

Josefa Segovia: Opening Paths for the Laity Today

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In various parts of the world, books, articles, thesis and dissertations on Josefa Segovia's personality, work, teaching and spirituality have been published in different languages. Radio and television programs have presented her person and contribution to the paths of culture and education in our present times. Some years ago, a Spanish publishing house included her among the outstanding women of this century. Many commemorative acts have made her speak along this year, which marks the centennial celebration of her birth.

A short biographic note can be enough to find her in Jaen (Spain), where she was born on October 10th 1891, to see her in Granada during her studies at the Normal School —taking up the only course open to women at that time— and later in Madrid, where she accomplished her university educational studies. Back in Jaen, Josefa Segovia developed an important professional task as a Primary Education Supervisor and Principal of the Teachers' Formation Center, one of the first centers of this type founded by Pedro Poveda. She was a singular and faithful collaborator. In Madrid, we witness the fruitful years of her action as President of the growing Teresian Association. And from there we have to follow her in her movements in the different countries where she launched the Association to the experience of a universal, international horizon. We can say now of her what she herself expressed about Teresa of Avila: "The whole world was small for the heart of that woman." Josefa Segovia in 1957, at the age of 65, in the fullness of life and love, offered her whole being in one word: *fiat*.

Josefa Segovia played a key role in the cultural and educational change of her time. To speak about her is to make visible the dignity and vocation of women, against the background of the significant changes

in our times. To approach her lifestyle is a vibrant invitation to proclaim the "prophetic" character of women in their femininity, as stated by *Mulieris dignitatem*¹: "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way" (n. 30). If according to *Mulieris dignitatem*, "the true order of love constitutes a woman's own vocation," we can declare that Josefa Segovia fulfilled it generously.

Opening Paths for the Laity Today

An attentive journey through Josefa Segovia's biography would be significant enough to show her contribution to the development of a new awareness as well as a growing involvement of lay people in our world and in our Church.

But we would like to consider here her value-communication style, based on her life and writings, as relevant to the present status of the laity. We will do this under a two-fold title: (1) Emerging values in her written communication; and (2) Communication of values, a consistent pattern.

Christifideles Laici, John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation on the vocation and mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,² will be our precious point of reference with which a dialogue will be maintained along this reflection.

Around forty years have passed between the dates of Josefa Segovia's last writings and the publication *Christifideles Laici*. Significant events have touched through these years the life of the world and the life of the Church. Vatican II made firm statements about the mission of the lay faithful; a synod about the laity was held in Rome in 1986. And besides the various documents and statements, a flourishing of lay groups and Associations in the Church seems to speak about a renewed awareness.

When in the beginning of this century, Pedro Poveda launched his projects in the world of education and culture, counting on the com-

¹ John Paul II: Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and the Vocation of the Woman *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Aug. 15, 1988.

² John Paul II: Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful *Christifideles Laici*, Dec. 30, 1988.

mitted involvement of lay Christians, certainly not much was going on about it. When Josefa Segovia herself discovered the possibilities of a commitment of this type—it happened in 1913—who could have taken for granted the participation of a woman called to assume progressively a style of leadership and involvement that could expand to our days?

Why this reference —*Christifideles Laici*? Certainly I am not intending to show a lenient connection between this document and some of Josefa Segovia's writings, but a common dynamism and direction. Indeed the horizon opened by *Christifideles Laici* can offer a precious light to understand some of Josefa Segovia's contributions to the laity today.

The extent of our present reflection imposes us the discipline of limiting the area of our study. Although a systematic presentation of Josefa's writings or our concentration on specific writings according to subject matter or period of time could be methodologically desirable, I have made the choice to move myself along the long-span of her correspondence, choosing different types of letters among the approximately 6,000 that we know. This will allow us to consider a variety of elements that may enlighten the topic we try to deepen here.

An important background, as a point of departure, is especially relevant for this endeavor: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the gifts and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuine by human fails to raise an echo in their hearts"³

Christifideles Laici, in its introduction, points out to "the present needs of the world today." "A new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present times render it even more so."⁴

Now we will briefly develop the first title and will suggest some points for further study of the second.

