

NOTES ON THE SPIRITUALITY
OF THE
SOCIETY OF JESUS CHRIST THE PRIEST

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by
Alfonso Gálvez

Translated from the Spanish by
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**LETTER PROLOGUE
TO THE MEMBERS
OF THE
SOCIETY OF JESUS CHRIST THE PRIEST**

This short book is not the fruit of my own initiative. Rather, it was written to satisfy a request of the ecclesiastical authority, which had asked for a brief report from me, on the essentials of the spirituality of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*, on its history, and on myself.

I have always been rather sceptical about those who claim to write under obedience. Of course, there are a few exceptions: St. Teresa of Ávila, for instance. I have no special difficulty believing her claim that she wrote, overcoming her own disgust for the task, only when compelled by her confessors — charming and wonderful St. Teresa! I can assure you that this is a special case as well. I might never have written this document had I not been required to do so by a legitimate command.

I must confess that despite the book's brevity, the effort to prepare it was laborious. Yet I was pleased with the outcome.

For this volume, product of a happy contingency, makes available to you a *vademecum* as well as a safe guidebook, containing the goals and general guidelines of our spirituality.

Both things are equally important: our spirituality and the goals that, with God's grace, we intend to attain. In fact, those goals depend completely on fidelity to our own spirit and charisma, whose abridgement is drafted in this document. I am convinced that the different elements of the whole are intimately intertwined: should some of them disappear, the others would certainly vanish too.

Spiritual Families that have existed within the Church, as well as those that now exist, were and always will be liable to the possibility of decadence and extinction; the latter often being but a consequence of the former.

The subject is important, and since it has much to do with the intentions of this book, I will attempt to present, as briefly as possible, the various circumstances which might lead to the relaxation or even extinction of spiritual Families within the Church.

The first cause is related to the exhaustion or disappearance of the goals for which a spiritual Family was established; this must be regarded as absolutely normal. Despite the special charisma and particular spirituality with which a spiritual Family was provided for the attainment of its goal, historical circumstances may render obsolete or unnecessary the specific end for which it was established. If it was founded, for instance, to care for indigent lepers, and there are no longer any of these about, then it is evident that its rationale has disappeared as well.

The relaxation of a spiritual Family, which does not necessarily imply its extinction, is a more likely event. Often it results from a lack of fidelity to the Family's original ideals or charisma as its members are somehow swept away by the powers of this world. When this occurs, it is not rare that some of the members, disagreeing with the new state of affairs, attempt to separate from the rest in an effort to return to their roots. Thus, new branches or orientations sprout within the same spiritual Family. The result is that it is sometimes difficult to recognize just who keeps the original spirituality or is more faithful to the founder's spirit: Calced and Discalced, Strict Observance, Reformed Observance, Primitive Rule, Mitigated Rule, etc. And, as it is often the case when the foundational spirit is gone, the supporters of the *Mitigations* do not deem themselves far from the primitive spirit at all and label those who seek to revive it as insane visionaries.

I will not pass judgement on a controversy that for centuries has confronted some well-known and high ranking Religious Orders. I shall say no more on this matter: however, I always have been fond of those who fight to live their own spirituality with sincerity. Besides, we should remember that this is a subject suitable only for historians, and is of such complexity that it might lead to bewildering and most unexpected conclusions. The Church herself, having also undergone a number of reformations —Protestant Reformation, Catholic Reformation,

and many others¹—, has recently reinstated Luther, who was thought to be, for centuries, a tenant in hell.²

There is still another cause for the relaxation of spiritual Families which has, astonishingly, been ignored by some historians; a cause so important that its consequences still continue to affect Western History. I am referring to a certain *procedural philosophy* that may taint the foundational spirit of a religious Family. It is a phenomenon hard to detect and even harder to acknowledge.

Such procedural philosophy —contained in Statutes, By-laws, or any of the founder’s writings defining his spirituality—, pursues the acquisition and use of power and social influence. The sole purpose in achieving that power and influence would be, of course, to do good most efficiently, and to spread it in ever wider circles. Intentions could not be better.

The problem arises from the indisputable fact that History and Logic, like Mathematics, have their own internal laws, and do not always heed good intentions. We easily forget that power and influence do not enjoy much recognition in the New Testament as a *course of action*; after all, they are mere natural methods and, therefore, are alien to the supernatural world.³ That is why they inevitably develop themselves into worldly

¹Cf. P. Congar: *True and False Reforms in the Church*.

²A good friend of mine, considered by many a conservative, and with certain tendency to be always joking, told me that we should be careful not to jeopardize some dogmas, such as, in this case, the eternity of hell.

³You can find numerous quotations in the Holy Scripture that will prove this point. I will not bring them here, because I have spoken to you at length about this issue in my writings as well as in my spiritual talks.

Power: a social and political factor of unsuspected consequences with a considerably important economic component. Power and money are considered synonymous by the world. *You are worth what you have*, the common people say, utterly convinced of the truth of that statement. With the attainment of power and money, the unavoidable result is relaxation within a short time, despite the good intentions that might have animated the foundational spirit.

This has nothing to do with the hypothetical sanctity of the founders of the spiritual Families; it is such a subtle element it may have completely escaped their perceptions. Besides, the Church, accomplishing her mission of canonizing intentions and conducts, lacks competence to forecast the consequences of a specific procedural philosophy contained perhaps only *in nuce* in the Statutes or By-laws of a spiritual Family.

Whether this procedural philosophy is contained in the foundational spirit or is adopted later, the effects are the same. So, there were and are spiritual Families that, notwithstanding the purity of their original spirituality, have ended in the saddest of mediocrities, due to the position of influence they gained and the material wealth they accumulated.

History clearly attests to the fact that a spiritual Family acquires *weight and influence*—it makes no difference whether inside or outside the Church—only at the price of its infidelity to the original spirituality. Worldly powers charge dearly for their services and it cannot be denied that they also exert influence within the Church. Since the temptation is strong and very subtle, the danger is extremely grave, and many will not be willing to admit to it. After all, what is wrong with the acquisi-

tion of renown within the Church...? Is not the potential for spreading good increased in this way...? St. Francis of Assisi, for instance, clearly sensed the danger of this temptation, yet he was unable to prevent his Order from falling into it. Very few have understood this, and still fewer are willing to admit that the temptation has been welcomed into their homes.

I know that many will disagree with my statements, and that the very few who may admit to them in theory, may not be willing to apply them readily to themselves in practice. That is why I do not advance them for everyone, but only for the good-hearted among you who may find yourselves in any of the situations I have just described; for those among you who, no matter what may happen, will still be willing to remain faithful to our hopes and dreams.

Yet if you happen to find yourselves in any of those situations, do not hesitate a single moment: leave. Go where you may remain faithful to your vocation, even if only to join the few who are left who, tirelessly wandering through the path of this world, are forced to live as strangers, singing the wonders of God to those who do not want to listen. Only the Church is perennial, not the spiritual Families that may spring from her bosom. And not even ours, born amid so many beautiful hopes and uniting us in such an immense love, may claim to be an end in itself. Only God is eternal, and only through Him may beautiful dreams and rapturous hopes last forever.

It is said that God promised St. Francis that his Order would last till the end of time; I believe it. Perhaps God did not mean so much the rigid structure of the institution as such, but those who, stretching through time, would live according to the

authentic spirit of the Saint, *whether they belong to the Order officially or not*. In any case, *Spiritus est qui vivificat, caro non prodest quidquam*,⁴ and this is the reason why it is only the spirit that lasts.

Thus, if your adventurous journeying is temporarily interrupted, or even stopped, return to it! If your path is lost in the wilderness, make it straight again! If the fire in your hearts burns down to embers, rekindle it with renewed determination! At any cost, *spiritum nolite extinguere*.⁵ For dreams kindled by God will in some way, somehow, become true; if not for me, at least for you, provided you remain faithful to your spirit.

Do not let your hearts be troubled when all seems to be against you; it only means that the moment fully to share the cross of the Lord has arrived. Have always in mind that *neque mors neque vita neque angeli neque principatus neque instantia neque futura neque virtutes neque altitudo neque profundum neque alia quælibet creatura poterit nos separare a caritate Dei, quæ est in Christo Iesu Domino nostro*.⁶

⁴Jn 6:63.

⁵1 Th 5:19.

⁶Rm 8: 38–39.

I

I was born on June 4, 1932, in Totana, a little town in the province of Murcia, Spain, into the bosom of a poor Christian family. My father worked as a humble clerk at the town hall; my mother was a good, hardworking and intelligent woman with little formal education. She was unable to read, but was always busy with housework.

I attended grammar school at Totana — first a State school, then the Miraculous Medal School, run by the Daughters of Charity. The sisters prepared me for my First Holy Communion which I made, along with a number of other students, in the public chapel of the school on May 21, 1942.

Things were difficult when I was growing up. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the years after it my family experienced material economic hardship and even hunger. During the war my father was drafted into the Red Army against his will. He was captured very early on, and my mother went from one concentration camp to another looking for him. My uncle and aunt in Murcia took care of my brother, Peter, and

me during that time. They were always kind and did everything possible for us, but they too were very poor. Peter and I had to get used to hunger and to the anguish of being without our parents, whose whereabouts we did not even know.

About 1942 my parents, at considerable sacrifice, sent me to live with my uncle and to finish my education in Murcia. My uncle and aunt could only afford to give me one meal a day, so my parents sent me a snack every day (in reality whenever they could afford it) which made up my breakfast and dinner. I completed my high school studies at the Institute of *Alfonso X The Wise*. I did not get very good marks (except the last year) because I did not work very hard — just enough to pass into the next class. I suppose I lacked motivation, although probably the deepest and real reason was my own laziness. My spiritual life was mediocre: I did have faith, went to Mass on Sunday and had respect for religion; but I very seldom went to the sacraments, and Jesus Christ was almost a stranger to me.

My last year in high school (probably about 1949) was an important turning point for me. Under the guidance of Father Andrés Caruana, a good priest from my home town who specialized in youth work and gave me some spiritual books, I made a serious attempt to change my life. I began by receiving the sacraments frequently and by graduating from high school with good marks. In October I went to Murcia University to study law and during my first year there I felt the Lord's call to the priesthood.

By this time my mother had passed away and things were still difficult at home. I had three brothers. I was the eldest, at seventeen; the youngest was nine months old. I won one

of three scholarships granted by the University that year. No sooner had the academic year begun than I went to talk to the director of *Cardenal Belluga* Hall, a highly regarded residence for undergraduates and university teachers; I told him my problems, especially the fact that I could not afford to eat proper food. The good man felt moved and the next day he offered me the option of either becoming a resident or receiving an allowance from the University. I chose residence and was immediately admitted.

The following year I entered the *Seminary of Saint Fulgentius* in Murcia. Due to the precarious financial situation of my family and the fact that I had a University scholarship, I decided to use my scholarship to pay the Seminary expenses. I also thought it would be a good idea to finish my law studies, in order to be better qualified. There was one problem: the University required regular attendance at class if I was to keep my scholarship. Not without a certain boldness, for in those times seminary discipline was very strict and there were no precedents for what I requested, I explained my position to the bishop, Most Reverend Ramón Sanahuja y Marcé, who had recently arrived in the diocese. The bishop granted his permission and I began my civil and ecclesiastical studies simultaneously.

On June 10, 1956, in Murcia, I was ordained a priest and was immediately assigned as a curate to Saint Andrew's Parish in Murcia. There I earnestly started working with young people, having had some previous experience in that field as a seminarian. Saint Andrew's was an exceptionally large and flourishing parish, so pastoral work took up most of my day. However, even though I could devote very little time to it, my work with the young yielded magnificent and consoling results. It was easy

to see what a bountiful harvest could be reaped among young people.

In those first years as a priest I became acquainted with *Opus Dei* and it immediately won my admiration and love. The seed for our spiritual family was already sown, and the foreseen fruits were, even then, abundant, but I did not mind committing myself to *Opus Dei* (although for a short time and without ever going beyond temporal promises); I was, rather, moved by a spirit of generosity and affection for a Work I always avowed as inspired by God. But even then, I never stopped thinking of the task I believed God had entrusted to me.

Naturally, *Opus Dei*, concerned as it was with its own considerable apostolic enterprises, gave little attention to mine, which were scarcely born. I was to be sent to the Apostolic Prefecture of Llaullos (Peru). Although well aware that this meant a complete and definitive end to my dreams, I, of course, wholeheartedly consented to the assignment. But the Will of God became apparent in another way. The bishop did not grant his permission for my going to Peru, for he had other plans (unknown to me) but which he told to the superiors of *Opus Dei*.

