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“At home and along the way, when you lie down and when you rise:” The Plan of Life (I)

A spiritual plan of life is not so much a “system” as a deep-rooted interior commitment to a relationship: the relationship of a child with their Father. Editorial in the “Combat, closeness, mission” series.

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“Listen:” this is how one of the great prayers of the Old Testament, known as the *Shema Israel*, begins. It is recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy and is quoted by Jesus in response to the question about the first and greatest commandment: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength* (Dt 6:4-5; Mk 12:29-30). But the prayer goes beyond the commandment, stressing the importance of practical everyday acts that keep our minds and hearts in harmony with God:

These words that I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and speak of them when you are sitting at home and when you walk along the way, when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as a

reminder before your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Dt 6:6-9).

For a Christian, this is a powerful call to live with a heart in constant dialogue with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The saints and spiritual writers have always suggested concrete ways to nourish this dialogue, such as setting aside time for prayer and spiritual reading, frequently receiving the Eucharist, praying the Rosary, and ending the day with an examination of conscience. With this same practical spirit, St. Josemaría began to speak early on about a plan for spiritual life — or more simply, as it was commonly called at the time, a *plan of life*.^[1]—

Goals, processes, and purpose

In one of his letters to Timothy, St. Paul encourages his young disciple to live a life of piety and holiness with a sporting spirit: *Train yourself in godliness. For bodily exercise is of little value, whereas godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come* (1 Tim 4:7-8). In other letters, too, St. Paul reminds his listeners that God wants us to cooperate with his grace, and again he compares our response to an athletic competition: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? Run so as to win it* (1 Cor 9:24).

[2]

In sports, as in many other areas of life, setting goals and objectives is important. If someone goes to the gym just to look around and do whatever occurs to them in the moment, they are likely wasting their time and will soon either lose

interest or, worse, injure themselves. The same can be said of learning something significant, developing a project, or launching a business. Without a purpose and clear goals, it is easy to become disoriented, distracted, and to squander our efforts. This is why, when we view our lives as God does — in all their little details, without losing sight of their breadth and depth — we also need a clear goal: to become saints, guided by and “inundated”^[3] with grace, and to help many others discover and enjoy the happiness of life in God.

All the same, merely setting a goal is a limited act. If we want, for instance, to win a championship, build a successful business, or achieve a high academic mark, we must do more than merely desire the goal. Good results require not only an ambitious vision and clear goals, but also the right system to achieve

them. For a coach, this system includes a plan for recruiting talented players and running effective training sessions. For an entrepreneur, it involves hiring employees, developing product ideas, and launching marketing campaigns. For a student, it encompasses a method for taking good notes, a structured reading plan, and strategies to prepare for exams.

In the spiritual life, a concrete plan of life is like a “system” that facilitates (or at least removes obstacles from) the work of the Holy Spirit, who guides and transforms us.

^[4] “Christ's invitation to sanctity, which he addresses to all men without exception, puts each one of us under an obligation to cultivate our interior life and to struggle daily to practise the Christian virtues.”^[5]

— We need a clear end goal (of living and growing in holiness) to begin walking in the right direction. But if

we only focus on the goal, we will soon become discouraged. Seeing our own inconsistency and weakness, we could easily grow impatient with ourselves — or even with God — thinking that we are not good enough or that He never intended for us to aim so high. Saint Paul, for instance, exhorts us to *pray without ceasing* (cf. 1 Thess 5:17). Yet we must consider how to achieve this in a realistic and sustainable way; after all, it would be difficult to always pray in exactly the same way, just as it would be difficult, or at least unhealthy, to subsist on only one type of food.

For this reason, St. Josemaría strongly encouraged faithfulness to a plan of life, which serves as a kind of “spiritual diet” carefully designed and balanced for ordinary people: “I can assure you that whoever fulfils our norms of life, or at least struggles to fulfil them, in health and in

sickness, in youth and in old age, in sunny weather and in stormy, when it is easy and when it is difficult, that child of mine is predestined, if he or she perseveres to the end: I am certain of their sanctity.”^[6] —

This faithfulness, however, is not simply the diligence of a student who achieves high marks by dedicating time to study. In the realm of grace, personal effort does matter, but things operate somewhat differently than in the natural order. Holiness — the greatness to which God calls us — is something we have already received in abundance as a gift, and it continues to be given to us freely, above all through the sacraments. For this reason, what is required is not so much heroic strength but deep humility: poverty of spirit and gratitude for all that God gives us. He desires ever greater intimacy and harmony with us, that we rely above all on Him and allow ourselves to be

transformed by his grace. And this effort to sustain a continuous dialogue with God, who already dwells within us is the very essence of holiness. From this perspective, the plan of life is not really a system at all. Rather, it is a deep-rooted interior commitment to a relationship; the relationship of a child with their Father. And that *relationship* is the very heart of holiness.

