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The Dawn of the Day of the Sun: Benediction and a Marian Antiphon

Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament and an antiphon to Our Lady on Saturday prepare us for the Sunday celebration and unite our two great loves, Christ and Mary, in one moment of the week.

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“On the day which is called the Day of the Sun, the gathering takes place

in one place for all those who dwell in the city or in the country.”^[1] This is how St. Justin begins his description of the Eucharistic liturgy of the early Christians, a little more than a century after the death of Christ. Since the Resurrection of the Lord on the “Day of the Sun,” Christians have not ceased to celebrate the breaking of bread together on the first day of the week, which they soon renamed *Dies Domini* or *Dominicus*: the Lord’s Day.

Within the treasure of Christian piety that we practise in the Work, there are two observances that have in common their character of preparation for the Lord’s Day, because they are characteristic of the Sabbath and constitute a prologue to the Sunday celebration: Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the singing or saying of a Marian antiphon. To use an image, we could say they are the first radiance –

peeping over the horizon – of the day that brings us the Sun, that rises from on high (cf. Lk 1:78) and that will begin to shine in a few hours. They are, therefore, like the dawn of the Day of the Sun.

Moreover, these practices unite our two great loves, Christ and Mary, in one moment of the week. “Try to give thanks to Jesus in the Eucharist, by singing praises to Our Lady, to the pure Virgin, without stain, the one who brought forth the Lord into the world. And, with the daring of a child, venture to say to Jesus: My beautiful Love, blessed be the Mother who brought you into the world! Assuredly you will please him, and he will put even greater love in your soul.”^[2]

Eating with one's Eyes

The historical origin of Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is to be found in the

development of spirituality and theology about the Eucharist that took place in the Middle Ages. The teachings of the Church in response to those who denied the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and as a refutation of their ideas, as well as the miracle of Bolsena (1263) — which gave rise to the feast of Corpus Christi — brought about a great movement of devotion among Christian peoples. The flourishing of Eucharistic processions; the gesture of genuflection before the sacred species; its elevation during the Consecration at Mass; and the greater importance the tabernacle acquired in church buildings, are some expressions of the growing reverence for the Blessed Sacrament that the Holy Spirit aroused in the Church.

There was a growing desire among the faithful to contemplate the Sacred Host in order to be spiritually

nourished by it: this was called *manducatio per visum* (eating by seeing, or eating with one's eyes). A problem arose, however. This seeing was limited to the moment of its elevation during the Canon of the Mass. Therefore, in the 14th century, some dioceses in Germany began to spread the custom of keeping the Blessed Sacrament exposed for longer periods, at times other than during the celebration of the Eucharist. The exposition was enlivened with chants taken from the Liturgy of the Hours and from the Mass of the Feast of Corpus Christi, the texts of which were composed by St. Thomas Aquinas: *Pange Lingua, O Salutaris Hostia, Tantum Ergo, Ecce Panis Angelorum ...*

Eucharistic worship outside Mass continued to spread in later centuries, especially after the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The reform of the liturgy that followed the Second

Vatican Council sought to continue to encourage this practice, emphasizing its intimate connection with the Mass: “The faithful, when they venerate Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament, should remember that this presence comes from the Sacrifice and tends towards sacramental and spiritual communion.”^[3] Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament constitute, at another time of the day, a natural continuation of the celebration of Mass: they are born from it and they lead towards it. Adoration helps us to be “Eucharistic souls”, attentive to the Eucharist from morning to evening and from night to morning: “We learn then to thank Our Lord for that other refined gift of his: that he wished not to limit his presence to the moment of the Sacrifice of the Altar, but decided to remain in the Sacred Host reserved in the tabernacle, in the sanctuary.”^[4] —

A heart that breaks into song

The tradition of venerating the Blessed Virgin in a special way on the eve of Sunday is very ancient in the Church. Perhaps its most remote origin is the gathering of the disciples around Mary on Holy Saturday. While darkness and uncertainty reigned in their hearts, she, a perfect model of a disciple and believer, became the continuity of the presence of her Son in the world. A medieval author, Caesarius of Heisterbach (+1240), explained it this way: “Mary alone kept faith in the resurrection of her son, within the general despair of Holy Saturday, when Christ lay dead in the tomb. Marian devotion on Saturday is understood from Sunday, the day commemorating the Resurrection.”^[5] —

Besides veneration for the Lord’s Day, from ancient times in some regions, there was also a certain

reverence, with different tones, for the Sabbath, as a prologue to Sunday, or as its close relation. The custom of celebrating the Mass of Our Lady on Saturdays goes back to Alcuin of York (+804), theologian and advisor to Charlemagne, who composed a series of weekday Masses to be celebrated when the memorials of saints were not commemorated. In addition, not long after, the custom became widespread of praying the Little Office of Mary on Saturdays in the Liturgy of the Hours.

