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Authors Of Our Own Lives

A new series of articles with reflections on how to develop a strong Christian personality. Saint John Paul II said that "all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life," creating a masterpiece.

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"I ask you to be builders of the future, to work for a better world. Dear young people, please, don't be observers of life, but get involved.

Jesus did not remain an observer, but rather he immersed himself. Don't be observers; immerse yourself in the reality of life, as Jesus did."[1] These words of Pope Francis to young people immediately raise some questions that the Roman Pontiff himself formulated: "Where do we start? Where? With you and me! Each one of you, once again in silence, ask yourself: if I must begin with myself, where exactly do I start? Each one of you, open his or her heart, so that Jesus may tell you where to start."[2] To be protagonists in world events, we first need to be protagonists in our own lives. We need to acquire self-mastery.

Free and conditioned

Taking control of our own lives requires recognizing that while family or social circumstances influence our character, they do not determine it absolutely. The same is

true of the most basic instincts that come from our heredity and bodily constitution. These instinctive ways of acting can be moulded and guided by the exercise of a will that heeds the dictates of a well-formed reason.

Our personality is forged to the extent that we make free decisions, since our actions not only alter our environment but also shape our way of being. Although at times we aren't fully aware of it, the repetition of acts leads us to acquire particular customs or attitudes in facing reality. Therefore when we explain the reason for our spontaneous reactions, rather than saying "that's the way I am," we should often admit: "that's the way I have made myself."

Our lives are conditioned by factors that are often difficult to control: for example, the quality of family relationships, the social environment

in which we grow up, an illness that limits us in one way or another, etc. Although often we are unable to ignore or undo these limitations, we can certainly change our attitude in confronting them, especially if we are aware that nothing escapes God's provident care. "It is important to keep reminding ourselves that Jesus did not address himself to a privileged set of people; he came to reveal the universal love of God to us. God loves all mankind, and he wants all to love him."[3] In any situation, even one that entails great limitations, we can offer God and our neighbors deeds of love, no matter how small these may seem. Who knows how great the value is of a smile in the midst of tribulation, of suffering offered to our Lord in union with the Cross, of patiently accepting small annoyances and setbacks! Nothing can quench a limitless love, a love stronger than suffering, loneliness, abandonment,

betrayal, slander, physical and moral suffering, and even death itself.

Author of our own life

Our freedom brings with it the responsibility to discover our personal talents, virtues and skills, to be thankful for them and draw out as much fruit as possible. But we should never forget that what most firmly shapes a Christian personality are the gifts of God that configure the deepest recesses of our being.

Preeminent among these is the immense gift of divine filiation received at Baptism, thanks to which the Father sees in us the image of his Son Jesus. This likeness, although imperfect, since we are limited creatures, becomes progressively clearer through the sacrament of Confirmation and the transforming forgiveness received in the sacrament of Penance, and in a

special way through communion with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Starting from these gifts received from God's hand, every person, like it or not, is the author of his or her own life. In the words of Saint John Paul II: "all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life. In a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece."[4] We are the masters of our own actions. *God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel.*[5] It is we, if we so wish, who hold firmly to the tiller of our life in the midst of all the storms and difficulties.

We are free! This discovery can bring with it some trepidation: where will my life take me? But above all it brings joy. "God in creating us has run the risk and the adventure of our freedom. He wanted a history that would be a true one, the product of

genuine decisions, and not a fiction or some sort of game.”[6] In this adventure we are not alone. We count, first of all, on God’s help, who offers us a mission. Next we count on the help of family members and friends, and even those who happen to be alongside us at some point in time. Being authors of our own life is not to deny that we are dependent in many respects on others. And realizing that this dependence is reciprocal, we can also say that we are interdependent. Our freedom therefore is not self-sufficient. It would remain empty if we did not use it to commit ourselves to magnanimous, great undertakings. Our freedom is for self-giving; or in other words, the only genuine freedom is one that involves self-giving.

A path for each one’s life

Saint Josemaria used to recall a poster he saw in Burjasot (Valencia), shortly after the end of the Spanish civil war, containing advice he often quoted in his preaching: *Each wayfarer should follow his own path.* Each has to follow the path of his or her own vocation in a very personal way, with its very specific requirements. “You can travel on the right, on the left, or zig-zagging, on foot or on horseback. There are a hundred thousand ways to go along the divine path.”[7] Each person is the principal actor in the history of holiness that our life should be. We need to leave a distinctive mark on every facet of our own makeup and personality, striving never to simply be “carried along” by events.

“It is freely, as children and not as slaves, that we follow the path which our Lord has marked out for each one of us. We relish our freedom of action as a gift from God.”[8] This

freedom, a mark of human dignity, goes hand in hand with the responsibility of knowing we are God's handiwork. Each human being is a divine dream that becomes a reality when we experience God's unconditional love that seeks our response. God's love affirms our freedom and raises it to unexpected heights with his grace.

