

GENUINE CHRISTIANS

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and 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.

As we set our attention on Jesus Christ, we ask for the grace, Lord, to see the value of the ordinary Christian life in the middle of the world. But not as one more alternative, let alone a bit of a consolation prize, that we're not Franciscans or friars or nuns or priests. And, perhaps one of us here praying is a bus driver, or a teacher, or businessman, or a hairdresser. In fact, the clock of time has turned literally first circle where we find ourselves in the same situation, perhaps the word *predicament* would be more accurate, of a society totally paganized, indifferent towards Christ, not through ill-will, but they never had an opportunity to know him. How are they going to follow Jesus unless someone teaches them, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, chapter 10. And we find ourselves amid the hedonistic culture, violent culture, a culture of anti-truth that we soften that description with the phrase, *moral relativism*. The ordinary Christian in the middle of the world is, in fact, the true hope of the Church.

Things have changed and I'm old enough to hearken back to perhaps over a half a century ago when I my age was in single digits. People marvel that I actually was six or seven or eight years old once upon a time. Now you have to make an act of faith. But I remember in those days preceding the close of the Second Vatican Council, especially in the metropolitan areas, every parish was chock full of nuns, perhaps brothers or a religious- religious order of priests. The rectories had many more priests, there were many more churches. Churches were packed with people on Sunday. Many times you would have a Mass in the main church and then a simultaneous Mass in the basement all morning. I would venture to guess that probably 85 to 90% of Catholics attended Mass on Sunday. Saturday afternoons, for hours, there were long lines of penitents going to confession. Most Catholic schools would have Eucharistic exposition/adoration and benediction, confession every month. During the month of Our Lady, there would be a May crowning, recitation of the Rosary.

This Catholic identity, this Catholic culture, this Judeo-Christian moral culture is for the most part gone. And I remember very recently in a discussion with a number of parish priests, we were pulling together ideas and strategies how to recover the original population of various parishes throughout our nation, especially in the metropolitan areas. And we priests were kind of wringing our hands a

little bit trying to understand why the attendance at Mass has been steadily going down, especially among the younger people, where the Catholic faith is completely irrelevant for many people. Again, not through ill will or formal rejection, lack of exposure, lack of contact.

And of course, so we priests have to try to be on top of our game through preaching and sacramental ministry and just good example, that's indispensable. And parish life is the base of operations of the Church. But what needs to be done? The Church has to go out to the people. The Church has to visit the people. The Catholics, laity especially, have to give people an experience of Christianity, of Catholicism. The Church has to be brought to the workplace and for the faith- to the family, to the party, to the sports field. Optimism is a challenging sentiment in any age, but we're in the age we are in. Why is that? Because those who are serious Christians, serious Catholics who love their faith, see the truth of it very clearly, are tempted to discouragement because so few buy into their brands of theology and moral behavior.

What must I do? Well, first I need to keep my focus on Christ, on his mother, on his father. Why do I say that? Because they're the template. Jesus, perfect God and perfect man, his Mother Immaculately conceived, Joseph, who enjoyed a certain fullness of grace, not to the extent of Mary but he needed to receive many, many graces and blessings to actually prepare the Son of God made man into public life. What must be the sentiments? Again, going back to Christ, he's the paradigm. He will commission his disciples to preach to all nations, to every corner of the Earth. He wants everyone to hear the Good News. How is it done? Well, each Christian, each follower of Christ, is entrusted with a tiny piece of the world, just like Jesus and his mother and father were - they lived, in an insignificant village called Nazareth. Apparently, Jesus and Joseph would travel to find work. And why did Jesus do that? Because he's our model. He's the way and the truth and life. He's teaching us that this new evangelization, so emphasized by recent Popes, rests on the family, rests on those disciples who work in the world, who are part of the world. And now we are called, the laity in very special way, because their base of operation is in the world. We priests preach to the good people. We wait for people to come to confession. We serve people who come to Mass. But we need another big component that brings people to Mass, brings people to confession, brings people back to the parishes. How was that done?

We hearken back again to the early Church, and Pope Francis strongly alludes to that in his exhortation on the *Gospel of Joy*. He warns us not to give into pessimism. That era- every era of the Church's history had its challenges, had his difficulties. He urges us to be optimistic, but it's not a Pollyanna optimism or just a sort of a goody-goody optimism, or an optimism that is not based on reality. We got a problem out there and only Christ could solve it, but through his saints - and I'd specify through the ordinary man and woman working in the middle of the world - whether they're

packing bags, flipping hamburgers, writing papers, running a city, running a country, washing dishes, teaching, etc, raising a family - they are the hope.