During the 13th century, an evening devotion known as laude arose in Italy. It consisted of a celebration with hymns at the end of the day or week, including one dedicated to Mary, especially the Salve Regina. Later, it became common to perform the laude in the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, reserved in a pyx or visible in a monstrance. At the end, the people received a blessing

with the Eucharist and were dismissed. Thus, although the two traditions arose independently in the Church, one, that of venerating the permanent presence of Jesus, and the other that of honouring the Virgin Mary, especially on the Sabbath, both converged happily at the end of the Middle Ages. This gave rise to a liturgical and devotional tradition that has continued throughout the centuries.

St. Josemaría liked to think that when the heart overflows with love, it bursts into song. He often showed us how to pray using songs of the world directed to God. In fact, he often dedicated his serenades of love to Mary: “Sing to the Immaculate Virgin, reminding her: Hail Mary, daughter of God the Father: Hail Mary, Mother of God the Son: Hail Mary, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit... Greater than you, none but God...”^[6] —
Throughout her history the Church

never failed to sing the praises of the Virgin Mary, confirming what she herself declared in the Magnificat: “Henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48).

From the beginning of the Work

St. Josemaría wanted Saturdays to be days to show our love for Our Lady in various ways: through some extra mortification, and in the singing or recitation of a Marian antiphon, especially the *Salve Regina* and the *Regina Coeli* after Easter. In addition, from the beginnings of the Work, in the St. Raphael centres, there was a collection on this day to buy flowers to decorate her statue (or other representation) in the oratory, and to help Our Lady’s poor, a work of charity which our Founder frequently saw the Grandfather practising.

In one point in *The Forge*, our Father explains some of the reasons why he

wanted the Work to express in practical ways such affection for the Virgin Mary: “There are two reasons, among others, that friend was saying to himself, why I should make reparation to my Immaculate Mother every Saturday and on the eve of her feasts. The second is that on Sundays and on feasts of Our Lady (which are often village celebrations), instead of dedicating such days to prayer, so many people spend them — you have only to look around you to see this — offending our Jesus with public sins and scandalous misbehaviour. The first reason is that, perhaps due to the devil’s influence, those of us who want to be good sons don’t take proper care of how we mark these days dedicated to Our Lord and to His Mother. You’ll realise that unfortunately these reasons are still very valid. And so we too should make reparation.”^[7] —

In the first decades of the twentieth century in Spain, the practice of the *Sabatina* was common in churches and oratories. It consisted of reciting some prayers and hymns to Our Lady, such as the Rosary and the Salve, and could include a brief talk. St. Josemaría attended these events with his family in Barbastro and in the seminary in Saragossa. We also know that, like many other priests of the time, Benediction was often a part of his ministry in Madrid, and also with those who first took part in activities of the Work: in the Patronato de Enfermos; in the Christian formation classes in the Porta Coeli home; in the recollections in the church of the Redemptorists or in the DYA Academy-Residence on Saturdays; and in some retreats and on solemnities. Our Founder concluded the first St. Raphael circle, with three students attending, with Benediction. That was a Saturday, 21 January 1933. In giving the blessing,

St. Josemaría foresaw, projected in time, the fruitfulness that this work with young people would have over the centuries: “I held Our Lord in the monstrance, I raised him up, I blessed those three..., and I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three billion.... (...) And I fell short, because after almost half a century it has become a reality. I fell short, because Our Lord has been much more generous.”^[8] —

As part of the history of Opus Dei, in December 1931 our Father decided that the Salve should be sung to Our Lady in centres on Saturdays. As for the Benediction on that day, it seems that it gradually became a feature of family life, usually combined with singing an antiphon to Our Lady.

In the Work, moreover, Benediction can also be understood in the context of our Father’s desire to prolong the Mass throughout the day, with

various expressions of piety,^[9] so as to sanctify ordinary, daily life in and through the grace of Mass and Holy Communion. While we're involved in day-to-day concerns, where Our Lord calls us, we can strengthen this extending of the Mass in various ways, whether or not we have Benediction: with a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, saying aspirations, making spiritual communions, and so on. It is understandable that the pious practice of Benediction — although not one of the customs of the spirit of Opus Dei — arose naturally, as St. Josemaría wished, in centres and activities of the Work, on special days such as solemnities or feast-days; for family celebrations; at times when we seek to renew our spiritual life close to Our Lord in peace and quiet, such as on a day of recollection or on retreat; and every week on Saturdays, a day which is usually a little more relaxed and which

prepares us for the Eucharistic day
par excellence: Sunday.

