

And we too, can do this. I think Our Lord must have been thinking of Our Lady, when he thought-thought up this parable because he probably saw his mother make bread so many times. And if we think of how Our Lady must have been so united to the love of her son, we can also, with the daring of a child, go to her and turn to her right now as we end our meditation and ask her to give us that same love, not only human love, but love with a capital letter. And that way, when we fulfill our duties in our ordinary work, they will have the transformative power of a divine leaven that also extends the Kingdom throughout society.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations which you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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