Jesus is introduced with a description and an implicit mandate. The description of who he is. In a sense he receives two descriptions, we can even call him that. "I bring you good news of great joy." Jesus, in an absolute sense, is this good news of great joy. He is good news. He doesn't communicate good news only, he is good news and good news flows out of him. Why? Because he will have conquered the evil one - sin, death, suffering - and he will have earned and merited the mechanism of Resurrection- as long as we follow Christ as always the work of this Resurrection on this renewal in Christ. And shortly after he's introduced us to this good news of great joy, the angels- the array of angels say that this is for all the people, this is for everyone. Everyone is called by God to be a recipient of this good news of great joy.

St. John, who is much more theological, says the same thing but in theological terms, that Jesus, the Word, is the light and life of every human being. He also says that the world received him not - so this is not just a characteristic of our own times - John, in a sense, predicts the future of every age, saying the world did not accept him. But those who do accept him - doesn't just mean intellectually accept them, but their lifestyle lifestyle accepts them - he gives them the power to be sons of God, daughters of God.

The work of evangelization is done by laity. We priests do it, but in a different way. We don't interact with the world the way a lay person does. The image we receive in the Gospel is that we are called to be salt but not lose our saltiness which is an illusion or reference to the interior life. What gives that saltiness, that gives the salt the capacity to transform food, to convert food into a tasty dish? It's that salt, and the saltiness is the interior life, that union with Christ - you are the light of the world. And he places the workplace and he places the family and he places a party and he places a sports field - that's the world. You are the light of the world. What does he mean by world in this sense? The heart of every man and woman, you are the light with a small *l*. The large *L* is Jesus Christ. What is urgent here, Jesus does not consign us to failure. If he says, "Preach to all nations," it's because we can. When he says, "Make disciples of all nations," it's because it's possible. When he says, "By your love you will know my disciples," it's because we can do it with the grace of God, with that personal union with Our Lord, our prayer life, our union with Him allows us to be transformed.

I recall that Bl. Alvaro, first successor of St. Josemaria, knowing him and then, decades later, having the privilege and the exciting joy of attending his beatification, it was a very surrealistic experience since I never would see him with hundreds of thousands of people present, waiting, thousands of buses in Madrid, in this big open field where he was beatified. I would see him in a living room with

a joyful smile on his face. It wasn't bombastic or over done. And, in spite of the decades that have gone by when I would have the privilege of actually being with a future Blessed, he had that ability to leave you wanting to love God, to love Christ, to integrate the Gospel in one's life more faithfully. He would leave you happier. He didn't have the charisma of St. Josemaria. He claimed, I could see it, but with the effort he would make, he was for everyone. He was always attentive and with a smile on his face, tremendous affection, warmth for anybody who would encounter him. St. Josemaria was the same way but with a lot more passion and emotion. He would display joy, sorrow, levity, laughter, seriousness. He'd become indignant, become righteously angry. So, you saw a whole panoply of emotion.

And, what we have to do, and especially the lay people, as 1 Peter 3:15 says, "we have to be ready to give the reason for the hope that is within us." We need to kind of awaken a healthy inquiry, a healthy curiosity. What makes us so loving? What makes us such a good friend? What makes us so joyful? Again, without being contrived or artificial. So, our first step is always this personal union with Christ.

There was an anecdote of St. Josemaria- after the close of the Second Vatican Council, a Cardinal came to visit him and congratulate him that the message he was trying to communicate to others for a few decades already, the Church had made solemn in the Second Vatican Council by saying that the domain of the lay person is the heart of the world and that their vocation is to sanctify the world, to bring Christ into the world. And, I'm sure St. Josemaria thanked the Cardinal for his encouraging words, but it seemed like he threw a bit of rain on the Cardinal's parade because he said, "Yes, Your Eminence, as long as the laity are contemplative," meaning immersed in God, in dialogue with God throughout the day, whether it's through work, whether it's through actual acts of piety, whether it's through silent periods, whether it's through suffering, whether it's through interaction with others, the laity have to be in dialogue with Our Lord. And he told the Cardinal that if they're not contemplatives, they'll go nowhere, that the world will sweep them away, that their ability to transform the world hinges on that contemplative spirit.

Going back to Bl. Alvaro, the first successor of St. Josemaria, I didn't notice it. But again, it's significant. He didn't glow in the dark. At least, not that I know of, that he had the gift of physical healing, nothing extraordinary. But I remember him apologizing to us. But, about two hundred men studying for the priesthood, and he would visit us periodically for get-togethers. And he said, Listen, if I appear distracted or overly serious, he says, it's not towards you. It didn't occur to me, anyway. It's because I'm trying to live more presence of God, I'm trying to say more to Our Lord, especially when I see you. I'm reminded to say more to Our Lord.