The bishop's plans still pointed toward South America, and I was officially appointed philosophy teacher at the Seminary of Cuenca in Ecuador, which had been recently established and placed under the guidance of the diocese of Murcia. I respectfully explained to the bishop that this plan was likely to result in the ruin of my projects and dreams regarding working with young people, which deserved consideration. Let me stress here that because of my obedience to and respect for the superiors of *Opus Dei*, I was never against their sending me to Peru; but,

being a diocesan priest, I owed obedience first to the bishop who, being unconvinced by *Opus Dei*, carried through with his original plan of sending me to Ecuador for five years. The outcome was that I had to leave for that country in the month of September, 1959.

The group of priests from Murcia who worked together at the seminary in Cuenca did not agree with each other on everything; as a result, two years later, I was asked to leave the seminary. After a month with no post and also out of sheer necessity, I asked the archbishop of Cuenca, Most Reverend Manuel Serrano Abad, to give me an assignment. He sent me to El Tambo, a small village in the mountains inhabited by Indians. There I spent some quite harsh but very enjoyable months. I loved my Indians and felt their extraordinary love for me.

It was then that I left *Opus Dei*, above all moved by the urgent idea of developing my plan of pastoral work with youth and also to foster priestly vocations, whose first fruits were now beginning to appear. I was practically cut off from spiritual direction, and was in quite a difficult position. In the meantime I asked for authorization to go to Venezuela, in the hope mainly that my projects might be put into action there. Also, the idea of joining a group of priests from Murcia who lived there seemed very appealing.

After obtaining the necessary permission from the archbishop of Cuenca and from my own bishop, I set out for Venezuela, where I spent two and a half years, thus completing the five year term for which I was sent to South America. At Barquisimeto, Venezuela, Bishop Crispulo Benitez Fonturvel appointed me pastor to a parish in the slums, which was so difficult and tough to

manage that the previous pastor —also Spanish— had decided to go back to Spain lest he should lose his sanity. I consider it the most difficult stage of my priestly life.

Back in Spain the bishop appointed me a curate at Saint Andrew's again, although this time as a priest in residence, so as to allow me greater freedom to devote more time to working with young people — a task of which he approved and wholeheartedly blessed.

Successive bishops of Murcia, including my present bishop, Most Reverend Javier Azagra, released me from pastoral parish work so I could devote myself entirely to the special work God seemed to have entrusted to me.

Our spiritual family, *The Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*, was approved by the Most Reverend Bishop Javier Azagra as a Pious Union on July 29, 1980. Later, to fit in with the terminology of the new Code of Canon Law, the juridical figure of Association of Christian Faithful was adopted, being approved by the same bishop on November 27, 1986. At present the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest has members in Spain, in Ecuador and in the United States of America.

II

When I entered the Seminary of Saint Fulgentius, in Murcia in 1950, I was quite taken aback. I was eighteen years old at the time, and had finished first year at law school while staying as an undergraduate at *Cardinal Belluga*. That Residence was a very civilized place; the undergraduates who lived there —really the elite of the University— mixed with a number of highly intelligent lecturers.¹

The environment at the seminary, however, surprised me due to its intellectual poverty and the seminarians' poor human formation. The contrast with the Spanish University of the time was very marked. The accommodation and catering also left much to be desired. The material poverty was understandable, considering the difficulties Spain experienced in the years immediately after the Civil War; the poverty of spirit —as distinct from the spirit of poverty— which was so much a feature of the

¹Today, along with the decadence of the Spanish university life, *Cardinal Belluga* Hall is a pale shadow of its former self.

seminary, was much more difficult to justify. I feel it helps to explain the crisis which came afterwards and which still lasts today.

A rigorous timetable governed the life of piety at the seminary, but the system of religious practice was more appropriate for training *religious* clergy than for training secular clergy, as I shall explain later. It was a piety also with very little human and intellectual base. For my part, I have always distrusted any search for supernatural values that tends to despise, or at the least to forget, natural values. Nonetheless, I have never doubted the good faith and propriety of the men who run that seminary; but I tend to think that they just had not the right qualities for the job, or the intellectual ability.

Such little philosophy as we were taught had marked Scotist and Suarezian overtones. Saint Thomas (who was scarcely referred to) I had to discover on my own. This was in sharp contrast with the Seminary's official support of papal exhortations; in the area of philosophy I am referring to directives of successive Popes that the training of priests should be based on Thomistic philosophy in its purest form. I am convinced, nevertheless, that despite this and many other incongruities I later observed among the clergy, there was but good faith. . . and very defective training. Theology fared somewhat better than philosophy and was more orthodox, but it still fell short of a reasonable basic standard. Fortunately, the times were gone (but not long gone) since the study of the sixth commandment was omitted

from moral theology in the interest of modesty.² The emphasis on Latin was also a problem. I have always been an enthusiastic supporter of Latin, but many of the students at the seminary had only a very poor grasp of the language. I rather think that the use of Latin as the medium for their intellectual training had a negative effect on their study of philosophy and theology.

To give an example of the low intellectual level of the seminary: the library was officially open only five hours a week; and in fact at best it never went beyond four. And, I might add, regular visits were so ill thought of as to merit a quick reprimand, as happened in my case.

Regarding the piety and life-style at the seminary, I referred above to their being more appropriate for religious than *secular* clergy. No one seemed to realize that the purpose of the seminary was to train, not consecrated religious priests, but *secular priests*. Prayer, in particular, had a strong Jesuitical overtone, and retreats were always directed by fathers of the Society.³

²One of the things that has astounded me the most during my priestly life is the great ignorance about this matter on the part of mature and prestigious priests, entrusted with the grave responsibilities of the care of souls. I have always wondered how they could carry out their delicate duties when it came to the sacrament of penance.

³I have always felt respect and admiration for any method of prayer approved and recommended by the Church, particularly the Jesuitic method. My objection here is that perhaps it would have been more helpful to introduce future secular priests to a variety of methods. Clearly the method of Saint Ignatius is as good as any, even for those who live in the midst of the world; but, even so, it seems reasonable and appropriate to leave room for other methods of prayer, especially when those called to practise them are secular priests.

Also, the spiritual reading books recommended to us, as well as most of the pious practices, were always more suited to religious clergy.

All the activities in my seminary were signalled by the ringing of bells—a practice typical of convents of the time—and you had to file in and out for every event. You could not leave the seminary (not even to see a doctor) unless another seminarian accompanied you. In the dining-room, which was always referred to as *the refectory*,⁴ lives of the saints and spiritual books were read out at all meals, which began and ended with lengthy Latin prayers.⁵ Absolute silence had to be kept during meals. For our vacation time, we were recommended to wear black clothes and to get an extremely short haircut,⁶ and the reading of newspapers was forbidden (I always fancied that was rather naive to a certain extent since, during those years, State censorship had reduced newspapers to little more than pious parish bulletins).

I realize that all I have described above, and many other things not worthy going into, were more or less common in all

⁴I never heard terms such as *student body* used to describe seminary students. They used the term *community* which like *refectory* has strong monastic connotations.

⁵At my home it was customary to say grace before meals. But I always thought, until I became a seminarian, that the dining-room was mainly for eating and the chapel mainly for praying.

⁶I, who acted sensibly over such a matter and had a haircut like any other undergraduate, was given a mild reprimand by the rector of the seminary on account of complaints about my hairstyle: some considered it *sexy*. I said I was ready to do whatever he thought best, but the rector eventually told me to forget all about it.

Catholic seminaries of the period. And, of course, I am not saying it was wrong or bad. They probably knew no better; besides there were many who devoted themselves to the training of priests with the best intentions. Proof of this is the many generations of good priests who, in Europe as well as in America, kept the faith of the people strong during that period. I even acknowledge that the men in charge of the seminary I attended were pious and good priests who strove to do their best. For my part, even though I often did not understand many of their methods, I always showed them the greatest respect and thought well of them. I certainly never agreed with those *angry* reformers who started to appear during my last years at the seminary and, driven by the veritable Jacobin fury, tried to oust those priests. Those reformers heralded the terrible crisis that would develop in all its harshness after the Second Vatican Council. I knew them all too well, so I could not trust them.⁷ When they finally took over the seminary in later years, the subsequent catastrophe confirmed my fears: before, we had a seminary with many imperfections; now, thanks to them, we have no seminary at all.

⁷Although I was very young, I realized that their behaviour was inconsistent with their *furious* demands for a greater holiness and fervour at the seminary. On the one hand, they clamoured for more priestly authenticity (nobody knew exactly what that meant and they never explained it); on the other hand, they practically ignored obedience and were far from humility and Christian charity. They showed little interest in study, which became almost impossible for them because of the enormous number of meetings they held at every opportunity, unauthorized meetings which were even kept hidden from the superiors. Soon they began calling for *justice*, which was understood exclusively as social justice with clear political overtones.

However, I do not want to write a critique of the Spanish seminaries of the 1950s. What I have said so far is simply by way of preface to discuss the urgent need to bring about an authentic reform of priestly training. I have already said that I think the people of the time were well intentioned, and it must also be said that problems arise the moment it becomes clear that good faith is not enough. What I mean is that the training given in those seminaries may have been inadequate, at least, for the kind of secular priest needed by the Church of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. That can be seen from the fact that the Second Vatican Council did try to bring reform to the training of priests, and, even so, the crisis soon broke out with all its virulence.⁸ Perhaps it is unfair to expect from the situation of the Church of the period something the historical momentum could not provide. But the worst part of this whole affair, as I see it, is that, so many years later, and after so many failures, they are still hesitating and experimenting in ways, all too often, more dangerous than those of former times.

There is no doubt that in the years prior to the Council concepts such as *religious*, *secular*, and *lay* had become blurred. Nowadays, despite the definitive and illuminating doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, the same confusion reigns, in theory as well as in practice. We may refer, for instance, to the life and customs in the *Secular* Institutes: in many instances their secularity is open to question. As far as Secular Institutes for

⁸The Council proved unable to ward off the crisis. Historians and philosophers of the next century will have to try to explain why that was so. I shall touch on this phenomenon later, for it has much to do with the reasons for establishing the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest.

the laity are concerned, it is difficult to see how, for instance, praying the Divine Office in common, or reading lives of saints during meals *is something proper to and characteristic of lay people*, no matter how good these practices might be in themselves. But that is just one example out of thousands; the fact is that, it is the *spirit* of those institutes which lacks secularity. And one would have to be very optimistic to accept that certain customs, and the way in which some pious practices are performed, can be offered as norms to ordinary lay people who (although consecrated) live right in the midst of the world. The modern Church ought to be convinced, once and for all, that the *religious* charisma is completely distinct from the *secular* charisma.

III

Precisely when everybody was calling out for reforms, and a spiritual rejuvenation of the Church was expected, the great conciliar and post-conciliar crisis of Vatican II occurred. At the risk of seeming sarcastic, one may recall here the well-known observation of Loisy, for it now carries a certain degree of truth: *We were waiting for the Kingdom of Christ but it was the Church that came.* One thing was expected and something different happened. Hopeful as we were of witnessing a new dawn for the Church, such a dawn came, indeed, but unfortunately it brought serious problems with it. Some ecclesiastics sought to solve these problems overnight, acting (others thought) rather naively. The crisis, which at first sight might seem to have resulted from Vatican II, really came *post hoc* and not *propter*

hoc. There is no doubt about that;¹ but problems which have become widespread and extremely grave should not be dismissed with a *play on words*.

As might have been expected the training of priests was one of the serious problems awaiting reform by the Council. It is only right to acknowledge that the reform was undertaken everywhere with great enthusiasm; but perhaps also with some haste, and in some instances, without serious and thorough study of the goals to be achieved. There were many documents, many committees, but they seem to have failed to reach a *corpus* of clear ideas and (more important still), practical ideas. The outcome, once again, seems to have been determined by the swing of the pendulum.

In sound logic, two goals should have been established. On the one hand, it was obvious that the spirituality and interior life of candidates for the priesthood needed to be fostered, furnishing them at the same time with a profound knowledge of the most wholesome Catholic theology, always within the lines established by the Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. On the other hand, it was also clear that priests, to be better equipped to work in the modern world, needed updating and improvements in their education and human virtues, and to be given the necessary resources to face the difficult stage of history

¹For my part, I clearly affirm, once more, my absolute acceptance to all the Councils of the Church. The documents of Vatican II enshrine its work; but no one could deny that, prior to them and during their construction, lay intrigue, manipulation, tensions and compromises. The faithful found themselves plunged into confusion more often than was necessary. Paul VI himself said that Satan's smoke had infiltrated the Church.

in which we find ourselves. In other words: *conserving* the spirit, intensifying the practice of the most authentic Catholic doctrine and spirituality, and *updating* prospective priests' knowledge of the modern world and its culture.

