

THE STANDARD OF HOLINESS

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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.

Our topic for today is the standard of holiness. There is a point in St.- St. Josemaria's *The Way* that opens up an entire chapter on what he refers to as the plane of sanctity. It's number 387. That gets things going. It's a very surprising point, one that grabs our attention because at first it sounds a little bit shocking, because he says, "The plane of sanctity that God expects of us is determined by these three points: Holy intransigence, holy coercion, and holy shamelessness." This point which was written when St. Josemaria was a very young priest of barely 30 years old, a little bit less, is very surprising, and he intended it to be so to get our attention, because he talks about three different approaches to life that at first glance seem contrary to sanctity: intransigence, coercion, and shamelessness; because obviously, a Christian must not be shameless, certainly must not be intransigent, and we must not coerce anyone. But then, the young priest or author radically changes the meaning of those terms by adding the word, "holy." God expects of us holy intransigence, holy coercion, and holy shamelessness.

One way for us to get very concrete quickly, is to think of these recent great models of holiness that we have known. St. John Paul II, Mother Teresa, St. Josemaria. They're so close to us in time, we can imagine them with this great, strong, personality of theirs. And at the same time, so filled with love. In the final analysis, when we talk about holy intransigence, coercion, and shamelessness, ultimately, we're talking about charity. Well, we can dive into this point, since it is, well, so important for our holiness, our pursuit of sanctity. On January 1, 1932, when St. Josemaria was all of- he was about to celebrate his 30th birthday, he wrote down in his own private notes, the following two sentences: "Child friend," he refers to himself, "tell Jesus that you wish for yourself a holy shamelessness. With holy intransigence, and holy coercion, you have the three points that determine the plane of sanctity that suits you." How interesting that he gave such importance and saw so early on in his life. This- this *foundation* for sanctity.

Not that many years later, in 1937, when St. Josemaria spent five months hiding during the Spanish Civil War, he commented on this holy shamelessness in a meditation that he gave, most likely in a whisper because they were hiding. He wrote, "My Jesus, give me a holy shamelessness. How often each day my will bends in the face of difficulties, like a weathervane, turning in the wind. Grant me the integrity of steel so that I do what I should even though my head threatens to burst with the effort, even though it's necessary to risk my life. The man who is ready to compromise his ideals, his honors, his faith, truly has neither ideals, nor honor nor faith."

The author is reaching out to each one of us in this time of prayer, giving us a sense of what a genuine saint looks like. He goes on to say, “In this regard, let us examine our shortcomings like mature adults. Without being childish or getting carried away by our emotions. We always have to be interiorly tough. It's not that shamelessness means being brash or cheeky, as they say nowadays; rather it means that along with good manners, with courtesy, with charity, we need to acquire an interior mettle of steel with an unbending intransigence and shamelessness always imbued by Christ's charity.” I apologize because that's way too much to read in a meditation like ours right now. But it gives us a sense of where he's heading, what he means by this holy shamelessness, what he means by this steadfastness or holy intransigence. It means being interiorly tough, with good manners, with courtesy, with charity, and at the same time and interior mettle, *m-e-t-t-l-e*, of steel.

At another moment, he explains more about the meaning of this shamelessness which surprisingly, has everything to do with the life of childhood. You know from your reading of St. Josemaria that life of childhood meant a great deal to him. And as he says in point 389, holy shamelessness is a characteristic of the life of childhood. A little child worries about nothing. His weak points, those natural weak points, show up quite simply. Even if everyone is watching. You can say that he's reaching out to us and saying, “Break the mirror. Have that abandonment, that simplicity of a child, that natural simplicity, that lack of concern of a little child, taken to the supernatural plane.” That is why he says we must rise above the all too human way of reasoning.