Accompanied along the path

Within the divine plan, life is made to be shared. God counts on the mutual help that human beings give to each other. We experience this every day, for many times each day we are unable to meet our most basic and urgent needs on our own. No one can be completely autonomous. At a deeper level, each person senses the need to open up his or her life to someone else, to give and receive love. "No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The

lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse.”[9]

This natural openness to others reaches its maximum expression in God’s redemptive plan. When we recite the Apostles’ Creed, we confess that we believe in the *communion of saints*, a communion that is at the heart of the Church. Therefore in the spiritual life it is also essential to learn to count on the help of others who are involved in one way or another in our relationship with God. We receive the faith through the teaching of our parents and catechists. We take part in the sacraments celebrated by a minister of the Church. We seek the spiritual advice of another brother or sister in the faith, who also prays for us; etc.

Knowing that we are accompanied in our Christian life fills us with joy and peace, without diminishing our own effort to achieve holiness. Although we often let ourselves be led by the hand, our role is not limited to only that. Saint Josemaría, referring to the spiritual life, said that “advice does not eliminate personal responsibility.” And he concluded: “spiritual guidance should aim to develop men and women with their own Christian standards.”[10]

While recognizing the indispensable help provided by others, we also need to be aware that in the spiritual life it is God who works through them to convey to us his light and strength. This gives us confidence to continue walking towards holiness when, for one reason or another, the persons who played an important role in our Christian life are absent. Thus we also enjoy a deep freedom of spirit in relation to the people God

has placed at our side, whom we love through the heart of Christ, and whose help we deeply appreciate.

Free to love unconditionally

Christians know that personal fulfilment comes as the result of a free and total self-giving to the love of a God who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. The gifts we have received reach their fruition by opening ourselves to God's grace, as the experience of so many saints teaches us. In allowing God to enter into their lives, they placed themselves lovingly at his service, as our Lady did at the moment of the Annunciation when "she gives her firm reply: *Fiat!* Be it done unto me according to thy word! This is the fruit of the best freedom of all, the freedom of opting for God."[11]

When someone opts for God, they direct their dreams and energies towards what is most worthwhile in

life. They fulfil the ultimate meaning of freedom, which is not simply to choose this or that, but to dedicate one's life to something great, accepting definitive commitments. Dedicating one's talents to following Christ, although at times this requires rejecting other options, is what brings real happiness, *a hundredfold*^[12] on earth and *eternal life*.^[13] It also reflects a high degree of inner maturity, because only those with deep personal convictions can commit their whole heart: "I opt for God because I want to, freely, without compulsion of any kind."^[14]

Abandoning past, present and future in God's hands

The soul that opts for God acquires an inner peace that rises above any tribulation. *I know whom I have believed*.^[15] These words express Saint Paul's confidence of being faithful to his vocation as an apostle

to the Gentiles despite all the difficulties. Those who ground their life on God acquire an unshakeable security that allows them to also give themselves to others: whether in celibacy, for apostolic reasons, or in marriage, or in so many other paths that Christian life can take. It is a self-giving that spans past, present and future, as Saint Josemaria prayed: “My Lord and my God: into your hands I abandon the past and the present and the future, what is small and what is great, what amounts to a little and what amounts to a lot, things temporal and things eternal.”[16]

No one can change the past. But God knows the true meaning of each person's history. In the sacrament of Reconciliation he can forgive any sin and reintegrate these events harmoniously in the life of his children. Everything works for our good,[17] even the mistakes we may

have made, if we have recourse to God's mercy and with his grace seek to live more attentive to him in the present. Thus we can look confidently towards the future, because we know we are in the hands of a Father who loves us. When we are in God's hands, we fall and always get up in God's hands!

Opting for God means accepting his invitation to write our own biography with his help. Humbly recognizing our freedom as a gift, we will employ it to carry out, accompanied by so many other people, the mission God has entrusted to us. And we will joyfully experience that his plans exceed all our expectations, as Saint Josemaria once told a youngster: "Let yourself be carried by grace! Let your heart fly! ... Write your own little novel: a novel of sacrifice and heroism. With God's grace, your dreams will fall short."[18]

[1] Pope Francis, *Address*, 27 July 2013.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 110.

[4] Saint John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 4 April 1999, no. 2.

[5] *Sir* 15:14,

[6] Saint Josemaria, “The Riches of the Faith,” Article published in *ABC*, Madrid, 2 November 1969.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Letter 2 February 1945*, no. 19.

[8] *Friends of God*, no. 35.

[9] Pope Benedict, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, no. 48.

[10] *Conversations*, no. 93.

[11] *Friends of God*, no. 25.

[12] *Mt* 19:29.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Friends of God*, no. 35.

[15] *2 Tim* 1:12.

[16] *Way of the Cross*, VII, no. 3.

[17] Cf. *Rom* 8:28.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *Notes taken in a get-together*, 29 June 1974.

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