



# Order

*By Joseph L. Soria*

Booklet

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## SCEPTER BOOKLETS

### Order

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## INTRODUCTION

In matters of order, as in the matters of work or time-management, we tend to think of the immediate and most material aspects, without considering the basic principles involved. When we hear someone speak of order, for example, we immediately think of punctuality, or of our closet, or perhaps even of the consequences of a breakdown of authority in the family or in government. The papers on our desk may come to mind, or the way our tools, toys, bottles, or books are arranged. But this material and utilitarian aspect of order is not, or should not be, an autonomous principle or end in itself. Rather, it should be a consequence of a more fundamental order connected with the Eternal Law. When this is not the case, order—which should really be a means of promoting the happiness of oneself and others as well as contributing to both the beauty and harmony of the world—can become a tyrannical, personal mania, making life difficult for both those who suffer from it and those around them. Material order should not enslave us as the most important of our interests. But we should not disregard order either, lest our lives, surroundings, and activities be characterized by confusion and anarchy. Order may or may not be defined as a virtue; but either way it entails a virtuous way of acting, for not unlike the moral virtues, it is found in a just mean.

We should not allow ourselves to fall into either the abandonment of laziness or the extreme of obsessive perfectionism. The reasonable good, St. Thomas tells us, is that which is moderated and ordered according to reason. This is why, in all that is ordered and moderated by reason, there is something of moral virtue.

Often we cannot say that a particular way of ordering material things—for example, a dresser drawer with the handkerchiefs on the left and the shirts on the right—is something necessarily desired by God. Objectively speaking, it would be just as agreeable to God if the shirts were on the left instead of the right. What we can say, however, is that it would not be pleasing to God if, through our laziness or carelessness, the shirts or handkerchiefs were mixed up with the shoes or the groceries. This is so because our Lord desires that some order be present in all things—the subordination of the less important to the more important, the false to the true, the vicious to the virtuous, the temporal to the eternal.

In this booklet I do not refer to merely material order, or to what might be called public order, or to the relation among the groups of interests that form society. Instead, I shall speak of an order which is more intimate and at the same time more universal and profound, which derives from the fact that some things (beings, goods, ways of living, virtues, options, possibilities, and so on) are better and more important than others.

There is a lack of order if my duty, here and now, is to work, but instead of working I laze around. Similarly, order is lacking if, instead of putting things in their place (such as the handkerchiefs on the left and the shirts on the right), I submit to laziness or lack of responsibility and drop things any which way. We can indeed affirm that our Lord wants, for me and in my present, personal circumstances, the handkerchiefs to be on the left and the shirts on the right. This is not because of anything special about the locations themselves, but because in my case not ordering them would be failing to carry out, for the love of God, a small duty which has a supernatural and eternal significance.

In other words, order does not necessarily signify a determined structure of material things in either personal or social life; nor, perhaps, does it constitute an independent and specific virtue in itself. It is, however, the aid and consequence of a virtuous way of living. It is, in a sense, the product or fruit of many virtues together, responding in the proper way (that is, in a prudent way) to the many distinct calls of God— thereby giving rise to a unity of the various elements of our life: joining and converting them, by means of our incorporation in Jesus Christ, into the pure, immaculate, and holy sacrifice mentioned in the Roman Canon. It is this kind of order, the order necessary for our sanctification, independent of our temperament and human inclinations, that the following pages will consider.

## WHAT DOES ORDER CONSIST OF?

To understand what order is, we have to begin by understanding, as has already been suggested, that not just any kind of arrangement of time or objects is sufficient to constitute real order. When mere material order is carried to a point where it becomes a supreme law or requirement, an idol to which other more important things are sacrificed, this is a grave disorder. For this reason, in order to practice an ordered order (the redundancy is deliberate), it is very important to take into account the criteria by which one ought to regulate one's life. For example, I can order my activities according to the will of God or according to my own ideas or caprice; according to principles of generosity or egoism; on a purely animal level or according to the criteria of religious faith, or practical utility, or according to the law of minimal effort or maximal pleasure. I can arrange my furniture and decorations according to a practical or aesthetic plan, or simply in the order in which they arrive. From an objective point of view, the results will be different in each case; but, and this is most important, each result will be evaluated—ethically, aesthetically, or pragmatically—in a different way, depending on the nature of the decisions and motives that have brought it about.

From the human point of view, if I give primacy to the practical, the ugliness of disorder will not bother me, at least initially. If, on the contrary, I am more concerned about the harmony of colors, volumes, and forms, I may neglect the practical aspects of a particular layout. From the supernatural point of view, if my decisions have been virtuous, the result will be good; if the motives have been sinful, the result will be bad. The ideal order implies an equilibrium of all these positive factors, which enables us to obtain something that is at the same time, good, beautiful, and useful, to the greatest extent possible. If we do this, we shall have attained something perfectly ordained to the glory of God.