In my view (and I respect contrary opinions and recognize that there are isolated exceptions), neither goal has been attained; in fact, the situation in the seminaries is worse today than before Vatican Council II. The spirit, or what Saint Vincent of Lerins called *quod traditum est*, has not been *conserved*; even less successful was the *updating* of the training of priests for modern times. Paraphrasing the Lord's words, one could say that *these you should have done, without omitting the others*.²

The problem may have worsened due to the inroads of temporalism and an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the world³ that began to assail the Church from the decade of the sixties. An urgent need was felt for the priest to become a man of his time. To be honest, it might be recognized that need was real, since seminaries were clearly out of touch with the times in which priests had to live. This is not the place for a historical analysis of the question, but one must also admit that the Church of the time found herself invaded by Liberal Protestant theology and by various currents of Marxist ideology. In those years, Marxism seemed to become the dominant ideology in most parts of the world. Two other events of historical consequence should probably be noted. The first is the awe aroused in some people by

²Mt 23:23

³Kneeling before the world, according to the known phrase of Maritain.

technological triumphs,⁴ which was a decisive factor in helping to bring about the inferiority complex I have referred to. The other fact, linked to this complex, has to do with the emphasis Catholicism put on acknowledging its faults in its past attitudes for the irruption of Protestant theology into Catholicism.

As a result, the seminary reform took unexpected courses. Fear of the world and of worldly ideologies, admiration for Protestant and Rationalist theology, and perhaps a mistaken approach (in some sectors) to ecumenism, all led to the long cherished plans of reform being based on an undervaluing of the interior life and a debasing of genuine Catholic values. This led to a veritable collapse in some cases. Sensitive subjects, which should never have been questioned, became the matter of debate. This happened, for instance, with the important subject of *priestly identity*; and with the no less sensitive issue of priestly celibacy. The first (a doctrine clearly defined in its main lines, although, as any theological matter, it was capable of deeper studies) now became a problem. As for celibacy, the very fact that it was made an issue involving doubts and a down-playing of the demands of a celibacy which had always been an accepted

⁴It was a awe verging on panic. Those were the years of landing on the Moon, of spacecraft and space satellites. The Russian astronauts' statement that *they did not see God*, in their first laps of the earth's stratosphere, seems to have disconcerted some rather narrow minded people.

fact, undermined the conviction of many priests and caused a number of them to leave their ministry.⁵

On the other hand, young candidates to the priesthood had little access to any Christ other than the evanescent Christ of the Liberal Protestant theology, imported into Catholicism with hate and enthusiasm, or the Christ reduced to a mere human being preached by Liberation theologies. Because neither Christ could possibly win their hearts, seminarians could not satisfy the need for love that any human being feels, and were left, moreover, with no weapons to fight a lustful world which proclaims sex to be an absolute value.

The need to be men of thier time is something which priest of any epoch in history (not just modern times) must confront. After all, a priest is a *pontifex*, as well as *pro hominibus constituitur*.⁶ As pontiff, he is supposed to be a perfect instrument of communication between God and men, which means that he must wholly belong to both at the same time: he must simultaneously be a man of God and a man of his time; completely filled with God and perfectly *up to date*. A priest can neither neglect his holiness, nor allow his fellow men to think him so alien to their feelings, or so alien to their problems, as to be incapable of understanding them.

Unhappily, in many a case, the priest has been *updated* in a way detrimental to his spiritual life and without regard for

⁵Eventually, exemption from the various obligations lined to priestly celibacy had to be stopped. But clearly the damage had already been made, as far as the firmness of many priests' convictions was concerned; the whole affair, moreover, had a very negative effect on the growth of vocations.

⁶Heb 5:1.

supernatural values. Perhaps that is why, as if obeying an inexorable and mysterious law of history, the desired updating has not been achieved, to such an extent that one may even say that we are now as far from it as we were in the old days. Probably much farther.

What has happened with the thorny issue of celibacy, for instance, is highly revealing. Naturally, the Church, maintaining the traditional practice and discipline, has retained priestly celibacy with all its demands, despite the pressure exerted on her in the opposite direction. Fortunately, some absurd and exaggerated norms dealing with the keeping of chastity, which were a feature of priestly training in Tridentine seminaries, have fallen into oblivion. Nevertheless, and always following the swing of the pendulum mentioned above, some expert reformers, with very personal ideas about the priest as a *normal* man of his time, liberalized to an unacceptable extent the standards of chastity required of the candidates to the priesthood. This leads to a kind of schizophrenia in young candidates. For, on the one hand, the Church's discipline logically upholds the demands of celibacy; but, on the other hand, by encouraging seminarians to be *normal* young people, a normality understood in an unacceptable way, these reforming experts create absurd situations, which undermine the spiritual life of these young men and put their psychological balance seriously at risk. It is impossible to expect that a person may practise perfect chastity if he is not provided with the necessary resources to do so. And that becomes even more obvious when those resources are made an object of ridicule. Of course, it is true that times and customs

change, but that in no way means that there is no need for means necessary to live perfect chastity.

I see no point (nor it is possible) to provide an exhaustive list of specific cases. Nevertheless, perhaps it is appropriate here to insist that a modern seminarian must not be expected to deprive himself of newspapers or television programmes; at the same time, he must not be encouraged to read *everything* or to watch television indiscriminately. Nor can he keep perfect chastity, which aims at a consecrated celibacy, if at the same time he is encouraged to seek out all kinds of *encounters* and relationships with persons of the other sex, which inevitably lead to frequent and often imprudent acquaintances.⁷ such chastity cannot be demanded from him either, if an authentic prayer life is not urged on him.⁸ Regarding Mass, much emphasis has been given to its being a *liturgical gathering*, while the aspects of *banquet* and, above all, *sacrifice* have been left to one side; but as it is well known, living the full meaning of the Mass, by a profound and orthodox experiencing of what the Eucharist is, is absolutely necessary if one is to practise a consecrated chastity in the midst of the world. The same is to be said about the ne-

⁷Some years ago, I had to celebrate Holy Mass at a seaside town right through summer. On one occasion, when the celebration was over and I was about to leave, I was greeted by a seminarian who told me that he was on his way to go for a swim in most popular part of the beach. When I, in a friendly way, advised him to be careful, he replied that whatever was going on there *did not affect him*. The worst part of it is that that kind of attitude is, unfortunately, very widespread.

⁸The Lord said that *this is the kind that can be driven out only by prayer* (Mk 9:29). Today there is a tendency to emphasize liturgical prayer, but personal or private meditation is forgotten.

cessity of frequently receiving, in a prudent and proper manner, the sacrament of Penance,⁹ and of practising a genuine personal ascetical life.¹⁰ If we finally consider (for we do not want to stay on this theme too long),¹¹ that very many candidates to the priesthood live under a social pressure which questions and disputes priestly celibacy, one can easily understand that the situation is far from being solved successfully, as some people make out.

Everybody agrees that a priest as well as a candidate to the priesthood must be a *normal* man and know his world. But the concept of normality is like other concepts: there is a danger of confusion and ambiguity if one tries to define its meaning exactly. Everybody uses and accepts¹² certain words which do not always mean the same thing. They need to be carefully examined to identify what they really mean.

The easiest and most obvious thing to do would be to say that the concept of *normal* should be taken here in its psychological meaning: a person is normal who is psychologically balanced and has no deficiencies. Unfortunately, normality is also understood in other, different, ways. Thus it is necessary

⁹I know of Catholic seminaries where confession is ridiculed.

¹⁰One need not to give any importance to the fact that some people make fun of things like the cilice. for instance, considering it obsolete and (they say) harmful. but certainly, young candidates to the priesthood ought to be trained in the practice of a real asceticism. Otherwise, they could neither live a full chastity, nor become true Christians, or even well-rounded balanced men.

¹¹Since this is not a complete and thorough study of this serious question.

¹²Marxist regimes, even the most radical, have not hesitated to describe themselves as *democratic*.

to notice that a priest or a young seminarian need not be exactly and in everything like other men in order to be recognized as *normal*; after all, the priest will always be a man *separated*, or *segregated*, or *consecrated*, whichever term one chooses to use.¹³ Moreover we also ought to remember that *normal* and *not very common* are wholly compatible ideas; this is easily seen if we realize that the priest is asked to possess qualities (natural and supernatural ones) which cannot be regarded as very common. Everybody will probably agree that is necessary for a candidate to the priesthood to be a man with human virtues as developed as possible, a person well able to live in the modern world and with no moral or psychological defects. It is even more important that he be, also, a man of an intense and strong supernatural life, although practised *in the most natural way*.¹⁴

Like the priest in other periods, the modern priest is expected to carry out a double task which certainly is not easy. On the one hand, he should be a man of God; it is undoubtedly in this sense that he ought to be completely *different* from the rest of men. He must arouse among Christian people the conviction that he is not like others, by living in a radical and

¹³The Letter to the Hebrews calls the priest *ex hominibus assumptus* (5:1).

¹⁴It must be remembered that I am discussing secular priests here, not priests of religious orders. Really, this is one of the features that distinguishes the former from the latter: both ought to live the gospel to the full (holiness is for everybody) and both ought also to bear witness to Jesus Christ. But the religious, in so far as he is a man living away from the world (not so the secular priest) is supposed to bear witness in a way that *shocks* that world. I discuss this question in my book *La Fiesta del Hombre y la Fiesta de Dios*, Burgos, 1987 (English translation: *The Feast of Man and the Feast of God*, Raritan, N.J., 1990.)

determined way things such as celibacy, poverty, generosity and dedication to all, prayer life, and, in short, his supernatural sense of the world and of life. On the other hand, he must be a man of his time, totally able to understand the people whom he lives with, experiencing and understanding their problems in such a way that they *never regard him as a stranger*. Consequently, the priest must act and feel in perfect psychological tune with the people, adopt their customs and manners *to the extent that they may be compatible with the priestly life of a man of God*.

And yet when seminaries felt quite reasonably a need to adapt themselves to the world, they were invaded by lots of maladjusted youths, so to speak, who were very far away from being ideal candidates for the priesthood. I have already pointed to the reasons for this; basically it was because the reform of priestly training was approached in the wrong way.

It seems absurd to regard a youth as *normal* just because he has a good head of long hair, or because he is fond of *pop* music and knows how to play the guitar, or because he wears jeans and tatty shirts or feels at ease in scuffiness and dirtiness. All those things (and many others) are quite compatible with abnormality.¹⁵ Also, sheer numbers cannot be taken as an indication of normal. Yet, today it is unthinkable to find a seminary brochure without some pictures of groups of seminarians wear-

¹⁵It makes me very sad to see respectable priests, sometimes in their fifties or sixties, dressing like ‘with it’ teenagers. It is quite obvious that there is a deplorable degree of muddled thinking about what up-dating the clergy involves. Feelings of inferiority towards the world and a sense of identity crisis can have an appalling, degrading effect on one’s sense of one’s own worth.

ing long hair and playing the guitar, all of them with a broad smile, supposedly natural, exactly as if these were all sure signs of perfect Christian happiness and of bringing the priesthood up to date. Those things cannot be called as intrinsically evil, but if they are over-emphasized, simply because there really is not much more to offer, then it is not hard to predict that propaganda of that sort will not appeal to normal youths, of truly manly character, who are capable of falling in love with the Lord.

What has turned authentically generous young men off from seminaries has been the lack of a very demanding training and of high ideals. If the priest is seen as a man like others and the young candidate to the priesthood really does not have to give up anything, what has happened to the surrendering of one's own life, through a total and generous self-giving, in order to set out on the difficult adventure of following our Lord? If you begin with the prejudice that young people are not capable of much,¹⁶ and lower the evangelical ideals almost to the extent of levelling them, then those generous hearts willing to offer them-

¹⁶This prejudice is something not found among youngsters, but among the old. When faith weakens and one's supernatural vision is blurred, charity also cools off. Then one wrongly thinks that others do not love either — a prejudice, since only those who love understand about love. Hence the vain attempts some people make to offer a toned-down Gospel *ad usum Delphini*, as the only one (as they see it) that young people are capable of accepting. At the bottom of all this lies the idea, proper to Rationalist ideologies derived from Idealism, that modern man can accept only such *transcendence* as their reason can measure. The apparent modernity of the *progressive* theologies and philosophies is but a reversion to the Pre-Socratic thinkers: man is the measure of everything.

selves are compelled to search for other ways to achieve their dreams. Or they just give up searching. That is why they do not go to the seminaries — which makes the vocational crisis worse, compelling bishops to face a grave dilemma: whether to have no priests, or to accept whoever presents himself as a candidate. That explains why young men of weak spirit, incapable, effeminate, and —why not say so?— even homosexuals have been admitted to seminaries. Indeed homosexuality, hard as it may be to face the fact, is a problem at Catholic seminaries in some countries. When things reach to this point, muddled thinking puts goals more and more out of focus. In my last trips to the United States of America, I have found, much to my amazement, that some members of the Catholic hierarchy, concerned about possible *machismo* attitudes in candidates to the priesthood, felt obliged to issue strict rules and directives on the matter.¹⁷ The hierarchy knows its own business, and of course I too would be concerned if seminarians suffered from *machismo*. Nevertheless, what surprises me is that a similar emphasis is not laid on correcting defects which, in my view, are even more serious. One gets the feeling, for instance, that the same concern is not shown about seminarians who do not pray, who do not practise enough asceticism, who do not frequent the sacraments, whose devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is little more than nominal, who give up all religious practices when on vacation, who do not love the Church, who hold no clear ideas about celibacy or chastity, who almost ignore the teachings of Saint

¹⁷The *anti-machismo* complex is among the most curious and odd I have happened to detect in certain sectors of the Church in North America.