When we are praised, contempt- or we're shown contempt, admiration, ridicule, honor, dishonor, health, sickness, who cares? He's saying, let go of these things. If you have holy shamelessness, why care about what other people said? Or what people will say? Convince yourself that there is no such thing as ridicule for whoever is doing what is best. These ideas, these insights, come from a long tradition in spirituality. There is no such thing as ridicule for whoever's doing what is the best. Another way we can have of saying this is that the one audience we really and truly care about are the three Persons of the Trinity. If you have holy shamelessness, why care about what other people say, what they think? Undoubtedly each one of us is- perhaps I shouldn't say, undoubtedly, but perhaps thinking, why do I care if I get all sorts of thumbs up in social media, things like that. It just doesn't matter.

Then this next term, “intransigence.” St. Josemaria was well aware that that term, “holy intransigence,” could be wrongly interpreted because it can make us look obstinate and closed minded. That's not what he's talking about. This holy intransigence is the fruit of a carefully formed conviction, a whole series of convictions, which is the fruit of study and formation and ultimately, a sign of our love for truth. This is very different from being stubborn. There are some people who will hold on to their opinion simply because it's their opinion. A friend was once saying that long ago, he actually was a professional baseball player, back in the 60s, so this is a long time ago. When they would go from town to town in a bus, he would be in the back with another- another baseball player. And this friend, he loved to get into arguments. At one point, the other person next to him just turned to him and said, “Would you stop it? You would argue with a stop sign. Stop it.” Well, that's- that is not what St. Josemaria is talking about. He's talking about studying very carefully, forming our convictions, above all, seeking the truth, and then developing this steadfastness. In another point in *The Way*, in this same chapter, he says, “Be intransigent

in doctrine and in conduct, but be gentle in manner. A powerful steel mace wrapped in a quilted covering. Be intransigent, but don't be pigheaded." Well, the founder is using a very graphic image. But he's showing us that what he's talking about is fortitude, moved by the charity of Christ, but never sinking into rudeness. It is not a cold intransigence, but rather an intransigence bathed in charity.

Well, finally, "holy coercion." This comes right out of the Gospel. You recall how the king is told that- by his servants that in spite of his kind invitation to a banquet, people came up with all different kinds of excuses, not being able to come. So finally, he says to his servants, "Go out into the highways and the byways and *make* them come in." This is in chapter 14 of St. Luke's Gospel. The coercion of this point moves on the plane of the spirit of the soul, of freedom liberated by grace. We're not talking about cold coercion, but rather holy coercion. You might recall those words of St. Paul to Timothy, where he says, "convince, rebuke and exhort." The full sentence is, "Preach the Word. Be urgent in season and out of season; convince, rebuke, and exhort. Be unfailing in patience and in teaching." But what is the context for this, "make them come in?" What are we talking about here? At stake is our concern for those who, to quote a phrase, "are stupidly bent on killing their souls." We're talking about very loyal friendship, where we're not going to sit back and watch friends of ours, colleagues of ours, make short, very short sighted-moral choices, knowing that those choices are going to do a lot of damage; we're not going to sit there and not say anything.

There comes to mind a story from years ago, of a young woman going into her place of work and just showing off the ring that her boyfriend had just given to her, explaining to everyone how excited she was because they were going to start living together, and one after another, everyone said, "Oh, that's wonderful. That's very beautiful. I'm so happy for you." And finally, this person came across another colleague who heard the news and then kind of looked at- well, didn't kind of, she looked down, eyes down, and she says, "Oh." And the young woman with the ring said, "What do you mean by that?" Long story short, because they did have a good conversation, she said, "You know, I- I just have to be honest with you, because I care for you. That's not the way you want to go. You have- you deserve much better." And the other one said, "Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, because I had this vague idea this was not a great idea, but you're the only person who said, 'maybe this is not the way to go.' Now I realize that, that- that example may strike some people as hopelessly out of date. But what can we do?