## THE ULTIMATE BASIS OF ORDER

God established a certain order when he created the universe. Since it is a divine order, to our myopic gaze it may sometimes appear to be a “disordered” order, but this is not really the case. An earthquake, a flood, any kind of a physical evil—each appears to be both a disorder itself and the cause of further disorder. But are these really disorders in the truest sense of the term? Consider the natural beauty of certain regions of the Earth that have been sculpted by enormous glaciers over millions of years, or by the forces that jolted the tectonic plates which formed the continents. Can we dare to describe as evil those immense masses of ice and stone, or the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that gave rise to the present face of our planet?

We do not like extreme temperatures, and if we had the power to order the climate, perhaps we would eliminate frigid winters or excessively hot summers. But at what price, and with what consequences? The ecological damage that may be caused by the use of certain technologies or products may be an example of how human science, which is necessarily limited and imperfect, can give rise to disorder when it tries to order things. By contrast, it’s not that way with God.

It is most difficult, however, to judge sin, that moral disorder which is the real disorder and the only true evil. To superficial and nearsighted human eyes, sin does not always seem so grave. But consider the statement of Cardinal Newman: “The Catholic Church maintains that if the sun and moon disappeared, and the earth was drowned and the many millions of people who populate it died of inanition in extreme agony, since this all would be a matter of temporal evils, all this would be less bad than that one single soul, not only should be lost, but even that it should commit a single venial sin, deliberately tell a lie, or rob, without excuse, a single dime.”

Newman realized this statement clashed with the attitudes and opinions of many people, and he was harshly criticized for having stated such a view. But this did not bother him. Explaining his doctrinal position since 1845, when he converted to the Catholic Church—he added: “I believe that the principle which I have just enunciated is a simple preamble to the beliefs of the Catholic Church, in a way similar to that in which an Act of Parliament can begin with a ‘Taking into consideration that . . .’” If the evil is great, then

great must be the challenge which the Church—an instrument of God—launches to combat it. In effect, Newman declared that “such a preamble gives sense to the position of the Church in the world, and an interpretation of its way of acting and of teaching.”

Newman’s point here follows directly upon Jesus’ first commandment: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” If we take seriously the love that we owe to God, we will understand that we cannot be satisfied with half measures; this love should totally penetrate our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. To look at it from the point of view of our subject: order must influence all of our thoughts, words, and deeds—all we do and all we opt not to do.

Of course there is a certain difficulty in understanding how true disorder, that is, moral disorder or sin, is compatible with the omnipotence and the goodness of God. We need to remember, however, that sin is only tolerated, not desired, by God. God has given to human beings the tremendous gift of being able to make decisions, of acting or not acting; of choosing between this and that, of doing something or its contrary. In a word, man is free, and our Lord respects this freedom with which he created us, even if we abuse this gift and disorder the universe with our sins. But when we do sin, faith in divine providence tells us that our Lord takes advantage of even these failings, these evils, to promote the good of those who love him and to manifest his glory. Though now we can neither see nor understand how this is possible, someday, when we have reached closer union with God, we will be able to understand more fully.

What we need then is a Northstar, a light to guide us, so that none of our actions—no matter how insignificant they might appear—contributes to destroying the order desired by God in creation. Means cease to be means when they do not lead to the end. There is no virtue if prudence is lacking. Walking won’t take one any place if one doesn’t follow a path, if each step acts against the previous one and makes the next one more difficult. Every inferior order ceases immediately to be order if it contradicts the higher order, which is the fulfillment of the will of God.

At the same time, it is evident that we do not reach our goal in one step or a single act, but through a multitude of steps and stages, and for this reason we must instill order in each of these steps. As such, one of the best

and most fruitful consequences of our accepting the universal divine plan would be practicing this same order in our ordinary, everyday routines.

It might seem at first that this association of the order of the universe with the order of our daily life is something of a stretch or an unrealistic goal; or that, even if it is possible, it's not very important. But if order is a good (and it certainly is), then any small piece of order, just as any small piece of gold, has value and should be looked after, not only because it might be useful, but also for the sake of the goodness it is in itself.

We need to be orderly, for in this way we obey God's plan, according to which each thing is put in its place. We need to be punctual and make good use of our time. We need to observe the proper hierarchies in our ways of thinking, acting, dressing, relating to others, dealing with God, and planning our future.

Of course we can't always act explicitly and consciously for the ultimate end of realizing God's plan, but the final reason for which we live, think, and work with order should be clear in our mind. We need to understand that we are cooperating personally (although to us it might appear that ours is an insignificant contribution) in the order desired by God our Father in creating and preserving the universe.

As long as our will does not reject this fundamental motive, we should not be upset if, in living order, we find that we are immediately or consciously motivated by concerns for efficiency or frugality with respect to time and material. We may be interested in keeping ourselves calm and self-possessed, or respecting our neighbor who suffers because of our disorder. We may be motivated by our temperament or aesthetic sense. But as often as possible we should try to rectify our intentions, offering to God the order that we are trying to live, and doing "everything for love.—In that way there will be no little things: everything will be big."