On the soul's horizon

Participation in the Sunday Eucharist, as a family, allows us to experience the closeness of God in our lives, thanks to listening to the Word of God, the homily, Holy Communion and the encounter with the Christian community. The singing or saying of the antiphon to Our Lady and also, if our circumstances allow, attending Benediction on Saturdays, can prepare our souls for this central moment of the week and increase our love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. We could say that both practices can enliven the desire to receive Our Lord. "Desire is renewed only if we recover the taste for adoration. Desire leads to adoration and adoration renews desire. For the desire for God grows only by being before Him. Because only Jesus heals

desires. From what? He heals desires from the dictatorship of needs. The heart, in fact, becomes sick when its desires are reduced to what it needs. God, instead, elevates desires and purifies them, heals them, curing them of selfishness and opening us to love for him and for our brothers and sisters.”^[10] Eucharistic worship outside Mass educates the soul to yearn ardently for sacramental and spiritual communion: adoration tends to union. The Marian antiphon makes us grow in love for Mary, whose mission is always to lead us to Jesus.

To avoid these two practices becoming routine due to doing them week after week — routine is the “graveyard of true piety”^[11] — it can be helpful to meditate slowly on the words that are sung or said every Saturday: Eucharistic hymns, biblical readings, prayers and litanies, and the Marian antiphons. In this way,

during the times of silence during Benediction, we enter into interior dialogue with Christ and relish what has been sung or read. It is not just a simple pause that allows us to focus on what is truly important in our lives, but deep recollection, and then to pass this on to others. “In speaking of the greatness of God, our language is always insufficient, and so space for silent contemplation opens up. This contemplation gives birth to the urgency of the mission, with all its inner strength, the overwhelming need to ‘communicate what we have seen and heard’ so that we may all be in communion with God (cf. 1 Jn 1:3).”^[12] At the same time, the liturgy also invites us to foster this attitude of recollection at every Mass, so that “the Word of God may effectively accomplish in our hearts what it sounds in our ears.”^[13] —

We should enliven our desire to receive Our Lord. We can savour the

words God addresses to us. Each of us can find ways to enjoy liturgical celebrations more and to participate more lovingly in them. This effort, renewed repeatedly, acting as a person in love, to make each liturgical celebration a moment of unique encounter with Jesus, can open unsuspected horizons in our life of piety.

In this way, Benediction, and the antiphon to Our Lady on Saturdays, will make it easier for the radiance of the Sun, who is Christ, to shine with special clarity in our hearts on the eve of Sunday, filling the horizon of the soul with a dawn of love and hope. Especially the Marian hymn, which is a collection of affectionate requests, will kindle devotion to Mary in us. “She is a marvellous woman,” exclaimed our Father at a get-together, “the most splendid creature the Lord could have created, full of perfections. It is not

an imperfection that she enjoys compliments. So now you know this, you and I will give her loving compliments.”^[14] —

[1] Saint Justin, *Apologia*, no. 67, 3.

[2] *The Forge*, no. 70.

[3] Ritual of Holy Communion and of the worship of the Eucharist outside Mass, no. 80.

[4] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 154.

[5] Cf. A. Heinz, Der Tag, den der Herr gemacht hat. Gedanken zur Spiritualität des Sonntags, “Theologie und Glaube” 68 (1978) 40-61, qtd. here pg. 55.

[6] *The Way*, no. 496.

[7] *The Forge*, no. 434.

[8] A. Vázquez de Prada, *El fundador del Opus Dei*, vol. I, Madrid, 1997, pg. 482.

[9] Cf. *The Forge*, no. 69; *Christ is Passing By*, no. 154, among other possible sources.

[10] Pope Francis, Homily, January 6, 2022.

[11] *The Way*, no. 551.

[12] Pope Benedict XVI, Message, May 20, 2012.

[13] Roman Missal, Ordenación de las lecturas de la Misa, n. 9.

[14] From our Father, qtd. in *San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer a los pies de la Virgen de Guadalupe*, in SEDS, special issue, Mexico, 2 October 1976, Ed. de Revistas. S. A.

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