Very interesting, very helpful, is a famous passage from St. Augustine. If anyone had the right to talk about someone going after a lost soul, it was St. Augustine, who, as a young man, was a very, very lost soul. And at one point, he's talking about a- the shepherd who leaves behind the 99 and goes in search of the one who is lost. And Augustine says, describing that moment when the shepherd comes across the lost sheep, says, "There you are." The lost sheep says, "Well, why do you why do you seek me? If I am in error, if I'm lost, why do you seek me?" The shepherd says, "Because you are lost, I want to find you." "But I wish to live in error. I wish to remain lost." The shepherd says, "Well, you may wish to be in error and remain lost. But I do not want that. Which is why I'm here." This point in *The Way* really and truly is a- an appeal for us to show our concern for our friends, to liberate them through our loyal friendship, and through our advice. And not to be- not be afraid to say how we see things.

We're talking here about this holy coercion, holy steadfastness, holy shamelessness. All of these, this- this whole way of being requires deep formation. It can help us a lot to take a look, a brief look, at some points from a letter from the Prelate of Opus Dei. The letter is dated February 14, 2017. It is eminently worthwhile downloading the letter and reading numbers 16 and 17 because the following snippets do not do it justice. The Prelate says, our times “[demand] deep human, professional, and doctrinal formation [. . .] with an open mentality that enables [us] to dialogue with everyone.” We have to have that formation. Otherwise, we could end up becoming pigheaded, to quote *The Way*, or obstinate. We don't want that. We want to be so well-formed, at the same time with this open mentality that enables us to dialogue with everyone, to listen, to take others seriously. And that requires a desire for permanent renewal.

That Prelate goes on to say, “This will foster the sort of empathy [that] makes the Christian view of reality convincing, because it makes us aware of the existential questions of our neighbor, and keeps us from becoming strident or falling into a monologue.” This is a really key phrase. If we don't know how to listen, if we don't know how to show respect, acknowledge the positive aspects of different views, and want to learn from others, we will fall into a strident monologue. And the world does not need that because we're surrounded by it all the time. That's why the Prelate goes on to say we have to respect “the dignity of every person despite their errors.” We have to learn how to have a “calm, responsible” way of working “in collaboration” with those around us. And it all requires deep formation. We need deep formation to give our ideas solid foundations.

The opposite of this is ideology. The enemy to everything we're talking about here is ideology. That is to say, holding on to a, you could say, a simplistic vision of the world, a vision that purports to explain the complexity of the world, to offer remedies that will perfect things. But the problem is that it- ideologies end up being a simple-minded, “I know it all” approach that does not take into account the complexity of existence. The last thing the world needs now is an ideologue who insists stubbornly and very- with a great deal of shrillness, stridency- insists on their point of view. We don't need that. To finish this thought from the letter of the Prelate, “We should not enclose ourselves in a merely defensive attitude,” but rather we “should take on board the positive aspects of different views[.]” We have to “dialogue with other people, learn from everyone, [respect] their freedom assiduously, especially in matters open to various opinions.”

As we were saying at the very beginning of the meditation, we have these marvelous examples, these role models: St. John Paul II, Mother Teresa, St. Josemaria. If we think of them, we think of tremendous charity, great magnanimity, great capacity for friendship towards everyone, an amazing capacity to listen and at the same time, such forcefulness, shamelessness, complete abandonment, no concern whatsoever for that which the public opinion thinks of them and says about them, but forging ahead with that sincere search for the truth. Well, considering their example, let us ask them, to come to our help- come to our aid, to ask to help them - excuse me - we ask them to help us to learn what it means to have this interior strength that is wrapped with a quilt so that we'd be so approachable, so eager to learn from others, and very much on the path to sanctity. Well finally, as we always do, we finished by turning to Our Lady. We can't even begin to imagine her interior strength. But it's enough for us to imagine her there at the foot of

the Cross. She who went on to be that pillar, that source of such solidity, steadfastness, for the nascent Church. Mary, help us. Help us develop this plane of our sanctity.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have 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. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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