## THE GLORY OF GOD

Everything is ultimately directed to the same end, namely, the glory of God. This is why the rectification of our intentions—before, during, and after our actions—is an indispensable Christian practice that enables us to give all the glory to God without retaining any of it for ourselves.

Before our actions, we rectify our intentions by offering them to God and by purifying the motives. We do this by eliminating reasons that are tainted with sin, whether they be motives of vanity, egoism, revenge, impurity, greed, and so on. The most frequent enemy of rectitude of intention is seeking, either implicitly or explicitly, one of the objectives implied in the seven capital sins—pride, greed, lust, gluttony, envy, anger, and sloth.

While acting, we rectify our intentions by avoiding consenting to the temptations which invite us—like Adam and Eve—to indulge in the sweet and enticing, but poisonous, fruit of self-satisfaction.

Finally, we rectify our intentions after performing our duties “by penance and greater self-giving,” whereby we learn from our past errors in order to avoid repeating them.

## THE CRITERIA OF ORDER

St. Augustine defined order as “a disposition of equal and unequal things, which gives each of them its proper place.” As such, to have order means not only keeping in their proper places those things that we use or are around us, but principally and fundamentally keeping our thoughts and desires ordered so that we can properly order our actions. St Thomas tells us that if we want to order various things we need to see them in relation to their end or purpose, “for the order of various things among them-selves is dependent on the order that they have towards their end.”

To have order in one’s ideas—to order one’s mind—one must begin by establishing a hierarchy. That is to say, we need to know which truths are properly subordinated to others, and which need always to prevail in determining our decisions. In this sense, we have to give priority to the truths that deal, directly or indirectly, with our relation to God and our eternal salvation; for “what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul?” After these come the variety of natural truths—philosophical, biological, physical, and so on. Finally and least important are our matters of opinion—that is to say, our own views regarding what is beautiful, better, more suitable, and so forth, but which we have no right to impose on others as dogma.

When there is confusion among these three levels, there is disorder not only in our mind but in our lives. And this points to the value of order, as St. Josemaria has written: “Order will bring harmony to your life, and lead you to perseverance. Order will give peace to your heart and weight to your behavior.” This is why we have to have order in our mind: to understand the relationships among things and the relation of everything to God. We need ideas which form a hierarchy of both necessity and certainty, and we cannot allow the subjective to prevail over the objective. For example, I cannot deny that it is daytime because I prefer it to be nighttime, or act as though I were single because I don’t like being married. Similarly, we may not deny a truth of faith just because it is difficult for us to accept, because it runs counter to our opinions or conduct, or because we have trouble understanding it. Such mental or intellectual disorder leads us to make claims like the one Samuel

Butler made in jest, that the hen is the means that an egg uses to produce another egg.

Order is also needed in each of the three areas we have identified, truths of faith, natural truths, and matters of opinion. We know there is no true charity without order. We have to love God first, above all things and without limits. We must love him with our full capacity, in such a way that no other love can ever compare to the love we have for God or detract from our commitment to him. We need not worry that this will make us cold and insensitive, for we will be able to love others with the love of God, whose love is greatest of all. In fact, love of our neighbor is never as great, complete, noble, and efficacious as when it is based on our love of God. The soul, thus purified and strengthened in its affections, knows how to put others before self; it becomes forgetful of self and gives to others completely and with joy. In this way our affection for others is also ordered: we turn first to our family, then to our friends, all Catholics, Christians, and all people.

According to the gospel, neighbor is not a specifically delimited category of persons but rather includes everyone, for all need to be saved. As St. Josemaria has written: “I think it is very natural for you to want the whole world to know Christ. But start with your responsibility of saving the souls who live with you, and of sanctifying each one of your fellow workers or fellow students. That is the principal mission that our Lord has entrusted to you.”

Some might object: Couldn't this greater concern for those who are closest to us be a sign of egoism, and thus something of a disorder, for we are abandoning many who need us simply because our physical distance from them makes helping them more difficult, or because that distance diminishes the concern which first-hand experience of their misery would otherwise produce in us? How can a Christian give preference to his family at the expense of those who might perhaps be more in need?

The answers to these questions lie two things: 1) in a recognition of the diverse hierarchy of goods available to us—some goods are more important than others; and 2) the fact that the order of charity, as noted by the theologian Germain Grisez in commenting on St. Thomas, is not based on more or less generous subjective reasons, but rather on the Trinity. Some particular human beings represent the direct means of salvation for other particular human beings. The mission of the Church requires that there be priorities in the love of its members. For in this way, if we are faithful to the

particular mission implied in the personal vocation each one of us has, we are all able to play effective roles in the universal mission of salvation.

