



# Saint Josemaría Escrivá

Founder of Opus Dei

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## A spiritual guide for our times

*Tatjana Goristchewa*

Our people of Russia, tortured but not annihilated, still has one source of authority: the *starts*\*. In a country where it is very hard to find a Bible, they are a living Gospel, a living proof that God exists – something outside the grasp of political calculation and worldly thinking. The *starts* are spiritual guides, men of tried and tested lives. They come out to meet us, like fathers. And, like fathers, they save us, guide us, strengthen us, and share their joy with us.

In Josemaría Escrivá, whom I have come to know through his writings, I have found the same zeal, the same strength, the same love, surpassing all the boundaries between spirits. His works hold an answer for everyone who seeks for someone to trust in. And I have found in him too that unmistakable authority that does not do violence to the spirit or oppress it, but instead calls forth love and enthusiasm: true fatherhood.

Our age has lost authorities who can unite people: it has lost fatherhood. And when there are no fathers people end up rootless, homeless. Hence the great value for us of those great figures who are able to shine out through the darkness of the whole of Europe and become an authority, just where the very concept of authority had been lost.

“This man is so cheerful that he can’t be an atheist,” Dostoyevsky said once. And Josemaría Escrivá repeated, like a constant refrain, his call to the joy and happiness that comes of being God’s children. Surprisingly, holiness has a paradoxical effect. Holiness demands the maximum from us: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Holiness demands that we leave everything, take up our cross and follow Christ. Holiness means listening, heeding this call and obeying it unconditionally. And it is precisely by obeying that we become free: with an inner freedom that has nothing in common with being enslaved to an ideology, and still less with being subject to any kind of political system. Inner obedience is something that is freely chosen. That is why holiness goes together with joy.

People of the twentieth century boasted of their freedom, while in reality they were victims living under dominion. People of the twentieth century, in their poverty, wondered whether the Church too would not mean slavery for them. They would not listen to the answers of tradition and morality. Only a lived experience was capable of convincing them. A friend of mine who for thirty-five years had lived by the motto “Better to die on your feet than live on your knees”, told me that he experienced for the first time a sense of the limitless freedom that comes from obedience when he knelt down in a church. The lives of our spiritual teachers, the living spirit of our modern saints, is also an answer. Contemplating them enlarges the soul and leads us to peace.

I was impressed by Escrivá’s constant call to holiness in everyday life. We tend to look for great things and great events. That tendency – to delusions of grandeur – is a sign of human projects and ideologies. But Christianity is not a utopia, nor mere idealism. In the background of icons there is a particular call to pay attention to little things: the widow’s mite, the narrow gate, the grain of mustard-seed, the eye of the needle. The greater God is, the smaller the world is. Their call to attend to what does not glitter is an unmistakable sign that icons are not rooted in ideologies. God looks at us from the smallest detail. Moreover, ideologies are always orientated towards the future. But God is the eternal present. Christians live their lives here and now. “Now” contains infinity and eternity. “Renew each day the effective desire to annihilate yourself, to deny yourself, to forget yourself, to walk *in novitate sensus*, with a new life, exchanging this misery of ours for all the hidden and eternal grandeur of God.” The little things of every day show us the right time and place, and above all the real time and place, for love and faithfulness. The poetry of Christianity is rooted in the specific deeds of everyday life. Christians are called, in Escrivá’s words, to “turn the prose of every day into heroic verse”. In exactly the same sense, the *starets* Paisiy Velichovskiy called the monk the “martyr of everyday martyrdom”, and Escrivá called the path of Christian living a path of “hidden sacrifice”.

Paternity is spiritual in the measure in which it is itself obedient, and lets itself be guided by heaven. In spiritual direction, equality and authority come together in the most wonderful way. The spiritual father leads his spiritual son or daughter upwards; he teaches them how to go up one step further at a time. As Dionysius the Areopagite said, the higher step of the spiritual hierarchy does not turn against the lower. In God’s eyes they are all equal. And so spiritual direction, with all its equality, demands daring and calls Christians to be ever fruitful.

\* The *startsi* (singular *starets*) are priests or monks who, because of their

reputation for holiness, give spiritual guidance to other members of the faithful in the Orthodox communion.