Thomas, whose training in human and other sciences auxiliary to theology is so dreadfully meagre... , and we could continue with an exhaustive list, but this is hardly the place. At times I observe with sorrow that seminarians are more proficient in handling tests and sociological surveys than in theology and in the love of Jesus Christ; more sensitive to the problems of the third world (or pacifism, or ecology) than to the absence of God from modern society and to the ravages wrought by sin; more expert on politics than on personal intimacy with God; and much more knowledgeable about the world of compact disks and modern music than about the teachings and documents of the Magisterium.

It is not surprising that some have tried to return to the past as a reaction to the present situation. But it is well known that reaction can easily be taken to the extreme, and, as a result, fall into the same or similar mistakes one is trying to avoid. That is what has happened to the radical right-wing movements: they have not accepted (or have done so reluctantly) the teachings of Vatican Council II. There are also those who have tried, in a milder and more orthodox way, to go back to the type of training given in the old seminaries.¹⁸ To be sure, these praiseworthy efforts do fill a large gap. But, in my view, they have no historical perspective. I think it important to realize that *Tridentine* seminaries, like it or not, are obsolete and have fallen into decline for good. It is impossible to revive them, for they were designed for a time which has passed; besides, the world has changed too

¹⁸Efforts along these lines have been made in Spain, for instance at the Seminary of Toledo under the auspices of Marcelo Cardinal González.

much and has other problems, other needs, and other ways of thinking. Those attempts pursue a wholesome and correct goal: to keep faith with sound Catholic doctrine and to form priests with a solid interior life. But the approach is wrong. Remember that, as I have said before, the spirit of the *Tridentine* seminaries was never really in tune with the world of its time, so it is an illusion to think that they are going to adjust themselves to modern times now.¹⁹ You do not need to know modern men and young people well to realize that they would not put up with that kind of training, nor could they assimilate it.

Young candidates to the priesthood must be formed in a solid and strong interior life. More solid and stronger than ever before, for they find themselves in a world that is undergoing a crisis of faith, a world where charity is growing cold. But that training must take into account the world they are going to live in; they must be able to understand modern people and to be understood by them. That does not mean sweeping away what, for brevity's sake, we could call *tradition*. Quite the contrary. The Church must take tradition into account when facing the challenge of the modern world. In these modern times, the late twentieth century and early twenty-first, are there to be found young men with a strong faith, completely in love with Jesus Christ, Whom they confess as *true God and true man*, who will later become priests whom the people will identify as *true men of God* and, at the same time, as *true men of today's world*?

¹⁹I have always liked to dress as a priest. But I do not think that wearing a cassock from the first year of theology on, no matter how commendable and thrilling it be, is—in itself—going to make anyone keen to be a priest.

IV

A shortage of priests, lack of vocations and spiritual and cultural impoverishment are among the most serious problems the Church faces nowadays. In spite of what some optimistic statistics may say in an attempt to hide or at least disguise the situation, the crisis affects the whole Church, more or less seriously, with no significant exception. The Synod of Bishops to be held in October of this year (1990), which is meant to focus on priestly training (really on the situation of the clergy), shows that there is a problem and one which urgently needs to be solved. The crisis affects the quantity as well as the quality of priests, although the former is very much a function of the latter. There are no vocations because the spirituality, the culture and social situation of the clergy are at low ebb; and an impoverished priesthood has little to offer to today's young people. The conveners of the Synod must have taken these aspects of the problem into account, for the training of priests is the Synod's primary target, the aim probably being to improve the quality of priests and thus lay the foundation for remedying the crisis of vocations.

It must be acknowledged that the problem is worldwide and has always existed. Our Lord's remark can be rightly interpreted as permanently valid for the Church: *The harvest is rich but the labourers are few.*¹ In that sense, the shortage of priests cannot in itself be considered critical. The decision to leave everything and follow Christ has always been challenge, so the tension entailed in the decision *to lose one's own life*, to change it for the Master's life (Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24), is to some extent normal. But clearly that is not the cause of the present alarm.

Several circumstances tend to aggravate the problem today. The number of priests has dropped alarmingly, implying a steady downward trend, since the average age of priests in active ministry is excessively high. Moreover, the spiritual and human level of the clergy is quite poor. To this we must add the well-known *identity crisis*, which is only the result and the sum of many other problems, as everybody knows. The panorama becomes even bleaker if one thinks of the position of young priests; they seem to be suffering from an early and strong tendency to leave the ministry, apparently due to an absence of spiritual life, and a formation which has tended to give them an earth-bound sociological outlook, rather than a spiritual, supernatural one. As if that were not enough, the real prospects for vocations in the near future are not good. And all these phenomena take place in the midst of a desecrated world and at a time when the Church is facing a crisis of faith such as it never knew before.

¹Mt 9:37; Lk 10:2.

I think it is a big mistake to expect the sociological sciences to explain where this crisis originates or to attempt to find any solution from that quarter. Like any supernatural problem, this one needs to be analyzed and solved primarily by supernatural means. Since the true origin of the problem really has to do with the supernatural sphere, one must put aside diagnoses and solutions based on criteria and courses of action exclusively human (shrouded as they may be in theological verbiage frequently empty of content). If we fail to do that, no solution will be found and the situation could worsen on a scale we cannot imagine.

One cannot attribute the problem to natural circumstances of a sociological nature, nor to any kind of historical moment; it would be but an attempt at putting aside the problem, and any possible solution to it would be doomed from the outset. As I see it, blame for the gravity of the situation lies with our behaviour and the way in which we focus upon (or put out of focus) everything to do with ministerial priesthood. One easily perceives the contemporary crisis of faith and of supernatural values is the backdrop to the attitude we are analyzing.

What I have just said can be seen more clearly if we remember that God has given great attention to this whole matter — as the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), for instance, bears out. The terms used in the parable clearly indicate a feverish uneasiness: the landowner went out *at daybreak* to hire workers for his vineyard. Then he went out *at about the third hour*. . . Again he went out *at about the sixth hour and about the ninth hour*. . . And as if it were not enough, he went out again *at about the eleventh hour*. . . There is no doubt, therefore, that God takes a keen interest in this problem *all the time*;

He even showed us plainly the way to solve it: *Ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvesting.*² This last recommendation, particularly, must show those who want to see it that this subject must be approached and solved by methods mainly supernatural, mostly by prayer.

It is not enough, therefore, just to acknowledge the fact of a lack of vocations; to do so would be to address the problem from the wrong, even a false, point of view. One needs to look for its true causes, and to be ready to use the right means to solve it. The means are always supernatural; and absolute priority must be given to prayer and a genuine and attractive witness to Jesus Christ.

The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* was born as a gift from God, which took shape in my early enthusiasm for the priesthood. When I was a young man I never believed the problem of priestly vocations (in sufficient quantity and quality) was the real problem; now that I am older I believe it even less. I am convinced that there is no shortage of vocations to the priesthood; what we are short on is enthusiasm and love for Jesus Christ. If we can manage to get the young people to fall in love with Jesus Christ, then, they will not but want to be like Him and to share His life and mission, which is tantamount to saying that they will want to become priests. And we are not talking of vague abstractions: it is the only key to solve the problem.

I have been a joyful enthusiast of the priesthood ever since the moment I received the gift of my vocation. Nevertheless, when I cast my mind back, I soon realize that such an enthusiasm

²Lk 10:2.

was born of the fact that I was already in love with God — as must be expected, for, as everybody knows, love longs for the beloved, and tries its best to be like him. As Saint Thomas says, quoting Dionysius, *love is a unitive power, therefore it belongs to love to move towards union.*³ In that mutual and reciprocal surrender of love, each one of the lovers wants to share the life and lot of the other. So, since Jesus Christ is essentially the Priest of the New Covenant, it is not surprising for a young man in love with our Lord to want to share in His priesthood, so as to participate, in the most intimate way possible, in the life of Him to Whom he has given his heart.

I have said before that this approach is the only way to solve the problem. I have thought so ever since my first encounter with God, when I was an adolescent, only to see my opinion confirmed in many years of work with youth. The establishing of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* is the fruit of a firm conviction: *young people* are completely capable of falling in love with Jesus Christ and of following Him with all generosity. I emphasize the word “young people” for I want to stress that it is not a matter of converting, here and there, a few young men to the Lord. It is even less a matter of recruiting some people who want to follow the way of the priesthood because they cannot find anything else to do. I am talking about the real possibility of gaining all young people for the Lord, as abundant and numerous as wholesome and strong in spirit. Some young men (called by the Lord) will follow the way of the priesthood, while others will strive for holiness as lay people involved in earthly duties. But

³C.G. I, 91.

they will all be equally enamoured of the Lord. As for aspirants to the priesthood, there will no longer be any need to lower the standards to give access to the mediocre and the unsuitable candidates. Those in charge of the formation of Christian young people (particularly those concerned with forming candidates to the priesthood) will be able, finally, to observe the spirit of Saint John the evangelist, who, when summoning the young, spoke of fortitude, constancy and victory in the fight: *I have written to you, young people, because you are strong, and God's word remains in you, and you have overcome the Evil One.*⁴ For there is no doubt that everyone is not young, or strong, or constant, and much less able to become victorious.

We ought to remember that no one falls in love with *the priesthood*, for the simple reason that love always refers to persons. But young people are very capable of falling in love with *the Person of Jesus Christ*, true God and true Man, anointed High Priest, Who is determined out of love to share His priesthood with many young men who enjoy a privileged place in His heart.

Some may think, with good reason, that this doctrine is not in the least new or original. Nevertheless, it tends to be forgotten more often than we think, which leads us to a mistaken and even absurd approach to the problem, as the evidence shows. I have witnessed many a vocational campaign that has reaped nothing except noisy failure. To assemble, for instance, large groups of boys (perhaps altar boys of different parishes), dressing them in long robes, and celebrating a mass for them, while the *expert*

⁴1 Jn 2:14.

on duty preaches them (though not very convincingly) a homily crammed with banalities, is a pitifully wrong approach to the problem. First of all, it does not take account of the fact that children often instinctively use the faculty of discernment, perhaps even more frequently than grown-ups, which allows them to easily distinguish a sincere message from one swelled with commonplaces. When the preacher (the catechist) is not truly in love with Jesus Christ, children somehow *perceive* it, and the result is bound to be failure. Secondly, it does not take into account the fact that children, as well as adults, can only feel perfect love for persons; so much so that their interest for things (a toy, for instance) is always temporary and rarely reliable. After a long life in priestly ministry working with youth, my experience has taught me to distrust things such as mere enthusiasm about the Mass, preaching, or wearing a priestly outfit. A genuine vocation always does lead to enthusiasm for duties proper to the priesthood, but that enthusiasm is brought about in the soul only *as a consequence*. Genuine enthusiasm for the priesthood should always be the fruit of truly falling in love with Jesus Christ, and of an ensuing desire to share His life and His mission.

The same must be said about attempts, too frequent nowadays, to enthrall the young with pastoral ministry; and here the problem is more serious since it is widespread and involves far greater risks. Efforts in this direction are, once again, the after effects of *horizontalism*⁵ from which the Church currently

⁵In the sense of that approach which is concerned only with events that occur within an earthly, temporal perspective (n. trans.).

suffers, leading to a crisis in supernatural values and a grave confusion about the specific objectives of priestly ministry. I refer to instances in which pastoral ministry is aimed at mending of structures considered to be politically or socially unjust. Many young people, if only because changing the goal-posts also means making fewer demands upon candidates,⁶ may indeed be lured to such a calling; but I am afraid that this method is more suited to recruiting and training guerrillas than to forming priests.