## ORDER IN VALUES

First in order of importance are those things concerned with our spiritual life. Some will undoubtedly object that we can't spend the whole day praying, for we also have to eat. This is an obvious simplification and not a serious objection. It is obvious that one need not dedicate the majority of one's time to devotional or religious activities. Respecting the hierarchy of values means, for example, that we should be ready to give up having a meal if this is the only way we can give needed spiritual help to our neighbor.

Among these spiritual values we find those elements of religious life which are necessary by the will of God, such as the sacraments and other means that are necessary to maintain an intimate and loving relationship with our Lord, such as prayer, doctrinal instruction, and so forth. At bottom what is essential is living that order which is the basis of every other order, that which subordinates the creature to its Creator.

After this come the obligations which arise from our status and position in our family and society. We may be single, married, widow or widower; priest or layman; son or daughter, father or mother; husband or wife; employee or boss; miner, judge, student, office worker or a manual laborer; retired, and so on. All such personal circumstances constitute the basis of what we call duties of our state, our ordinary, natural duties and obligations.

Finally, there are other duties, also ordinary, which might seem at times to be luxuries but which cannot be ignored. These include rest, diversion, culture, sport, and so on. As we shall see, all of these things should contribute to a balanced plan of life, but none should take priority in our lives.

## ORDER IN OUR EXTERNAL BEHAVIOUR

Customs and manners are not universal. Every age and culture has its own conventions for conversation and writing, protocols and standards of etiquette, and aesthetic preferences – and these things vary from time to time and place to place. Often changes arise as reactions to what previously prevailed. For example, in response to an earlier generation's excessive valuing of formality, a new generation may embrace simplicity to such an extent that it is no longer a virtue.

The problem is not the evolution of customs and conventions, but the loss of certain values that may be effected by such evolution. One gains very little if the reaction against one sort of formalism constitutes an even greater formalism of another sort. It is even worse if this change eliminates positive elements of the past and does not replace them with new elements of equal value. In this way, a lack of concern for the care of material things is not necessarily a manifestation of a healthy detachment or freedom of spirit, for it may also be a manifestation of carelessness, laziness, or childish and immature rebellion. Dirty shoes or tattered clothes, missing buttons, purposely made holes, and so on, are all examples of this kind of thing.

Of course the dirtiness of a suit of work clothes need not be judged by the same criteria that a business suit or a dress for a social event would be. In every case, however, there are limits that should not be exceeded, out of both a sense of order and respect for those around us. The proverbial absentminded professor is a good example of the kind of disorder to which I am referring. He represents a person who has built his whole life around a center with a relative value—scientific knowledge—who tends to forget or ignore (a disorder), all the rest. He skips meals, works all night without sleeping, and neglects the obligations of family and friendship. He dresses in a disheveled manner with clothes that don't match. In his office working papers are mixed up with unpaid bills, and whatever order there may be is one of simple sedimentation, like geological strata. On the same shelf there may sit for weeks the remains of a cup of coffee, a half-eaten sandwich, and the pages of an unfinished essay.

Still, one must also avoid the other extreme of giving primary importance to external appearances, to how one is dressed or groomed, to what others think of us, or our hairstyle, or our way of moving our left hand while speaking. Here too there is a grave disorder; mere appearances and frivolity should not be the center of human life.

## ORDER IN MATERIAL THINGS

Order should also be present in our material effects. How often do we hear—at home, or at the office, the clinic, the workshop, or the library—someone complain that he cannot find what he is looking for because things aren't where they're supposed to be? Usually this is because someone has taken something and failed to return it to its proper place. Still, we cannot exclude the possibility that we simply do not remember where we left things, in which case our memory fails at a point where we had previously failed in a matter of order.

Inanimate items do not have legs, and they cannot crawl away and disappear on their own. My mother used to tell me when I left something behind and had to retrace my steps in order to find it: “When you don't use your head, you have to use your legs.” With respect to order, one could say that the person who is not orderly needs two heads, one for ordinary activities and another to take care of his own disorder.

There is something of a vicious circle when the disorder caused by laziness or lack of discipline or professionalism in turn causes more disorder. “Take care of order and order will take care of you,” wrote St. Augustine, indicating how order brings peace and efficacy. When you know what you are doing now and what you have to do in the future, you can make intelligent and calm decisions. In a certain sense you are the master, not the slave, of your duties. The disorderly person, by contrast, cannot does not have a handle on what has to be done, and in consequence—if he is not at the same time completely irresponsible—he is always oppressed by his responsibilities, which are like an enormous weight on his shoulders. But above all order is important because with it, as St. Josemaria has written, “you will be able to give more glory to God by doing more work in his service.”

Without order one cannot be happy here on Earth, for sooner or later one is tormented by small or great mishaps; the nightmares of things lost, destroyed, or left undone; the constant fear that one is forgetting or neglecting something important; remorse for deadlines not met, promises not kept, tasks left undone or completed poorly and late; and so on. One seems to live in “that land of gloom and dark shadow” of which the book of

Job speaks, “where darkness and disorder reign and where even light itself is like the night of death.” This is why, in order to live order, one must first overcome the discouragement produced by disorder.