³ *Gaudium et spes*: The Church in the Modern World, n. 1

⁴ *Christifideles Laici*, 3.

Emerging Values in Josefa's Written Communication as Relevant to the Laity Today

To my understanding, one of Josefa Segovia's greatest contributions to Education in our times is precisely the fact of having given flesh to certain values that are entrenched in the mission of the lay faithful in the midst of social awareness.

The Dignity of Every Person

"To rediscover and make others rediscover the inviolable dignity of every human person makes up an essential task, in a certain sense, the central and unifying task of the service which the Church, and the lay faithful in her, are called to render to the human family. The dignity of the person constitutes the foundation of the equality of all people among themselves. As a result all forms of discrimination are totally unacceptable, especially those forms which unfortunately continue to divide and degrade the human family. This dignity is also "the foundation of participation and solidarity of all people among themselves. Dialogue and communion are rooted ultimately in what people *are* rather than what people *have*.

The most radical and elevating affirmation of the value of every human being was made by the Son of God in his becoming man in the womb of a woman."⁵

In Josefa Segovia this profound sense of the dignity of the human person was concrete, visible, deeply personal. She did not only value and defend each person's dignity but shared her wisdom to walk with many persons in the difficult process of growth towards wholeness. Every person, image of God, is called to develop the best of himself/herself for a fulfilling self-giving. She walked with many persons as a faithful companion, loving, sustaining, stimulating and taking the risk.

One of the most significant consequences of her deep awareness of having been created by God in His image and likeness and redeemed by Christ was her unique appreciation of the *value of her life*. She wrote in 1946:

"Let the first lesson be to esteem much one's life and that of others. Today, humankind glories in a lack of appreciation of life.

⁵*Christifideles Laici*, 37.

As a consequence of the experiences of wars, we become accustomed to talking of lives lost without it causing a strong impression on us. Upon learning of the number of victims caused by the explosion of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, the amazement and astonishment was more than the pain that came with the news.

Daily we read of thousands of persons who pay with their lives for their actuation which are more or less misjudged and we are not at all moved to compassion nor to indignation. All these put together bring about a humanity that does not truly value life.

Esteem life very much and make others esteem life, too."

It is the responsibility of the lay faithful, who more directly through their vocation or their profession are involved in accepting life, to make the Church's "yes" to human life concrete and efficacious. If indeed everyone has the mission and responsibility to acknowledge the personal dignity of every human being and to defend the right to life, some lay faithful, such as parents, teachers, health workers and the many who hold economic and political power, are given a particular title to this task.⁶

Many were the dialogues and communications held by Josefa Segovia with different groups of people enhancing their sense of mission and responsibility. She herself could perceive how much this option for life was connected to human growth. Education meant to her a coherent capacity to allow new life to grow.

Culture and Search for Truth. Understanding a Mission

At the beginning of the Centennial Celebrations, John Paul II invited us to a renewed effort in the task of evangelization of cultures, making the Reign of God more present each time to be able to respond better to the needs and challenges of contemporary society. (10 oct. 1991).

These words echoed one year ago what *Christifideles Laici* had expressed more extensively:

"Strata of humanity are transformed: for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever-wider geographic areas or to ever-greater numbers of people, but also affecting and,

⁶*Christifideles Laici*, 38.

as it were, challenging, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation. All this could be expressed in the following words: What matters is to evangelize humanity's culture and the cultures of the human family... The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture or, more correctly, of cultures." (Paul VI).

Love for culture and search for truth are significant traits of the evangelizing task that Pedro Poveda proposed to those called to the experience of a lay vocation in the field of culture and education. Josefa Segovia radiated this spirit founded on her indeclinable authenticity. We can say of her what someone has written about the roots of authenticity in the human person:

"The human person is authentic to the extent that he lives the truth. He conforms his mind, works, actions to what is. His mind reflects reality and his speech reflects his mind. Synonyms therefore are honesty, fidelity, reliability, trustworthiness, genuineness. But more is required. The human person must be whole to be completely authentic... We are dynamically oriented to the absolute Holy One, to Him who is fullness of beauty, truth, love, joy, ecstasy. The Father made us in the image of his Son so that anything less than conformity to this image is a falling away from the "authentikos," the original.