After many years of working with young people, particularly with priestly vocations, I have found that it is essential to give them the full picture of Jesus Christ — Jesus Christ shown as *true God and true Man* at the same time, Someone in Whom nothing is missing, either of His divinity or of His humanity. That may seem to be too simplistic, something everyone takes for granted, yet no one (or almost no one) practises. At any rate, this question is so important that, as far as our theme is concerned, it may rightly be considered vital and definitive. Here, more than anywhere else, Christian catechesis must present the *real* Christ (or of the *whole* Christ, if you want), without over-emphasizing either nature subsisting in Christ through the hypostatic union. Jesus Christ is not more God than He is man nor more man than God, but simply, as old catechisms have said, *true God and true man*. Both are equally important. Neglecting any aspect of the divinity or of the humanity of Christ

⁶When this happens, things like an earnest spiritual life, along with proper asceticism and renunciation that such a life demands, are no longer deemed necessary. The result, naturally, is an increase in candidates, but at the expense of the quality and the authenticity of vocations.

leads to the same result: the true image of Christ disappears, with tragic and direct consequences for faith in general and for this particular question of priestly formation. If His divinity is toned down the Christ they are talking about is no longer the true Christ, and then it becomes impossible to love Him with our whole heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and even more than our own life,⁷ for only God can be loved to that extent. On the other hand, if His humanity somehow disappears, the results are no less tremendous: not only is He not the true Christ, but also it is precisely at this point when it becomes impossible to love Him in any way, as I shall try to explain.

The God known as *He Who is*, according to the words in Exodus, or as the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, as Saint Thomas wisely deduced from the ancient statement in Exodus, is also called *Love* by Saint John. In sound theology, God is He Whose essence is Existence (in a perfect identity of essence and existence), and He is also, and at the same time, Love. In fact infinite Being and Love are the same. And since the human being has been created, according to the Bible, in the image and likeness of God, it properly follows that he has been made for and to love. The most perfect work of visible creation, then, is a product of Love, created for loving. . . and to be loved.

I have the highest respect for the classic and Thomist theory of the ends of the Incarnation, and accept that the redemption of the human being is the fundamental reason for this mystery. But I also confess my sympathy for those theories which say that the primordial reason, though not the only one, for the Incarna-

⁷Mc 12:30 and parallels; Lk 14:26.

tion was to grant human beings the possibility of perfect love. If God wanted man to respond to Him with perfect love, in perfect reciprocity, as true love demands,⁸ He Himself had to become man too. For man, even when he has been gratuitously elevated to the supernatural order, cannot love except in human fashion; grace, as is well known, elevates nature but does not destroy it. The very moment God freely wanted to have a relationship of perfect love with man, He needed to turn to that necessary instrument of love: dialogue; for it is there that the intimacy between a *you* and an *I* takes place. Obviously love is not only dialogue. Man also performs his intellectual and volitive functions through the senses, at least to start with. In fact he never dispenses with the senses; strictly speaking, one can say that the human being loves, as everything he does, according to his human nature: with all his soul. . . , *and also with all his body*, because, being made up of spirit and matter (soul and body), the human being is in fact a unique and complete whole. He does not love with his soul only, even less with his heart only (taking this term to express corporeality), but always with his whole human being. So, it is easy to see that man, in order to truly *fall in love*, needs the object of his love to be someone he can perceive through his senses (1 Jn 1:1). Man can love a pure spirit, but perhaps he will not be able to *fall in love* with him with a love that is perfect and reciprocal, filled with intimacy and tenderness; and he certainly cannot do so in a human way, which is his proper and perfect way of loving.

⁸Since man is a creature, this reciprocity is *secundum quid*.

Hence the need for the human nature of Jesus Christ. The difference is that in this case the nature, a body and a soul which are human, belongs to a divine Person. Love, as we know, is always directed towards a person, in and through all that person is (therefore including his body as well as his soul). God wants to be loved by man with a total love, with all the tenderness a heart can have, so He has destined him to the infinite and, for that very purpose, has elevated him through grace. That is why God decided to take a human nature — so that man could love Him in this way. By perceiving supernaturally, through faith, the human nature of the Lord, the human being meets the divine Person of Jesus Christ and falls in love with Him. Later, through that Person, man gets in touch with the divine nature, which also belongs to that Person. Finally, in that divine nature, man reaches the Person of the Father. *Per visibilia ad invisibilia*. Through Christ, in the love of the Spirit, to the Father. And so the circle is completed, making it possible for man *to fall in love* with God.

This approach has many important consequences. In the first place, it helps explain what we have said previously concerning the catechesis about Jesus Christ. That catechesis must not hide, dissimulate or ignore any aspect of His human nature. It must depict the Lord not only as a *Man that is perfect*, but also as a *perfect Man*. It is essential to realise that, in order to fall in love with God, the human being needs to perceive Him as a man. I do not think it is necessary to further assert that the human being knows and loves through and with his senses. That is why he needs a face in which he can contemplate beauty and goodness after his fashion, or as best he can. A face he can

look at and in which he can see himself; ears that listen to his words of wooing, and a mouth which in turn woos him. For man falls in love with a heart of flesh through his heart of flesh. Ultimately, the human being, it is true, falls in love with a person, but that person is always perceived by him through a face, a body and a soul that are human. Thus Saint John says, in an outspoken but exact expression, that *the Word became flesh*.⁹

Consequently, *The Song of Songs* must not be regarded as a song dealing with epithalamic or exclusively human loves. The book is a real song to divine-human love narrated in language best suited to the theme and most accessible to man; and in doing this it uses expressions which, after the Incarnation of the Word, cannot be simply considered as mere metaphors. It is a song that sings the love between a God *Who became flesh* and a being (the human being) who is also made up of flesh and blood.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.
For your love-making is sweeter than wine.*¹⁰

.....

*How beautiful you are my, beloved,
how beautiful you are!
Your eyes are doves,
behind your veil.*¹¹

.....

⁹Jn 1:14.

¹⁰Sg 1:2.

¹¹Sg 4:1.

*Take your eyes away from me,
they take me by assault!*¹²

Any sort of catechesis, especially the one addressed to young people, that does not regard love as the essential and innermost part of its content, is doomed to failure. After all, the Gospel is the revelation of the mystery of the love of God for man: *May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.*¹³ Jesus Christ came for that particular purpose: *I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you love me may be in them, and so that I may be in them.*¹⁴ But it is a love between God and man in Jesus Christ, and no other love. It is imperative to start from there. The spirituality practised by the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* insists that it is a mistake to start with love for people.¹⁵ Any attempt to get young people excited about the idea of *a commitment to the outcast*, for instance, leads nowhere unless that commitment is first based upon a tender love for the Person of Christ. Only then, when a young person's heart feels completely in love with Jesus Christ, does he open wide to the outcast. . . , and even to the non-outcast, since for the Christian *there can be neither Jew*

¹²Sg 6:5.

¹³Jn 17:21.

¹⁴Jn 17:26.

¹⁵The mistake is even more serious when everything begins and ends with love for human beings, as if that were all that were called for. This thinking underlies the various liberation theologies and, in general, all strictly worldly theologies.

*nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female — for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*¹⁶

That is the reason for the paramount place the Holy Mass and the love for the Eucharist occupy in our spirituality. In the spirituality of our *Society*, the Eucharistic presence is not a mere *memorial*, in the sense given to this term by Protestant theologians and even by some Catholics. Those theologies which reduce the Eucharist to a *mere sign* have lost sight of something essential. If a man is to respond to the love of God with a love that is perfect and according to his nature, then there needs to be a real and actual¹⁷ presence of a human nature in the Eucharist (assumed in this case as His own by the Person of the Word). Love cannot feed on mere memories; never mind pure signs. Love (which in the case of the infinite Love is the same as Being) feeds on realities and presences, not only on absences and nostalgia: *I am going away and I shall return...*¹⁸ *And after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am...*¹⁹ *I shall not leave you orphans; I shall come to you...*²⁰ If the human being is *to really fall in love* with Jesus Christ, then we must understand the need for the real Eucharistic presence to be

¹⁶Ga 3:28.

¹⁷I am using these terms here in their obvious and accepted sense, with the express intention of avoiding the puns and ambiguities so often used by modern theologies (Protestant as well as Catholic) and even by the Mixed Commissions.

¹⁸Jn 14:28.

¹⁹Jn 14:3.

²⁰Jn 14:18.

truly *real*. The apostolic witness, that has come to us through Scripture and Tradition, is the foundation of our faith. But, as such witness only, it would refer to somebody who would inevitably be a person in the past. *And nobody falls in love with someone in the past*. By faith the presence of Jesus Christ is made actual in us and among us. But this actuality is truly real to the same extent that the Eucharistic presence is also truly real. Otherwise the *actualized presence* is nothing but an obscure idea, even empty (another thing everybody talks about but nobody explains), totally insufficient to sustain that true presence of the beloved person which undoubtedly is an essential condition of perfect love.

But the Humanity of Jesus Christ is not only the absolutely essential route to loving the real and historical Christ. That sacred Humanity is also the essential model for man, and more particularly for the young and for candidates to the priesthood. Because true holiness needs to be based on human virtues, any training for the priesthood that is unable to turn young people into real men is doomed to failure. Even the supernatural or infused virtues need a previous actualizing of natural virtues. Love for others, generosity, sincerity, courage, unselfishness, love of work and poverty, uprightness and justice, humility, simplicity and naturalness, and joy itself, all these are values to be learned from the Man Jesus Christ. The catechist's role here is to make young people aware of Jesus Christ as the very embodiment and source of all those virtues. That is the only effective way for the young to learn them, and thereby become true men, true Christians and also true priests.

The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* requires its members to work earnestly to develop these human qualities and virtues; and it has no qualms about not accepting people who are unwilling to do so. Our *Society* is convinced that it is a great mistake to reduce the goals to be achieved, or lessen the demands, on the grounds that there is an urgent need for priests. It is an indisputable fact that you cannot have true priests unless you have true men first. A genuine supernatural life needs to be grounded on genuine human virtues. Experience has proven that the goal of training just *pious* priests, besides being an illusion, is wholly worthless unless they are also trained to be true men. How could anybody expect a person to live a life of unselfishness and self-denial, of total self-giving to others, of absolute celibacy, of poverty and prayer, unless his human qualities were well developed to begin with? It is quite sad that people often forget the irrefutable truth that the supernatural not only elevates nature without destroying it, but also presupposes it necessarily; otherwise, how could nature be elevated? Some truths may be easily intelligible, recognized by all, and even self-evident, but that does not at all mean that they are easy to put into practice. Precisely because they are difficult to practise they can easily be set aside; perhaps that is why so many a Centre for the training of priests comes to grief. And it may also explain the immaturity of very many young priests and their high rate of desertion.

In catechizing the young and in training priests, it is particularly important to try to see that they fall in love with the divine Person of Jesus Christ, through faith and a supernatural perception of His Humanity. Love always presupposes a cer-

tain equality; it does not develop without a previous basis of friendship, nearness, and reciprocity which are absolutely real: *I shall no longer call you servants, I call you friends.*²¹ Given the way man is, any catechesis about Jesus Christ will fail unless it gets people to grasp through faith His *reality* and His *tangibility*. This is very important. I recall, for instance, that in my seminary they were very insistent on the need to have devotion to the Heart of Jesus — so much so that it would have been very difficult not to agree. Unfortunately, our teachers forgot to explain *why*, and above all *how*, to practise that devotion. One must admit that people do find it difficult, if not impossible, to practise a sincere devotion when the only reason given for it is that it must be done. Besides, to say that a devotion has been recommended by the Church is sufficient reason to legitimate it, but not to base it on sound principles. This recommendation undoubtedly has a theological basis but it needs to be discovered. Heavy insistence, after the fashion of television or radio advertising, does not work. Besides, there is a more delicate question at issue. We have to face the fact that it is impossible to instil a devotion to the Heart of Jesus if one is not in love with the Lord. A fact of life frequently forgotten is proven once again: only lovers can talk about love.

The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* believes that appealing to the young for generosity, whether or not they are called to the priesthood, will be fruitful if we can instil in them a sense of true love for the Lord. The aim must be to get young people to fall in love with Him in a total surrender. That is far from

²¹Jn 15:15.

being easy to achieve, as is always the case with any genuine pastoral action; but it must be admitted as something possible, unless we regard the Gospel as ineffective, and the revelation of the *mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his holy people*²² as useless. That mystery is none other than the Love of God, offered to man so that he may share it and respond to it in complete freedom, as is proper to genuine love. In fact, long experience of work with young people has confirmed the efficacy of a pastoral programme that, far from being based on complicated sociological techniques devised by people who claim to be *experts*²³ (with the results we all know), is based on the belief that human beings, and especially the young, can respond with love to Love's call and fall completely in love with Jesus Christ. No matter what they do, the hearts of the young people can never be filled with enthusiasm for things such as being on the outcast's side, the commitment to fight against social injustice, the establishing of democracies, the search for peace or the liberation of the third world. Authentic love for Jesus Christ is the only way to move the young to open wide the doors of their hearts. Only then do they forget about themselves, and only then are they willing to turn to others.

This leads us to another important aspect of the same problem. Human beings, particularly the young, cannot come to love Jesus Christ in the way described above unless they know who He really is; they need to meet the authentic Christ, true Man

²²Col 1:26.