It is interesting to observe the way any person with good professional training works. Whether a carpenter, a mechanic, a cook, or an accountant, every competent professional exhibits a truly impressive degree of order, even amid a complex schedule of activities. Quite often the reverse is also the case: when a person without adequate professional training tries to undertake the work of a carpenter, a mechanic, a cook, or an accountant, terrible disorder arises among the instruments and materials he uses. Instead of looking like a workshop, a kitchen, or an office, the work environment looks like a battlefield. In consequence, the job is botched instead of well done, costing more in terms of time, materials, and mishaps.

There is an old saying: “A place for everything, and everything in its place.” This indicates a basic precondition for organizing oneself and one’s activities. While it might appear that we are wasting time on minutiae, in fact it is essential for success that we establish certain structures, which may be small and simple measures, in our work. Things like boxes, file folders, envelopes, compartments, filing cabinets, shelving, and so on—are all crucial for ordering our work. By contrast, we do better to avoid collecting items in baskets or other catch-all containers, for too often these detract from order. We may label them “miscellaneous” or something to that effect, and in so doing we are planting the seeds of disorder. If we cannot think of, or out of laziness doesn’t want to identify, a proper way to classify something that doesn’t fit the usual categories, we may end up grouping together a number of things that should in fact be separated. In consequence, we produce a mountain of things that are hidden in their disorder. In time these may end up spoiled or lost.

One needs patience—a conditions of order—to put labels on bottles, compartments, and drawers so as to identify their contents, to save time when looking for things in the future, and to avoid potentially serious mishaps. (Consider if we are dealing with medicines or other things that may be consumed.) To live the virtue of order we need to practice with constancy a generous spirit of mortification, and to know how to put the things that we have used back in their places. Living the virtue well entails sacrificing oneself and taking, when necessary, the extra time to put a thing in its proper place and not just back where we happened to find it. This also includes the small mortification of offering to God the aggravation of getting up from the

table to put back, in the bookcase or filing cabinet, the book or file folder that we are not going to use again.

It's true that these little details take time (really very little time, hardly more than a few seconds), but in fact one loses much more time trying to find something that is out of place. Unfortunately, someone was not far off the mark when he jokingly described many office desks as wastepaper baskets with drawers.

Let's look at four questions that business efficiency experts have used as a rule of thumb for determining orderliness. If our work is quite different from a typical office situation we will have to make adjustments, but even so these questions can be helpful for anyone.

- Have I ever had to interrupt my dictating or writing of a letter to search for essential texts or documents connected with the matter?

- Do I spend more time gathering together the needed documents for a project than actually working on it? Do documents frequently go astray and turn up days later in very unexpected places?

- Do I ever have to push things aside to make space on my desk for a paper I want to work on? A "yes" to any of those questions suggests something to be desired in terms of order.

Material creation has to serve as our stairway to ascend to God. In this way every small thing can become great, and converted into an occasion to live our faith, our hope, and our love. We may thus offer "a flower for Mary: the books in good order, the ashes in the ash tray, the papers in the file, the table free of crumbs, the neckties together, the clothes well arranged, shoes in pairs, the closets closed, etc."

## ORDER IN OUR ACTIVITIES

The same reasons cited for creating order in our material surroundings can serve as a basis for ordering our activities.

It's important to have a basic daily schedule to organize our activities and help us avoid laziness, hectic improvisation, or senseless idleness. This is a matter of planning, but we need to be prudent and avoid rigidity, not forgetting, as St. Josemaria has reminded us, that "human undertakings, whether they are hard or simple, always have to count on a margin of the unforeseen; and that a Christian should never shut off the road of hope, or be forgetful of God's Providence."

One key to order is simply taking care not to be slaves to our schedules at the expense of other important aspects of our lives. But this risk, which is real but probably less frequent than one might think, should not prevent us from laying out a sensible plan for the use of our time. Among the basic elements of such a plan would be set times for getting up and going to bed, time dedicated to work, to the means of growth in our spiritual life, to our family, to cultural development and rest, and to social relations and friendships.

To use a metaphor, a good schedule is like a hand. In order for our hand to do its job properly, it needs its five fingers, and each has to be the proper length; none can be too long or too short. (It would likely be a greater handicap to have a finger eight inches long than to have one missing altogether.) The five fingers may represent our religious duties (the middle finger), our family duties (the ring finger), those of our profession (the index finger), those connected with rest and cultural development (the little finger), and those of our social nature (the thumb).

A schedule in which one of these groups of duties is either missing or overdeveloped at the expense of the others is not normal and causes a radical disorder in one's life, no matter which "finger" is missing or too large.