The genuine man or woman measures up to the real, factual situation. He is humble because he knows and professes himself to be neither more nor less than what he actually is.

Deep, ultimate person centered knowledge is achieved through love, genuine love.⁷

We have an enlightened treatise on *Study* by Josefa Segovia which expresses her conviction and her wisdom regarding an essential issue for those called to make a responsible contribution to a new culture in our times: (a) Study at all times at whatever age; (b) Search for knowledge with love; (c) "Love your culture as a mother loves the distaff with which she spins the clothes of her children," she said using one of

⁷ Thomas Dubay, *Authenticity*. Dimension Books, Denville, 1977.

her powerful images; and (d) Study for a mission: Josefa Segovia connects this call to the experience of service.

In Josefa Segovia, this idea of culture was translated into *a passionate love for truth* and a continuous search for it. In order to respond to this ideal, she studied much, wrote much, initiated publications, organized study groups, established educational Centers at all levels, paid attention to the university students and encouraged those involved in research in different fields. She approached different cultures with love and respect, always leaving behind her a trace of light that is today in four continents and in twenty-eight countries. Her prayer "living in truth, working in truth, loving You in truth, following You in truth" is kept alive among us and still inspires a fully human way of acting.

Christifideles Laici also encourages everyone towards this task that never ceases of evangelization of culture and cultures, as a service to the individual and to human society:

"Service to the individual and to human society is expressed and finds its fulfillment through the creation and the transmission of culture, which especially in our time constitutes one of the more serious tasks of living together as a human family and of social evolution. In this sense, culture must be held as the common good of every people, the expression of its dignity, liberty and creativity, and the testimony of its course through history. In particular, only from within and through culture does the Christian faith become part of history and the creator of history."⁸

Solidarity and Peace, a Challenge for the Present Times

Among the pressing needs of the world today, *Christifideles Laici* points out the reality of conflict and the longing for peace. Here is the call:

"Perhaps as never before in history, humanity is daily buffeted by conflict. This is a phenomenon which has many forms, displayed in a legitimate plurality of mentalities and initiatives, but manifested in the fatal opposition of persons, groups, categories, nations, blocks of nations. This opposition takes the form of violence, of terrorism, and of war. Once again, but with proportions

⁸ *Christifideles Laici*, 44.

enormously widespread, diverse sectors of humanity today, wishing to show their "omnipotence," renew the futile experience of constructing the "tower of Babel" (cf. Gen 11:1-9), which spreads confusion, struggle, disintegration and oppression. The human family is thus in itself dramatically convulsed and wounded.

On the other hand, totally unsuppressible is the human longing experienced by individuals and whole peoples for the inestimable good of peace in justice."⁹

One of the most passionate pages written by Josefa Segovia is precisely her analysis and invitation to peace. She devoted to this topic several letters, one of which I quote now, written in 1939 after experiences of conflict:

"Let us try to look at the world, not through a peeping hole but from a balcony full of light and from this balcony of the universe feel the ardent desire to do more and more for Christ and his Church.

Besides prayer, we have an appropriate field for work, trying to fill the immense hunger for God of so many souls, a hunger and an emptiness that originates from wars and division, an emptiness that can only be filled by Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. This is the hunger and emptiness of men and women, of children and of the whole world.

Frontiers would not be barriers but bridges, links which instead of separating with hate would bring about unity and fraternity."

This vision, complemented by other writings and above all by concrete gestures, connects with the value of solidarity as more than a feeling of vague compassion. It is, according to *Scilicetudo Rei Socialis*, "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the Lord of all and each individual because we are all really responsible for all." *Christifideles Laici* refers to it with challenging words to all lay faithful: "Take upon yourselves the task of being *peacemakers*." (cf. Is. 9:5). The same biblical reference is quoted by Josefa Segovia. Both of them call for a creative stance.

The faithful cannot remain indifferent or be strangers and inactive in the face of all that denies and compromises peace, namely, violence and war, torture and terrorism, concentration camps, militarization of

⁹ *Christifideles Laici*, 6.

public life, the arms race, and the nuclear threat. On the contrary, as disciples of Jesus Christ, the "Prince of Peace" (Is 9:5) and "Our Peace" (Eph. 2:14), the lay faithful ought to take upon themselves the task of being "peacemakers" (Mt 5:9), both through a conversion of "heart," justice and charity, all of which are the undeniable foundation of peace.