²³The modern Church is over supplied with experts and in serious need of authentic *witnesses* who can bear true testimony to Jesus Christ.

and true God.²⁴ Since the end of love is always and exclusively a person, and since the Person of Jesus Christ is divine, our love for Him is rendered impossible to the degree that His divinity is blurred. Nobody falls in love with a phantom or a fiction, and a Christ stripped of His divinity vanishes even as man. We have all seen the failure of *Christ the revolutionary* and of the Christ of Rationalism (Protestant as well as Catholic). Therefore, I would dare to predict (perhaps with a good chance of success), that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, now not so far away, only the history researcher will remember liberation theologies.

But the problem has deeper theological implications. Just as it is impossible to fall in love with someone one does not know, the contrary is also true to a certain degree. So it is not possible to attain a deep knowledge of Jesus Christ without loving Him (1 Jn 4:8). Jesus Christ is really known when He is truly loved, and one must truly love Him to really know Him. But only the Spirit can take the human being, through faith, to that knowledge and to that love: *The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you. . .*²⁵ *When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father, he will be my*

²⁴As Scholastic theologians put it, *ignoti nulla cupido*. This is not the place to deal with the links between knowledge and love, particularly those to do with love to God, such as, for instance, discussed by Saint Thomas in I-II, q 27, a 2.

²⁵Jn 14:26.

witness...²⁶ However, when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking of his own accord, but will say only what he had been told; and he will reveal to you the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he reveals to you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said: all he reveals to you will be taken from what is mine...²⁷ It is impossible to reach Jesus Christ except by Love, or, to use another expression, by letting oneself be led by the Spirit. But the Spirit witnesses to (and speaks of) the real and complete Christ only, that is to say, to the historical Christ and the Christ of the faith, who are one and exactly the same: the Person of the Word with His divine nature Who has also assumed as His own a human nature. Total love, or love that exercises all its strength and uses the whole heart, and is greater even than love for one's own life, is something that can be given only to a God. Exclusively human love always ends up treating the beloved object as a mere *object*; only a divine love, or a love that has been divinized, can see the beloved person solely as *person*, thereby making it the ultimate object of a truly unselfish love. All this leads us to some clear and practical consequences that I shall try to expound, as briefly as possible, in the next chapter.

²⁶Jn 15:26.

²⁷Jn 16: 13–15.

What has been said in the previous chapter should not lead anyone to think that devotion to the Humanity of Jesus Christ is the core of the spirituality of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*. That would distort the essence of our spirit. I have often repeated, following sound doctrine,¹ that love always refers to persons and is perfected in them. Nobody falls in love with someone's body, soul, face or heart, but with that *someone* to whom all those things belong. True, a person's attributes (in fact his entire make-up) are what determine the love which that person may arouse in another; but it is no less evident that love always focuses not so much on attributes as on the person to whom they belong, although, in fact, love also embraces all that pertains to the beloved person, excluding nothing proper to

¹This is another instance where doctrine merely explains and systematizes common sense and something everyone thinks in some way even though they are not fully aware of it. I believe that the doctrine concerning the *persona*, which Saint Thomas perfected and completed in a definitive way, is, in my view, fundamental to delving deeply into the notion of love, be it divine love, or divine-human love, or merely human love.

him. Certainly love finds great pleasure in the beloved person's attributes; nevertheless, the main reason for such pleasure is the fact that those qualities happen to belong to the *beloved person*. Those gifts and graces make the lover meet *the person of the beloved* and be captured in his nets of love.

*En solo aquel cabello,
que en mi cuello volar consideraste,
mirástele en mi cuello,
y en él preso quedaste,
y en uno de mis ojos te llagaste.*²

That is why in my adolescence I had problems understanding certain devotions, such as devotion to the Sacred Heart, for instance, so much stressed at the seminary.³ I was told that this devotion involved venerating Jesus' love for all, and in particular for me, by resorting to the symbol of the heart, which is the metaphorical term most used in human language when talking about love. Earnest devotion to that love would in turn move me to love the Lord. And that indeed is what should happen. Nevertheless, it is difficult to get rid of some uncomfortable feelings when one realizes that, in real life, *nobody falls in love with the love someone else lavishes on him, but only with that someone who lavishly loves him*; that love is precisely what unites the lovers, and through it and in it they love each other. Something

²Saint John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*: You considered / That one hair fluttering at my neck; / You gazed at it upon my neck / And it captivated you; / And one of my eyes wounded you.

³I refer simply to my personal difficulties in understanding a particular devotion. Needless to say, throughout all my life I have felt respect and great affection for all devotions recommended by the Church.

similar happens in the bosom of the Trinity: the Father and the Son love each other *in the Holy Spirit*, or, if you like, *through the Holy Spirit*.⁴ Perhaps that is why, despite the real tenderness I felt for the Sacred Heart, I always almost inadvertently switched that concept for the thought of *Jesus*. I thrilled with delight at the love of God for me, and I yearned to return it, but I always ended up with the unquestionable fact that I loved *Him*, for it was His person, and only that person, that seduced me.

When the enamoured Bridegroom in *The Song of Songs* passionately says to the bride, as it is proper between lovers:

*Show me your face, let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet and your face lovely.*⁵

what He undoubtedly wants is to see the face of the bride and to hear her voice, but it is *the bride* whom he ultimately wants to hear and to see. Here the key word is the possessive adjective *your*.⁶ The bride's voice and face are lovely in themselves, but they are even more lovely because they belong to the bride. The bride is lovely because she possesses that face and that voice; but the crucial issue here, and the all-deciding point, is that the face and the voice are exceptionally lovely because they are the face and the voice of the bride. And what would have happened if the bride had another voice and another face...? The lover never asks that question; besides, to him it would make no sense. He

⁴Cf. Saint Jerome, *Sup. Psal. 14*; Saint Augustine, *De Trin.* 1.6 c 5, among other Fathers. Saint Thomas admirably explains this question in I, q 37, a 2.

⁵Sg 2:14.

⁶Repeated twice in each verse.

knows that the bride is the way she is, and the idea of her being otherwise does not even cross his mind. Each person certainly is *absolutely irrepeatable and unique in him or herself*. For that reason God loves each person with a unique and total love, and each love story is as original and distinct as the dawn of each new day.

That is why the Bridegroom of *The Song*, who indeed is able to appreciate the beauty of other things, regards the bride as the only one among them, the favourite, or simply the perfect one:

*There are sixty queens
and eighty concubines (and countless girls).
My dove is my only one, perfect and mine.
She is the darling daughter of her mother,
the favourite of the one who bore her.*⁷

The Bridegroom loves a bride who has a particular and characteristic face and voice, perhaps for the very reason that she has these, along with her other graceful qualities, but there is no doubt that *it is the bride whom He ultimately loves*. In the same way, the bride loves the Bridegroom because of the gracious gifts that adorn Him; but she would never have envisaged his being different either. Precisely because she perceives (by way of faith) the Bridegroom's gifts, through the human nature of Jesus Christ, the bride can think of Him, describe Him, and above all, of course, love Him. Therefore, when the chorus of *The Song of Songs*, with some interested curiosity, asks the bride,

⁷Sg 6: 8–9.

*What makes your lover better than other lovers,
O loveliest of women?
What makes your lover better than other lovers?*⁸

she hastens to reply and tries to sketch the figure of the Beloved; she neither would know how to do otherwise nor could:

*My love is fresh and ruddy,
to be known among ten thousand.
His head is golden, purest gold,
his locks are palm fronds
and black as raven...*⁹

For the bride is enamoured of *the Bridegroom* himself, not of his gracious gifts, as the Bridegroom is likewise enamoured of *her*, not of her charm and graces. Although it is also true that love would not be possible for either of them without the presence of those gifts.¹⁰

All this has a great deal to do with prayer, which is something essential to the spirituality of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*.¹¹ I would even say that prayer is the core of our spirituality, since love is at the root of it. I have already said that, as the *Society* sees it, God is all Love, and man, created

⁸Sg 5:9.

⁹Sg 5: 10–11.

¹⁰About the theme of the spirituality of *The Song*, as the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* understands it, and its influence on the Association's spirituality, cf my book *Comentarios al Cantar de los Cantares* vol I, Murcia, 1984. There is another further developed edition of this book not yet published.

¹¹I deal with prayer at greater length in my book *La oración*, Burgos, 1985.

in His likeness and image, has been created primarily to love Him and to be loved by Him (Eph 1:4).¹² All human love of whatever kind, as long as it is genuine love, is just a participation in the infinite Love; or simply a participation in Love. But love is always built on the basis of intimate friendship and dialogue between two beings who are, reciprocally and at the same time, lover and beloved. This intimate friendship and dialogue between lovers, which is mutual and involves certain reciprocity, constitutes the series of relationships I here call prayer.

It has often been said that Christian prayer is not a mere monologue; but it is equally true to say that prayer is not a mere dialogue. Prayer exceeds dialogue to the same degree that relationship between lovers goes beyond mere dialogue.¹³

*Entrádose ha la esposa,
en el ameno huerto deseado,
y a su sabor reposa,
el cuello reclinado
sobre los dulces brazos del Amado.*¹⁴

¹²This does not intend to forget Being, or the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. God is infinite Love because He is Being as pure act. I ought to say that I have always wanted the philosophical–theological basis of the *Society* to be *basically* Thomistic. But one must take into account the wonderful and original revelation of the infinite Being as Love: a key point upon which our spirituality is built.

¹³I refer here mainly to private or personal meditation. The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* regards prayer in common, or liturgical prayer, important and necessary. For the *Society*, private prayer is neither less nor more important than other forms of prayer; it is simply essential.

¹⁴Saint John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*: The wife has entered / The sweet garden of her desire, / And she rests in delight, / Laying her neck / On the gentle arms of the Beloved.

Only love makes life meaningful, but only a total and perfect love gives full meaning to life: an absolute, tender and unreserved love for Jesus Christ. But since love is nourished in encounters between the lovers, prayer is that ineffable moment when, at last, the lover and the beloved manage to meet in privacy. Prayer is the truest and fullest of all the moments that make up a normal day in anyone's life; that moment alone is able to give meaning and fulness to all other moments of his existence.

*Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,
cesó todo y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado.*¹⁵

The Beloved being *all* for the bride, and the bride being *all* for the Beloved, the moments when they meet in privacy are of exceptional importance. As lovers do when intimately sharing their feelings, so prayer, when its time comes, looks for solitude, recollection and withdrawal from all other things, whose care, at least for the time being, remains *forgotten among the lilies*. It is then, as long as this climax lasts, that the lovers belong totally and exclusively to each other. For that reason, the bride of *The Song* wants to be alone with the Bridegroom, to be taken into the intimacy of His chambers, out of sight of others and

¹⁵Saint John of the Cross: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: I abandoned and forgot myself, / Laying my face on my Beloved; / All things ceased; I went off from myself, / Leaving my cares / Forgotten among the Lilies.

cares of the people. For her this is the moment of true fruition and rejoicing, for this is when she can sing, together with the Bridegroom, the marvellous hymn of their mutual love.

*The king has brought me into his rooms;
you will be our joy and our gladness.
We shall praise your love more than wine.*¹⁶

.....

*Come, my love, let us go to the fields.
We will spend the night in the villages,
and in the early morning we will go to the vineyards.
We will see if the vines are budding,
if their blossoms are opening,
if the pomegranate trees are in flower.
Then I shall give you the gift of my love.*¹⁷

But if anyone should think that all this implies flight from the world, or any kind of indifference to people's problems, it would be as big a mistake as thinking the bride alien to the Bridegroom's feelings. On the contrary: the feelings and concerns of the Bridegroom are the very same as those of the bride. And God, of course, is not indifferent to the world: *This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him...*¹⁸ *For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son...*¹⁹ Thus Christian prayer does not imply either indifference of any kind toward

¹⁶Sg 1:4.

¹⁷Sg 7: 12-13.

¹⁸I Jn 4:9.

¹⁹Jn 3:16.

one's brethren or oblivion of any of their problems and sufferings; prayer, in fact, is where the Christian more acutely and intensively experiences the needs and anxieties of others, even to the point of openly fighting with God on their behalf: *Epaphras, your fellow-citizen, sends his greetings; this servant of Christ Jesus never stops battling for you, praying that you. . .*²⁰ This is why the members of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*, while living in the midst of the world and conscious that they have been called to do battle for the salvation of all, even to the point of giving their lives, resort to prayer as their most important weapon for that fight. After all, prayer is also the crowning point of the Christian's sharing in the Passion of his Lord.

This interesting and important idea of *fight*, so proper to Christian prayer, rests on a two-fold base. One must never forget that because prayer is, above all, the proper place for and the crowning point of the lovers' encounter, it always involves a certain equality and reciprocity:²¹

*My love is mine and I am his.*²²

.....

*I belong to my love, and my love to me.*²³

.....

²⁰Col 4:12.

²¹Love cannot exist without a certain sameness between the lovers; hence love searches for that resemblance and tends towards it more and more.

²²Sg 2:16.