Ordering our activities with a schedule does not mean we are putting ourselves in a straitjacket or allowing what is written on a piece of paper to dictate our lives. Laying out a schedule is more a matter of protecting

ourselves—not against our autonomy as free and intelligent beings or against any reasonable, urgent needs—but against laziness, the caprice of the moment, confusion, or a lack of equilibrium in the use of our time and energy. A schedule is like the helmsman of a ship. Without him the ship will be driven every which way by wind and currents, and it will not reach its port. The helmsman helps the ship maintain its course or change it when the captain—not the helmsman—considers it reasonable to do so. It is disorderly to indulge in distractions that interfere with doing our duties, but it is equally disorderly to refuse to give a hand to someone who needs it “because it isn’t in my schedule for this afternoon.”

St. Josemaria has offered the following advice: “Don’t succumb to that disease of character whose symptoms are inconstancy in everything, thoughtlessness in action and speech, scatter-brained ideas: superficiality, in short. Mark this well: unless you react in time—not tomorrow: now!—that superficiality which each day leads you to form those empty plans (plans ‘so full of emptiness’) will make of your life a dead and useless puppet.”

To plan your time you need an instrument such as a simple notebook. This sort of notebook is sometimes referred to as an agenda, from the Latin word meaning “what has to be done,” and this is what it is all about: to have clear in our mind—aided by a notebook, a planner, a secretary, a computer, or whatever—the scope and hierarchy of our duties.

## GOOD USE OF TIME

As in everything else, success requires more than just wanting to live in an orderly way; it also requires knowing how to do this. In addition to a good sense of the proper hierarchy of values, the necessary virtues associated with order, and a few more or less refined techniques, we need to know how to make good use of our time. Good time management calls for both qualitative and quantitative assessments. To make good use of time in a quantitative way (this half hour, this weekend, these years) is to acknowledge that one needs to use one's time for the right qualitative purposes. Even if I took advantage of every minute of it, I have wasted my time if I was doing something useless or bad.

The first thing we must do is to recognize the spontaneous rhythm of our own way of acting in order to correct what is defective in it and take advantage of what is positive. We have to adapt each activity or task to our natural rhythm, but a rhythm that is educated by a spirit of self-denial. We shouldn't fall into the vice of transforming our day into a mad race against the clock, and we need to avoid the other extreme of living in a state of hibernation. But within certain limits each person has his own pace, and it would be counterproductive to ignore this fact.

We need to live with a sense of measured urgency. The Romans used to say "festina lente" ("make haste slowly"), a reference to the fact that things done hurriedly often have to be repeated. In other words, we shouldn't be turtles, exasperating others with our slowness, but neither should we be human rockets, so explosive that we make everyone around us nervous.

Let's look at two rather frequent attitudes toward the availability and use of time:

- thinking we don't have enough time to do all that we have to do, and
- thinking we have more than enough time.

The first arises when we do have a good appreciation of time, but don't know how to use it in an orderly way. The second is when, because of a different kind of disorder, or idleness, we forget that time is a gift of God and that it is a limited good.

## I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME

Many if not most cases of lacking time are really cases of lacking order: either we don't know how to organize ourselves well, or we are trying to do more things than we can and should do, which is also a disorder. If we don't have enough time, it may be that we are not attacking our jobs in the order of their importance, or that the same kind of disorder is leading us to use more time than is necessary.

A businessman attending a course on improving use of time remarked: "I almost didn't make it . . . didn't have enough time." This often happens. Since putting things in order takes time, one can succumb to the temptation of not spending the time necessary to organize our activities and our lives—a great mistake.

If you want to increase your time, you have to know how to invest the time you have. Actually managing your time is a way of increasing it, since improved management enables you to do more things in less time. Too often we see the need to organize ourselves better, but we don't feel we have time to organize ourselves. And then, paradoxically, in other ways we waste the time we could have used to plan our activities. We have to ask ourselves honestly whether the cause of this disorder is really a lack of time or just laziness.

When all is said and done, if we want to live order, we have to plan the use of our time, and to do this we have to keep in mind a few practical rules:

- To organize ourselves, it's necessary to "waste time" in order to gain it later.
- Past experience provides useful lessons, only if it is seen in a balanced way; that is, if we see it as a whole, and reflect upon the motives which moved us and the consequences that followed.
- It is necessary to define clearly our personal priorities, making sure that no finger on "the hand" of our life has atrophied or grown disproportionately large.

- It is useful to establish certain time goals throughout the day, both to see whether we are accomplishing our plan and to make certain that we complete certain tasks in a fixed period of time, so that we avoid eternalizing them through laziness or perfectionism.

- In our heads, in a notebook, on a simple sheet of paper, we need to have a daily list of the things we have to do, laid out in their order of importance and urgency, not according to our personal taste.

- Before beginning a job we need at least an approximate idea of how much time it will require. We can't plan to do in two hours what logically requires four. This would not be realistic and therefore would not be orderly.