Guided by the Spirit

The inevitable effort required to follow a plan of life brings certain risks that we should be aware of. One of them is that we may focus too much on fulfilling the plan itself and too little on the relationship that the plan is meant to foster. In other words, we may forget that personal holiness is not the result of a series of things we do, but a transformation that only the Holy Spirit can bring

about in each of us: “Get to know the holy Spirit, the great Stranger, on whom depends your sanctification. Don't forget that you are God's temple. The Advocate is in the centre of your soul: listen to him and be docile to his inspirations.”^[7] —

The role of the Holy Spirit is not simply to help us and assist us in our efforts to be holy; to think that way would be to see things backwards. He is the prime mover, the guide, the very architecture of our holiness.^[8] — We could go so far as to say that it is impossible to grow in holiness simply by devising a plan, not only because the task is beyond our strength, but also because we do not fully understand what holiness consists of or what form it should take in our lives. As we advance in life (and sometimes even in the course of a single day!) holiness is revealed as something quite different — far better and more beautiful —

than we had imagined at the outset. That is why clinging to an overly rigid idea of “our holiness” could even become an obstacle to the work of the Holy Spirit in our soul.

Naturally, the lives of the saints share many common elements, because holiness is an artistic creation of the Holy Spirit, who forms Christ within us and leads us to the Father.^[9]—

Moreover, the same Spirit has inspired various charisms and spiritualities in the Church, providing concrete paths for us to follow. However, even a specific vocation within the Church — whether one’s vocation to the Work or belonging to any other spiritual family — does not exhaust the Holy Spirit’s creativity, nor does it erase the unique traits of each person. On the contrary, each of these paths provides the means to purify and elevate those personal traits. This is why the Father wrote that “the spirit

of the Work, like the Gospel, does not impose itself on our way of being, but rather gives it life. It is a seed destined to grow in the earth of each person.”^[10] —

St. Josemaría was very conscious of this when he envisioned the plan of spiritual life for his children in Opus Dei. Without diminishing the importance of concrete practices of piety, he wrote: “You should not let them become rigid rules, or water-tight compartments. They should be flexible, to help you on your journey you who live in the middle of the world, with a life of hard professional work and social ties and obligations which you should not neglect, because in them your conversation with God still continues. Your plan of life ought to be like a rubber glove which fits the hand perfectly.”^[11] — Along the same lines, he often said that in the Work “we can travel along this path in

many different ways: keeping right, keeping left, or zigzagging, on foot or by horse. There are thousands of ways to advance along our divine path. Each person's conscience, in keeping with their particular circumstances, will lead them forward in one or other of these ways. The only essential thing is not to leave the path.”^[12] —

Yet precisely because our holiness is something more beautiful and personal than any generic protocol, a plan of spiritual life is truly a means of holiness. Daily moments of prayer and spiritual reading, frequent reception of the sacraments, spiritual direction, and ongoing formation... These things are all of great importance, even though holiness does not consist solely in performing them. They are ways in which we remain in constant dialogue with God, becoming ever more familiar with his unseen presence in our

lives, listening to Him, and disposing ourselves to follow his inspirations with docility. They are ways that ultimately lead us to *remain in his love* (Jn 15:9).

The distinction between these means and the primacy of the Holy Spirit's action should also be reflected in the spiritual direction we receive and offer to others. Especially when we are beginning along the path, we need to make an effort to acquire habits that strengthen our plan of spiritual life. But from the very start — and increasingly as we progress — we must also pay attention to more personal and relational aspects: What is the Holy Spirit saying to me? Is my prayer an affectionate dialogue? Am I truly seeking the Lord? Where is my heart during Holy Mass or when I pray the Holy Rosary? Is my daily reading of the Gospel an encounter with Jesus? Has my visit to the Blessed Sacrament

been a visit to Someone I love? Have I tried to respond to what I have sensed as the inspirations of the Holy Spirit?

The more docile we are to the gentle action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, the more peace and joy we will find in living our plan of life. To illustrate this metaphorically, we will realize that God wants us to be like coaches who aim high but also love the game and care for their players; like entrepreneurs who enjoy the adventure of business, want to serve others, and help their employees thrive; or like students who delight in learning and discovering new fields of knowledge. This is the path our Father always wanted us to take: “Let yourself be carried by grace! Let your heart take flight! For if it is true that the human heart is inclined to lowly things, it also has wings to soar high, all the way to the Heart of God.”^[13]

[1] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, nos. 149-153; E. Álvarez, “Plan de vida,” in *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Burgos, Monte Carmelo, 2013.

[2] See also *Phil* 3:13-14; *2 Tm* 4:7-8.

[3] “How often you will find yourself inundated, intoxicated with God’s grace — and what a sin if you do not respond!” (St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 1007).

[4] Cf. *Rm* 8:14-17; *2 Co* 3:18.

[5] *Friends of God*, no. 3.

[6] St. Josemaría, Letter no. 2, no. 59.

[7] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 57.

[8] Cf. J. Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, New York, Scepter, 2007, ch. 1.

[9] Cf. *Rm* 8:9-16; *Eph* 2:18.

[10] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-01-2018, no. 11.

[11] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 149.

[12] St. Josemaría, Letter no. 10, no. 19.

[13] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering in Santiago de Chile, 29-06-1974, qtd. in *Catequesis en América* (1974), vol II, pg. 45 (AGP, biblioteca, P04).

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