²³Sg 6:3.

*I belong to my love
and his desire is for me.*²⁴

And if it is true, as indeed it is, that all the Bridegroom's desires are for the bride, and that she wholly belongs to her Bridegroom, for both totally belong to each other, then it is equally true that either of them may *demand* anything of the other. Due to a rare and mysterious paradox, common to all matters peculiar to love, this strange *fight* or *conflict* of wills always starts, develops, and reaches its climax against the background of the identification of the lovers' wills (Jn 2: 1-5).

Moreover, because prayer is the high point of the meeting of lovers, it surely is the proper place to settle a combat of love, that struggle in which each lover strives to be the one who gives more to the other. Thus, and until its perfect consummation is reached, love is a challenge issued by both lovers, each one running to seize victory... in an attempt to be defeated and *captured* by the other: *For which Jesus took hold on me.*²⁵ Thus the bride of *The Song* says that

*He has taken me to his banqueting hall
and his banner over me is love.*²⁶

The Gospel is first and foremost a challenge of love which God has thrown down to men. That is why it contains so many piercing suggestions addressed to those who feel able to surrender everything and give up all their possessions, to renounce

²⁴Sg 7:11.

²⁵Ph 3:12.

²⁶Sg 2:4.

their own life and to lose it; to give away their wealth in order to search for the one thing *still missing*; to sell their pearls and buy the best of all pearls which is the only one worthwhile; to dispose of everything in order to buy the field which contains the huge hidden treasure; to forget their job and their livelihood so as to become apostles and *fishers of men*. . . All these promptings are couched in a context in which the Lord's words sometimes seem even aggressive: *Anyone who has ears should listen*. . .

And the human being has to reply to those challenging invitations—he has an inescapable duty to say yes or no—in his dialogue with the Lord. Ordinarily his reply will be articulated in words, either of submissive acceptance or outright refusal disguised as a reasonable excuse (as in the parable of the guests invited to the wedding feast); sometimes it will take the form of an embarrassing silence that is tantamount to a rejection (as the case of the young rich man). Sometimes the answer will simply be a gesture that speaks for itself: leaving the nets, or perhaps abandoning the tax office to follow the Master. But, in every case, it takes place through a dialogue—with or without words—which we agree to call prayer. Prayer, understood in this way, becomes the venue for the most important meeting between God and man, or the place in which definitive questions are formulated that must be met by equally definitive answers.

Of all the moments of his life, the one which man lives most intensively is the moment of prayer; especially when it becomes contemplation. Therefore the expression *passive contemplation*, even the word *contemplation* itself, seems to me rather unfortunate. If contemplation is the highest degree of prayer (pre-

supposing, of course, the divine initiative and the necessity of grace), it is difficult to conceive man having a passive attitude to it in any real sense. Prayer is the decisive moment when God asks man to respond to His love, the point at which man must decide for himself the answer most conclusive and transcendental to his existence, for there is nothing freer or more completely personal than love. This, surely, is very far from passivity. Besides, love cannot be pure *passivity* on the part of either lover, for love consists of mutual and reciprocal giving and receiving; since each lover receives everything from the other and *gives* everything to the other —especially so in the most perfect form of prayer, contemplation—, it is difficult and problematic to apply the idea of passivity to this manner of treating God. It should also be taken into account that love (as I have persistently repeated), calls for a certain equality of status and reciprocity, which love itself will deepen, between the lovers: the human being desires and is desired, searches and is sought, talks and listens, contemplates and is contemplated, gives and receives; that is the way in which he loves and is loved. The call to the great supper (or the magnificent banquet of love) is an invitation to sit at the same table, with no difference of levels depending on the class of guest, for they are summoned as friends (to meet and enjoy each other's company), not as servants: *Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him, and he with me.*²⁷ To forget this is to undermine the true meaning of

²⁷Rv 3:20. Some versions, perhaps too concerned about updating language, translate the end of this verse as *we will share a meal*; in doing so, they lose the message of equality and reciprocity which the verse doubtlessly

the love of God and of the mystery of the Incarnation, ignoring the fact that God chose to abase and lower Himself to our level, so as to make it possible to love Him with our heart in the only way we know and can: *I shall no longer call you servants. . . , I call you friends.*²⁸

As I have said, the term *contemplation* when applied to prayer is not very felicitous either. Prayer is a relationship of love that does not end with contemplation,²⁹ but is consummated in dialogue and mutual self-giving, which are the more perfect the more excellent the form of prayer is. To the Bridegroom of *The Song* contemplation is, moreover, His listening to the bride, as He Himself told her:

*Show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet
and your face is lovely.*³⁰

For the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*, the only and principal goal of pastoral work with young people (indeed of any kind of pastoral ministry) is to have them fall in love with Jesus Christ.³¹ And because love is not possible without a mu-

wants to stress and that is so deeply rooted in the nature of love.

²⁸Jn 15:15.

²⁹Besides, this contemplation would be reciprocal, whereas mystical language always refers it exclusively to the human lover.

³⁰Sg 2:14.

³¹The human being has been to such an extent created for love that his existence no longer has another meaning. Love is *his way*, even his only way: *Set your mind on the higher gifts. And now I am going to put before you the best way of all. . .* (I Co 12:31).

tual and intimate relationship between the lovers —*Ignoti nulla cupido*—, teaching them how to pray is a priority in the *Society's* work with the young. Pastoral work with the young needs to be based on this fundamental conviction: *young people, children too, are able to pray* to the same extent that they are able to fall in love with Jesus Christ. My experience on this subject is entirely positive provided the pedagogy of prayer approaches this subject properly. Young people need to realize that Jesus Christ ardently desires to be *their friend*, and to that effect has prepared and made available to them all the resources necessary for building friendship: contact, intimacy, conversation, equal treatment, mutual sincerity and absence of secrets, generosity and mutual dedication. These are things that always accompany mutual love and they are to be found all on the road of prayer, which is the proper place for them to develop.

All this becomes even more evident when we consider that prayer is an eminently *personal* human act, perhaps the most personal activity a human being can engage in. Because prayer is an intimate relationship of love between God and the human being, always set in the context of a certain equality and reciprocity, each lover is at the same time an *I* for himself and a *you* for the other. As happens with love and any kind of dialogue, prayer cannot exist if there are not relations of opposition between distinct persons. Because prayer is the pre-eminent meeting-place of lovers, it needs the presence of an *I* and a *you* who are different and opposed to each other as persons, for love always requires that. Therefore, in my view there is little sense in the kind of discussions found in various mystical doctrines (be they true or false) about the problem of the human person

being transformed into divinity, with consequent loss of human personality or identity. It never happens that the human being is transformed into divinity, and therefore pantheistic mysticism is talking nonsense. As for the orthodox mysticism, perhaps the problem would have been easily solved if only it was realized that prayer (as well as love) is not possible without the presence of the two persons, absolutely distinctive as persons, who oppose each other as a *you* and an *I*. The so-called disappearance of the creature in the “ocean” of divinity would result in the impossibility of prayer and of any form of love. Only in Perfect and Infinite Love, in the bosom of the Trinity, do the two Lovers and the Love in which They love each other have the same and identical nature. But it should be remembered that not even God would be Love were there not perfect distinctions of Persons in Him.

Transformation into Christ, the aim and highest ideal of every disciple, supposes an intimate sharing of His life,³² even to the point of making our own the thoughts (I Co 2:16) and the sentiments of the Lord (Ph 2:5). That identification, a fruit of love made real by imitating the Master and practising prayer, necessarily requires the perfect distinction of persons without which love is not possible. If there is no differentiation and opposition between the *I* and the *you*, there is no dialogue, nor prayer, nor friendship, nor any kind of love. Some words from the Apostle adequately throw light on this doctrine: *I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me.*³³ The radical-

³²Cf Col 3: 3–4.

³³*Vivo autem iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus* (Ga 2:20).

ness of the very person stands here as the background for the transformation into Christ: it is stated in the first sentence (*I am alive*), only to be confirmed again at the end (Christ living *in me*). I believe there is no other passage in which Saint Paul more explicitly declares his impassioned love for Jesus Christ and his desire to make his own the Master's life. To him, *his life* is nothing but Christ (Ph 1:21), a feeling that echoes the Lord's own words: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. As the living Father sent me and I draw life from my Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me.*³⁴ The text of Ga 2:20 is a kind of motto that reveals a thrilling ideal of life which young people can easily understand and assimilate. That has been my experience throughout many years of working with them.

Consequently, the personalism we have been talking about is very important to any pedagogy of prayer, especially when addressed to the young. They understand without difficulty when encouraged to establish an intimate friendship with Someone who may become for them the most wonderful friend of all. The only essential thing needed to achieve that friendship is, as always, *communing together*, which includes dialogue and a shared life. Although I have said that prayer is not merely dialogue, dialogue clearly remains an important ingredient of prayer.³⁵ One thing must be admitted: the Lord is as capable of communicating with young people as they are of listening to Him and understanding His language. Besides, since God has much

³⁴Jn 6: 56–57.

³⁵What I here have termed *communing together* is undoubtedly closer to prayer than to mere *dialogue*.

to say to them, it is inferred that they too must have many exciting matters to bring up in that dialogue. The important thing is to teach those young people *to talk to and listen to Him*; this involves neither more nor less difficulty than the effort any two people have to make to build friendship.³⁶ That is the only way they can understand Jesus' challenging invitation to follow Him — an invitation that results in a calling to go throughout the world witnessing to the disquieting message of the Beatitudes, losing and surrendering their own lives, which have already been exchanged for His. The young soon realize that the challenge thrown down to them is a serious one, which comprehends and embraces *everything* simply because it is a challenge of love; they readily grasp that it means giving up everything, for absolute poverty is the other side of the coin of love (Lk 14:33).³⁷ It is only then, when they have utterly fallen in love with Jesus Christ through their communing together and conversation with Him, that they come to understand the wonderful opportunity they are being offered to share His life and be like Him.

On the contrary, pastoral ministry with young people, based on calls to *Be yourself* and the like, can have a negative effect, in my experience. The young do not seem very interested in

³⁶The only difficulty the would-be teacher of prayer needs to overcome is the need of practising it himself. This difficulty might be deemed great or small, as you will, for it depends on the craving for love each person has. Whoever loves finds communing with the beloved easy, and the only unbearable thing for the lover is the absence of that communication.

³⁷This is not the place to discuss perfect poverty, so important and decisive in the spirituality of the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest*; it is examined at length in my book *El amigo inoportuno*, III, Murcia, 1990.

being themselves, either because they do not quite understand what that motto means, or perhaps because they are not very much enthralled with that way of being *authentic* (if that is the idea)³⁸, or maybe because the notion of *being the way they ought to be* does not much appeal to them. In this latter connexion a question may yet be posed: how can a young person choose a standard of behaviour without reference to a model? Whereas, if one admits that Jesus Christ is the only valid model, then there is no need, and it makes no sense, for anybody to devote his life to a search for himself. After all, what would he do if he did eventually find himself. . . ? Truly speaking, young people are no different from anyone else: it is not the troublesome search (of dubious utility, interest and thrill) to discover their very selves about which they get excited, but something as fascinating and lavish in promising possibilities as the joyful meeting with *the other*.

Because the human being has been created to love God without measure, grace makes him able to fall in love totally and passionately with Jesus Christ, Who is perceived through His Humanity thanks to faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. To fall in love with the divine Person of Jesus Christ is exactly the same as to fall in love with God, and for the human being to see Jesus Christ means nothing less than to see the Father (Jn 14:9). God is infinite Goodness, Truth and Beauty; and Jesus Christ is, in turn, *the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being*.³⁹ Besides, since God is the creator and origin of all

³⁸This shows, once again, that persons seduce, not concepts. Besides, authenticity always has to do with something or to somebody.

³⁹Hb 1:3.

things, the source of all goodness, truth and beauty, He can to some extent be known by the human being through His creatures (Rm 1:20). And, since human knowledge develops, therefore, *per visibilia ad invisibilia*, it is extraordinarily important to educate man's sensibility. It is impossible, for instance, for someone to acquire a certain knowledge of what infinite Beauty is, if he is incapable of perceiving created beauty.