The lay faithful, in working together with all those who truly seek peace and themselves serving in specific organizations as well as in national or international institutions, ought to promote an extensive work of education intended to defeat the ruling culture of egoism, hate, vendetta and hostility, and thus to develop the culture of solidarity at every level. Such solidarity, in fact "is the way to peace and at the same time to development."

"...to reject as unacceptable all forms of violence, to promote attitudes of dialogue and peace and to commit themselves to establish a just international social order."¹⁰

Further reflections could allow us to see the amount of initiatives and efforts made in the world in order to offer a type of education that fosters a consistent process to build attitudes and readiness for peace in an interdependent world.

The unmistakable value of formation

Christifideles Laici declares as a fundamental aspect of the lay faithful's life and mission the call to personal growth, to bear fruit always (cf *Christifideles Laici*, 57). In this regard we may need to quote most of Josefa Segovia's writings, because her thoughts on formation cross through all her actions and presence. Such experience, like in *Christifideles Laici*, is rooted in Christ, the Vine, and generates a dynamism of unity of life, capital for a clear understanding of Christian growth and also for a true fulfillment of the lay vocation. The real contribution of the laity to the call to a new evangelization depends on the integration of the gospel and everyday life and responsibility. This integration or *unity of life*, becomes the core of the formation dynamism, a "vital synthesis," as called by *Christifideles Laici*:

"This vital synthesis will be achieved when the lay faithful know how to put the gospel and their daily duties of life into a more

¹⁰ *Christifideles Laici*, 42.

shining and convincing testimony, where not fear but the loving pursuit of Christ and adherence to him will be factors determining how a person is to live and grow, and these will lead to new ways of living more in conformity with human dignity."¹¹

Formation, according to Josefa Segovia, is the most fundamental, serious and difficult task we have to take on. It needs to be, she considered, solid and profound. Formation includes the reform of oneself in order to become leaven. Finally, formation of lay people means above all becoming and maturing as evangelizers.

Communication of Values: A Consistent Pattern

We will only suggest at this point a few elements for further development.

The personal vibration of the believer, in other words, the vitality of her belief is the root of any possibility of communication.

Josefa Segovia was indeed a person gifted for communication. More than intending to apply to her any concrete outline of communication, I would like just to uncover the consistent pattern that arises from the observation of what she said in coherence with her personality.

The communication of values passed in Josefa Segovia through her own person and reached other people through a style of communication which presented at least these three levels: (1) Self-awareness: authenticity as an outstanding trait; (2) Reference to a fundamental dialogue with God: dialogue experience; (3) Relating to others: urgency of a mission.

The maturation of her total being permeates these three lines of concern and experiences. "When a value gives weight to life, then we act humanly." (A. Gesche).

The value of the radical appreciation of *human dignity and life* as lived out in our social structures; the value of *truth* as expressed in the respectful and loving approach to each culture enhancing inculturation and cultural communication; the value of *peace and solidarity* and, as channel for deep changes in our interdependent world, the value of

¹¹ *Christifideles Laici*, 34

growth as unity of life, were some of the paths opened by Josefa Segovia for the laity today.

Each of them meant for her a journey towards her deepest self and authentic traits. They were the result of a unique inner dialogue with God. They were translated into projects of life, proposals and educational thrust.

With her life and her teaching, Josefa Segovia contributed outstandingly to the creation of a new *awareness* of the lay vocation. At the same time she encouraged a renewed responsibility "in this crucial time," as she used to say. And above all she engaged herself in and offered her wisdom to the continuous maturation process the laity is called to undertake.

May her remembrance allow us to listen not only to the voice of the singular woman she was, but also to the voice of the Spirit in a changing world towards the creation of a new culture and a different history. The indeclinable hope of Josefa Segovia can be for us a sign of light today as we continue to risk and to embrace the signs of the Kingdom in our midst. The laity is called indeed to a renewed commitment.