And one of my classmates, in one of these gatherings with him, he suggested that I watch his eyes where they go. And he wanted- he asked me if I ever watched where his eyes go? No, I don't have that kind of sensitivity, or power of observation. But I said, to humor my classmate, sure I'll watch him. So I did. And I was watching those eyes, and yes, he was looking at something. And really often, I would say, intermittently, like, maybe every thirty seconds. There was a beautiful statue behind us while we were sitting in chairs and on the floor, and he was facing us. And his eyes would divert to something above our heads, but it was not obvious. But since, you know, my fellow classmate alluded to this, I started to watch his eyes and it was a beautiful, big statue of the Blessed Mother. And you could- you could see that he's saying aspirations to her while he's interacting with us.

Our optimism hinges again on my own union with Christ- if I'm united to Christ. Christ has overcome the world. I have so much to be grateful for and optimistic in spite of what I see. Christ does not lose battles, and he wins battles through a saints. As Pope Francis says, that we have to be extensions of him. And he warns us in the Last Supper discourse, he says, "In this world, you will have tribulation. But take courage, I have overcome the world." And we could take the liberty to unpack that a bit and say, take courage, I have overcome the world - and the world, now in the negative sense, the world of sin, the world that is created, not from nothing but who's affected, corrupted by the devil - I've overcome all of that, through my saints. And as we look at the whole array of saints that mark the history of the Church, we realize that it's indeed true, that the Lord does overcome the world. And I know it's an extraordinary example, but the Church wants us to look at that for the sake of optimism, edification.

When Padre Pio was here on Earth, sometimes he'd hear up to sixteen hours of confession in a day - that's overcoming the world. St. Josemaria encouraged confessional a lot. Yeah, Jesus' virtual first words are "Repent, and believe the Gospel." I have experienced that as a priest. On special occasions, special masses, Sunday Mass included and we offer confession, we're going nonstop. That's the victory that was overcome the world. John says something curious but very encouraging.

And we have to put ourselves in the historical circumstances of the early Church when these epistles were written. I'm referring now to John's first epistle, 5:5-6. It's not stated to what Church this is being addressed to. When John writes his Book of Revelation, he lists the churches he's referring to that he's- he wants to send his letters. But what we do know is those times were bleak on a human level. Persecutions were rampant- becoming a bishop, becoming a priest, especially becoming a pope was a death sentence. Virtually, they were all executed. They- there was family strife outside the Christian circle. There was raging hedonism and violence, abortion or infanticide, complete breakdown of any semblance of virtue. And John, he didn't die a martyr- he virtually did because tradition has it, under Emperor Domitian, the third set- the first- second century, he was immersed

in a barrel of boiling oil and survived- survived enough to write the book of Revelation and probably his gospel - I hear the gospel was probably his last writing.

And what does he say, given the circumstance, and I think it's important to know the circumstance. And he says that the man or woman in the middle of the world has to take personal responsibility for evangelization. Here, let me read: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world." Again, the world meaning sin, the work of Satan, human weakness, worldliness, etc. "And this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith." How do I interpret the word faith? Faith means being totally centered on Christ, that we eat and drink the gospel and try to duplicate it. Faith means being a saint. It's not just an intellectual ascent. And then he repeats this again, "Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." So, the saint again, who is it? So, the early Christians took personal responsibility it says, you know, it's always a *who* not *they* who evangelize- it's a bunch of who's, that's where the kingdom of God is- it's not a bag of mustard seeds or grains of wheat. It's *the* grain of wheat, it's *the* mustard seed.

I'd like to read, as we start to wind down our prayer, some considerations of St. Josemaria who was also pitted with many challenges. On a human level, he should have thrown in the towel - thank God he did not. Thousands and thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, if not eventually millions would not have that contact with Christ. He wouldn't- there would be one less conduit to the heart of Jesus. I read: "An act of faith, nothing can prevail against God, nothing can prevail against God's people. Don't forget it. Secondly, and lastly, don't lose heart, carry on! Carry on with that holy stubbornness, which in spiritual terms is called perseverance. My Lord, you always come to meet our real needs."

We turn our attention to the Blessed Mother and we use that aspiration, Holy Mary, Our Hope, Seat of Wisdom, Handmaid of the Lord, pray for us. So we feel that exciting urgency so that we are instilled with a desire to bring the Church, to bring the Gospel to the people through our witness in our word, through work, family, and social relations.

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



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