- We have to be flexible and allow for unexpected interruptions, not by leaving free time for the unexpected, but by using for more important and urgent tasks some of the time we had allotted for tasks of lower priority. This means that we have to realize that some of our projects for the day will not be accomplished. We should also make provision for making good use of unexpected periods of free time that may become available during the day or week (perhaps when you are away from your usual workplace). As St. Josemaria has commented: "When you parcel out your time, you need also to think how you can make use of the odd moments that become free at unforeseen times."

- At times it is better to change our activity, putting aside our current job and planning to return to it later, instead of losing time trying to overcome an obstacle—intellectual or otherwise—while seated at our desk. Often the solution to our problems comes by itself, when we least expect it. • Organizing our time well does not mean being obsessed about taking advantage of every second. An obsession of this kind could interfere with higher values and even destroy the human and supernatural value of our work. Making good use of time is not an idol, religion, or end in itself.

- Using our time well means using it willingly and diligently from the beginning: the first hours of the day or of the week, the first minutes of a period of work. The beginning is always most important to attend to in this way, for toward the end we all move along quickly without anyone having to tell us, and when we reach the end time is always scarce, as there may be only a few minutes left.

- We have to know how to say "no," recognizing our own limitations, to requests or proposals of others so that we don't overload ourselves with

promises we can't fulfill. Being able to say "no" implies not only the courage to put up with the annoyance we are causing, but also the prudence to be able to judge what is most important and, therefore, whether in this particular case we should say "yes."

- It is not necessary to be a genius or a superman to make good use of our time. There is no need for anything extraordinary or spectacular, and we shouldn't expect that good time management will bring about a sudden transformation of our personality. It is just a matter of creating, little by little, with the aid of God's grace, a series of good habits. We need something like a set of daily exercises to keeping us in shape and on track, making that good use of time that our Lord wants.

## DO I HAVE MORE TIME THAN I NEED?

There is a limit to the time each one of us has to get closer to Christ by means of grace and our personal cooperation. Some have more, others less—neither are we born nor do we die according to a set schedule. In any event, however, our time is limited. We have so many years, so many months, so many days, so many hours, so many minutes, and so many seconds. Unfortunately, our most common mistake is to forget that this time is limited and to fail to evaluate properly the quantity and quality of things we need to do in this allotment of time. St. Josemaria has written, “What a pity to be killing time when time is a treasure from God!”

What do we do when the local water company tells us that for a certain number of days there will be no water available? We store up all the water we can in the bathtub and in all sorts of pails and bottles and other containers. Then we use it judiciously, avoiding waste, because we know that for a while there will be no more water available. The situation is similar in the case of our time. If we lose time we cannot be happy, for we will be thirsting for this water that we have wasted. In the words of St. Josemaria, “Sadness and uneasiness grow in proportion to the time you waste. When you feel a holy impatience to use every minute, you will be filled with joy and peace because you will not be thinking about yourself.”

A few years ago I attended the funeral of an elderly lady who had honored me with her friendship. As I stood with her husband and children next to the open grave, waiting for the rest of the friends and relatives to gather in order to say the final prayers, my eyes fell on the gravestone. It was new and had already been engraved with the name of the deceased, along with the dates of her birth and death, 1903-1984. What surprised me was that, immediately below these dates, the name of her husband, who was standing there with us, was also engraved, along with the date of his birth (1896) and a hyphen followed by an empty space—a space that was filled when the elderly husband died only four years later, in 1988.

On more than one occasion this incident has been food for thought. We know when we were born, but we don't know when we're going to die. And it's certain that the time that remains for us is fixed: four years or twenty,

or fifty, or three weeks, or two hours? Somewhere in a quarry, or perhaps already in the warehouse of a stonecutter, or perhaps in the cemetery itself, there is the stone on which someone will carve the date of our own death. What will this date be? How much time remains between now and that date?

One often hears the old saying “time is money,” but time is indeed so much more: “time is glory.” We have to work with the talent that God has given us, and in this way fulfill his will before our death comes— “while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.” St. Josemaria has commented, “Time is our treasure, the money with which to buy eternity.” Moreover: “if time were only gold, you could perhaps afford to squander it. But time is life, and you don’t know how much you have left.”

To use an image, it is as if our Lord, when we were born, gave each of us a chest containing the talents of time that we were going to live: so many coins of gold (one for each year), of silver (one for each month), of copper (one for each week), and thus down to the tiny coins which represent each second. This chest is constructed in such a way that it cannot be opened, shaken, weighed to determine how much is left. All we can do is remove the coins as each instant of the present time passes, never knowing what the remaining balance is. Nevertheless, and here is the tragic element, we may spend this fortune in having a good time, wasting it like the prodigal son, on luxurious living, useless pastimes, or senseless laziness.

Tempus breve est (“time is short”). How short indeed is the time of our passing through this world! St. Josemaria has written: “For the true Christian these words ring deep down in his heart as a reproach to his lack of generosity, and as a constant invitation to be loyal. Brief indeed is our time for loving, for giving, for making atonement. It would be very wrong, therefore, for us to waste it, or to cast this treasure irresponsibly overboard. We mustn’t squander this period of the world’s history which God has entrusted to each one of us.”