To the *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* the development of human sensibility is an essential to practising prayer and acquiring a deep knowledge of Jesus Christ. Love is stirred by the contemplation of beauty and the perception of truth and goodness; so much so that the human being falls in love with Jesus Christ only when apprehending Him as the *seducer* He really is, a description even the Master's enemies conceded (Mt 27:63). Thus the bride of *The Song*, excited about the gracious gifts she contemplates in the Bridegroom, joyfully exclaims:

*How beautiful you are, my love,
and how you delight me!*⁴⁰

It is extremely difficult for an untrained sensibility to perceive beauty; and something similar may be said about assimilating goodness and loving truth. Hence the need to foster artistic sensibility, as well as taking pleasure in goodness and love of truth. The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* gives great importance to the education of the aesthetic and artistic sensibility of its members. Knowledge of literature, poetry, music, painting, even cinema, are considered factors of no little importance for

⁴⁰Sg 1:16.

a modern education; moreover, they are necessary equipment to manage in today's world. For some Secular Institutes, and of other secular or religious Associations (not to mention seminaries and Houses for religious formation), spending time in activities like listening to good music or viewing films (except those on *the lives of the saints*), is regarded as little short from scandalous: perhaps a regrettable waste of time, or at least a concession to human weakness. If that sort of criteria is being followed,⁴¹ defective human and supernatural formation of so many priests and religious should cause us no surprise. It is absurd to try to live *in the midst of the world* (that is, as seculars) and yet be completely alien, for instance, to such an important modern phenomenon as film (which video-technology has made available to every home). The incompatibility between a reasonable education in appreciation of the arts and a serious ascetic life (so essential for consecrated people) is mere fancy; that is not to say that doctrinal clarification about the authentic sense of Christian mortification and asceticism would not be superfluous.⁴²

When we apply these ideas to the doctrine of prayer, difficulties sometimes arise in the use of terms established by spiritual theologies. Let us consider, for instance, the *annihilation*

⁴¹Such a narrow approach would regard the mystic poetry of Saint John of the Cross, for instance, as absolutely profane.

⁴²One can quite often notice that, among those who are shocked by these ideas, there are some who systematically tend to forget other very important things, such as frequent prayer, making good use of time, chastity earnestly lived, study, fidelity to the Church or to their own Institute, etc., to mention some.

of the senses, a theme so important in Saint John of the Cross' doctrine on prayer; we will agree with him and with the classic doctrine that the divine nature, absolutely transcending man, is infinitely beyond all he can think or imagine. *Si intelligis non est Deus*. In all truth, *no one has ever seen God*,⁴³ *whose home is in inaccessible light*.⁴⁴ Yet, it is also true that *it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known*.⁴⁵ The Word became flesh (that is, one of us), and because His disciples could see Him, listen to Him and touch Him with their own hands, they also bore witness to Him and announced Him to us, so that our joy, too, may be complete (1 Jn 1: 1-4). It seems quite reasonable to think that the Word assumed a human nature for a broader purpose than that of giving His life for mankind. In our present condition, we perceive Jesus Christ through faith, but this virtue is not just a mere acceptance, based on some witnesses' reliability, of a historical testimony. Truly speaking, the knowledge of Jesus Christ we obtain through faith, based on the apostolic witness and on His real presence in the Eucharist, is certainly made actual by the work of the Holy Spirit; but the content of this knowledge is much richer than that. The disciple searches the Gospel high and low to obtain a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ — and to *imagine Him in the most perfect way possible* (which has nothing to do with the simplistic idea that the knowledge of Jesus Christ is purely imaginative). We come to prayer always letting

⁴³Jn 1:18.

⁴⁴I Tim 6:16.

⁴⁵Jn 1:18.

the Spirit⁴⁶ take us by the hand, with the purpose of achieving a more and more profound knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. In prayer the Spirit never speaks of Himself, only of Jesus Christ, bearing witness to Him and teaching us about Him (Jn 15:26; 16: 13–14) since the Spirit has been sent for no other purpose. That knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, attained by the human person thanks to the work of the Spirit, are supernaturally infused, of course, but always in a manner tailored to human nature, enabling him to know and love in the only fashion he can.⁴⁷ Clearly, *the Spirit has to bear witness to Jesus Christ in a way intelligible to the human person*. Lastly, because man prays with his whole being,⁴⁸ excluding neither his body nor his senses from this action, I prefer to describe faith and grace as excelling or elevating the senses, rather than to use the terms annihilation or abolition.

Knowledge and love of Jesus Christ arouses in the disciple a desire to make the Lord's life his own. Love causes an ardent longing to resemble the beloved and to share his life and his mission. And because prayer is the high point of the relationship of love between God and a person, it is necessarily connected with the Passion of Jesus Christ. Unless there is a serious life of mortification and asceticism, Christian prayer cannot go beyond the stage of conventional conversation between strangers.

⁴⁶Even more, the Spirit prays for us and with us (Rm 8:26).

⁴⁷Grace elevates human nature absolutely above all its capacity. What we are trying to say here is that it is always the human being (human nature, albeit elevated) who knows and loves.

⁴⁸And not with only the *tip* of the soul or of the spirit, to use the term employed by some mystic doctrines.

Prayer is real when love, of which prayer is the soul, is real; or when prayer shares the life of the beloved. There is, therefore, a relationship and a connexion between prayer and Christian mortification. The demands of love prevent prayer from becoming a simple and nice dealing, flowery and scattered with pretty remarks, between lovers; those demands, rather, turn prayer into a reciprocal sharing by each lover in the life and destiny of the other. Prayer demands from the disciple a genuine communion with the life of Jesus Christ; hence, when the bride of *The Song* knows that the lover is coming, she hastens to call on the winds to spread the fragrance which her orchard exhales: her own virtues. Besides, it is common knowledge that true Christian virtue is nothing less than sharing in the cross of the Lord.

*Awake, north wind,
come, wind of the south!
Breathe over my garden,
to spread its sweet smell around.
Let my love come into his garden,
let him taste its most exquisite fruits.⁴⁹*

Perhaps it is not always good to want to discontinue using things such as the cilice or the discipline, storing them in the attic with other out-dated useless items. The need to be up to date, if misunderstood, may well end up in mere laxity. Although interior mortification is much more important, it is rapidly abandoned if one neglects the exterior one. It is also true that some instruments for exterior mortification are of no avail if a person is not also making a good use of his time, guarding his

⁴⁹Sg 4:16.

heart and keeping his imagination under control, for instance. One needs, therefore, to be extremely careful when planning the ascetic life of a secular spiritual Family; one must style it in the way best suited to meet the demands of the Gospel in the times in which one is living. For instance, it would be futile to practise certain exterior mortifications if one did not take steps to protect oneself from manipulation by the mass media; people's need to be able to think for themselves implies that they have a serious duty to learn self-control when watching television, listening to the radio or reading the newspaper.⁵⁰ Making every endeavour to perform one's duties as best one can; rigorous control over the time allotted to work, to rest and to sleep; strict vigilance over quantity and quality of food and drink; control of the imagination and mortification of the heart (so as to free them to love better and to live more perfectly in the presence of God); getting rid of all attachments, big or small, which hamper the soaring of the spirit and the practice of real poverty — are all elements which must not be omitted from the ascetic life of the secular spiritual Family. We should always keep in mind what all the spiritual classics tell us over and over again: progress in spiritual life completely depends on the generosity with which one practises mortification.

Besides, true love for God always leads to true love for one's neighbour. Genuine disciples of the Lord are recognized because

⁵⁰Some Centres of formation try to solve this problem by simply banning all access to the mass media; but that approach is doomed. Experience shows that, instead of prohibitions which are of little use, it is more helpful (though more difficult) to teach people to exercise self-control in regard to television, radio or newspapers.

they love one another as the Lord does (Jn 13:34). If someone would ask me about the most distinctive characteristic of our spiritual Family, the answer would be that we love one another to the highest degree, *to the end*,⁵¹ and to the point of giving up our own lives (Jn 15:13). This is without doubt the most beautiful gift God has granted us, so much so that I think we would not be able to live without it. That is why, although dispersed throughout the world, our hearts share at the same time the longing for our brothers' presence with the joy of feeling that we are, despite all circumstances, one heart and one soul. Therefore, in our apostolic work, we feel a kind of continuous pain due to our impatient and longing desire to gain new brothers, so that they too may share with us the double joy of loving one another and of feeling in love with God. Hence *family life* lived within the family is of paramount importance for us, and it must not ever be mistaken for *living in community*, which is proper to the religious. Our houses are genuine homes where the life style suits people who do not belong to the world, but who are, nevertheless, immersed in the world and who feel perfectly attuned to people's problems. Those who live in our houses practise true fraternal love, and gather round a common father (as in real homes) who looks after them and reminds them of the true Father in heaven. Our consecration specifically makes demands and calls for renunciations as absolute and perfect as our love and self-giving to the Lord. At the same time, our distinctive secularity requires us to live in tune with the people of our time. Making both demands compatible (experience shows it is per-

⁵¹Jn 13:1.

fectly possible), is a matter for the grace of God; without the help of grace our special charisma would not work.

As in any worthy family, there is also a Mother in our homes. The Blessed Virgin Mary presides over our lives, encourages our expectations, cures our weaknesses, and points out to us the way to the Father's House. Our supernatural family could not exist without Her, and without Her the Lord would have never brought us together in the intimacy and warmth of one heart and one soul. During the years I spent in the seminary, I remember that my good-natured teachers made great efforts to instil in me a profound devotion to the Virgin; they will surely be rewarded for that in heaven; but to tell the truth, I already loved Her, although in my own way and out of necessity, for She was the only mother I had from adolescence on. The odd thing is that the people responsible for our formation tried to enthrall us with a Marian devotion I was never able to completely adopt. I am referring to the devotion known as *slaves of Mary*, recommended by Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. Although I always regarded it a good devotion and worthy of all respect, I could never consider myself as a slave of the Virgin Mary, and the idea of wearing a symbolic chain around my neck to that effect did not attract me. Despite sincere endeavours, I could not look on my Mother as my master and my overlord, much less see myself as Her slave. To me my Mother was just my heavenly Mother... and my earthly mother, too; the only one I had.

This example is merely of anecdotal importance. A mother is always a mother, no matter position, status or titles she has; and for her, her children will simply be her children, that is, everything to the woman who gave birth to them. I find quite

delightful all the invocations in the litanies of the rosary, and perhaps that is why the same sweet feelings are stirred in me by *Regina Apostolorum* as by *Stella Matutina*, for instance. But if anyone were to ask me to name one invocation that epitomizes them all, my first choice would be *Mater Admirabilis*, for it seems to me the sweetest and the loveliest. Indeed, the Blessed Virgin Mary has loved, guided and protected me; to me She has always been the most admirable and wonderful of all mothers.

Finally, I do not wish to finish this writing without fully asserting my tireless struggle, throughout my life, to inculcate into my children love and fidelity to the Church. I was born in her bosom to the supernatural life, and she too has nourished and guarded my faith. That is why I love her, and I deem it an inestimable grace to be her son. The *Society of Jesus Christ the Priest* would make no sense at all except within the framework of strict obedience and loving submission to the Church; the *Society* was born in her bosom, precisely with a burning desire to see its children fight to the end to stay true to that Mother.

Nevertheless, as it is well known, a paramount fidelity is never easy, for it is not called *paramount* to no purpose; obviously, the difficulty this faithfulness involves forms part of its greatness. Of all the things God has created, the Church is undoubtedly the most remarkable and mysterious of paradoxes. Holy and sinful at the same time, and placed on high to enlighten and guide her children —*Mater et Magistra, Lumen Gentium*—, she is also always in need of conversion —*Ecclesia semper reformanda*—. The Church is divine and human, the holy Body of Christ of which we too, her sinful members, form part, a mystery of faith as we acknowledge in the Creed. On that

account, and also because of her pilgrim condition as long as she is in this world, it is no surprise that the Church should experience vicissitudes —joys and tribulations—whose most arduous moments severely test the fidelity of her children.

Nowadays the Church is going through one of the most difficult moments of her history. Not everyone recognizes it, but nonetheless it is true. Influenced by the spirit of the world, her love has grown cold and she finds herself in a state of exhaustion caused by a crisis of faith. She feels extremely inhibited in the presence of the world and strangely frightened by technological advances and the great power which certain ideologies seem to exert. To so many people who are watching her, she now gives the impression of being more concerned about building the earthly city than about reaching the heavenly one. As if her ideals had suddenly become purely earthly ones, she repeatedly speaks to people about mankind, instead of telling mankind about God and talking to God about mankind. That is why, according to herself, she presents herself as an *expert in humanity*, precisely at a time when the world, which is suffering from spiritual hunger, needs her more than ever as an expert in the things of God.

But, as I have said, the hour of great trial is also the hour for paramount fidelity. Even though hardly anyone talks about holiness these days, the Church, holy as she indeed is, will eventually discover the lost ideals of heroic virtues and love. In this new century about to begin, the Church, through her saints, will tell the world again about God, the cross, the need for prayer, the message of the beatitudes, our definitive homeland in heaven, and, above all, about perfect love. The hour will pass

of politicians, diplomats, dealers in earthly things, bureaucrats, technicians and experts, and the hour of saints will come; it will be a time for poets, dreamers, idealists, the poor in spirit, and, above all, a time for great lovers. The Spirit, who looks after the Church and is the source of all holiness and love, will raise up once again those new saints who, filled with love for and fidelity to God and to the Church, will bring salvation to her and to the world.