There is another factor involved that we can’t ignore, namely, the effect that our failure to make good use of time has on others. In the words of St. Josemaria, “It would be bad if you were to waste your time, which is not yours, but God’s and is meant for his glory. But if on top of that you make others waste it, you both diminish your own standing and defraud God of more of the glory you owe him.”

Arriving late for an appointment, distracting others who are working, interrupting them unnecessarily – these things cause disorder and mean that

others will have to take additional time to make up for the time we cost them. This is unjust, and we have to make a sincere examination of conscience to improve and to make reparation.

“If you say that you want to imitate Christ . . . and yet have time on your hands, then you are on the road to luke-warmness.” This counsel from *The Forge* gives us a first clue on how to correct the situation we are considering. We have time to waste when there is a lack of love, when we don’t realize or don’t want to consider the immense task facing those who have been called to work as co-redeemers with Christ. We should be mindful: “It is no use wasting your time with ‘your own silly little concerns’ when there are so many souls awaiting you.”

We may also reflect on the following:

A hardworking person makes good use of time, for time is not only money, it is glory, God’s glory! He does as he ought and concentrates on what he is doing, not out of routine nor to while away the passing hours, but as the result of attentive and pondered reflection. This is what makes man diligent.

Our everyday usage of this word “diligent” already gives us some idea of its Latin origin. “Diligent” comes from the verb “diligere,” which means to love, to appreciate, to choose something after careful consideration and attention. The diligent man does not rush into things. He does his work thoughtfully and lovingly. .

Another enemy of good use of time—the talent God has entrusted us with—is the habit of putting off things which are difficult, leaving them for later, for tomorrow, for next year. The reason for the delay in most cases is personal comfort rather than prudence: “Every day is a good day to make good decisions. *Hodie, nunc!*—today, now! It tends to be the poor defeatist types who leave it until the New Year before beginning afresh. And even then, they never really begin.” In addition to betraying undue concern for comfort, these lazy and negligent delays may be signs of something more serious: “I have always thought that many mean by ‘tomorrow’ or ‘later,’ a resistance to grace.”

## CONCLUSIONS

We shouldn't feel discouraged, if at some moment—perhaps after reading these pages—we become especially conscious of the disorder in our lives. Rather, we should feel called to action: “Make up the time you have lost resting on the laurels of your self-complacency, and thinking what a good person you are, as if it were enough just to keep going, without stealing or killing.” We may be consoled by a great truth—“Where there's life, there's hope.” Love can do for us what it did for Mary Magdalene; it can let us recover the past even though we may not have much time, just as there was very little time for the good thief who died on the cross next to Jesus.

Little by little, with patience and discipline, we can set about acquiring the habits that provide the framework of order that we need. This task is not easy, but it is necessary if we want to respond faithfully to what God is asking of us.

We may heed the encouragement of St. Josemaria to examine ourselves: “Let's take a good honest look at our own lives. How is it that sometimes we just can't find those few minutes it would take to finish lovingly the work we have to do, which is the very means of our sanctification? Why do we neglect our family duties? Why that tendency to rush through our prayers, or through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? How are we so lacking in calm and serenity when it comes to fulfilling the duties of our state, and yet so unhurried as we indulge in our own whims?”

Some other helpful questions: “Do I live the virtue of order, so that I tackle jobs according to their relative importance and not according to my own whims or fancies? Am I unnecessarily slow in finishing off my work because of lack of interest or punctuality? Do I break off the work I am engaged in on any excuse, perhaps causing others to be delayed?” Do I habitually let myself be carried away by impulse? Am I careless about where or how I leave the material items that I use? Do I get as much sleep as I should? Do I know how to delegate work to those I am working with?

The list of questions could go on and on. Their answers contain the seeds of the resolutions we need to make in order to grow in the virtue of order—and thereby to give greater glory to God and to live with peace, joy,

and effectiveness. Mary, virgin and mother, she who was full of grace, is a great model of the virtue of order. Everything in her was and is harmony, because nothing in her suffered the damage caused by concupiscence and sin. May the Lord open our souls to the graces we need so that, imitating our Blessed Mother and with her intercession, we may advance step by step along the path of love, living the virtue of order, until we reach eternal union with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We may conclude by reflecting on the words of scripture: “Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These who are clothed in white robes, who are they? And whence have they come?’ And I said to him, ‘Sir, thou knowest.’ And he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits upon the throne will dwell with them. They shall neither hunger nor thirst any more, neither shall the sun strike them nor any heat. For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them, and will guide them to the fountains of the waters of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’” Only then will there be no more disorder or suffering. Man will no longer destroy himself with the foolish desire to be like God. Then all will adore only the one and true Lord, saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”



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