



# Saint Josemaría Escrivá

## Founder of Opus Dei

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## God's instrument for the Work

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The life of the founder of Opus Dei was the most eloquent application of his message. The lesson of every saint becomes explicit in the coherence between his life, his preaching and his writings. Saint Josemaría spoke of "the mute eloquence" of works: "Love means deeds and not sweet words" (*The Forge*, 498). What do saints talk to us about? There is one, simple, inexhaustible answer: God. Each one of them throws light on a particular feature of the infinite riches of the mystery of Christ.

### 1. A divine mission

To understand what the Lord says to the Church through the saints, we must be clear about one premise: holiness is the fullness of divine charity; all the saints, each in his own way, soared to the heights of divine charity. However, all saints bring a special message, which should not only be sought in the heroism with which they "privately" (if I may use this term) exercised the Christian virtues, but also in the way they carried out their mission on earth. Their awareness of the task received from God, along with the daily struggle to carry it out, explains the heroism of the saints. The point which really qualifies a person in causes for canonization lies precisely in the proven radicalism with which the person carried out God's will, the way he or she fulfilled the mission entrusted to each (the papacy, the episcopate, the priesthood; religious life, or the call to holiness in the world: in the family, at work, and so forth).

The mission the Lord entrusted to Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer can be examined from two aspects: the content and instrument. On the one hand, he was called to proclaim the universal vocation to holiness, and to show Christians who are called to serve God in the world, as the context of and material for sanctification. On the other hand and at the same time, he founded in the Church an institution entirely aimed at spreading this message and helping others, without distinction, to put it into practice. How did this priest accomplish this task? One element is particularly striking: he was fully conscious that he was the main agent of nothing, he did not have to invent anything, he had received it all from the Lord.

Hence the great pains he took to interpret the founding charism faithfully, to apply it without variations and to pass it on whole.

The historical circumstances in which Opus Dei came into being explain Saint Josemaría's consciousness of the supernatural origin of his mission. Anyone who analyzes the facts reaches the conclusion that God explicitly intervened. Indeed, it all happened in a few moments. On October 2, 1928 in the morning, at a precise moment during the spiritual retreat while absorbed in prayer in his room, Josemaría Escrivá "saw" what the Lord asked of him. Later, he wrote: "That day, the Lord founded his Opus (Work)". He received a sudden illumination. He felt he was merely the instrument - and one that was "inept and deaf" as he then started to describe himself - to a divine plan. The very name - Opus Dei - by which the founder later (in 1930) began to call the pastoral phenomenon that had sprung from that illumination was a clear sign of his consciousness of this. One can observe that the Apostolic Constitution *Ut sit!*, with which the Holy Father established Opus Dei as a personal prelature on November 28, 1982, indirectly accepts the founder's interpretation of the birth of Opus Dei: "he acted", the text says, "*divina ductus inspiratione*" (led by divine inspiration).

In the dedication with which he laboured all his life to fulfil his mission, he reveals his total conviction that he was an instrument. Hence his heroism, his fortitude in embracing the Cross and the daring of his apostolic initiatives. From this come his openness of mind and heart, his refusal of any kind of factiousness or pettiness, and his work, always at the service of the Church.... From this comes, finally, his struggle to begin over and over again every day, and many times a day, in his endeavour to correspond to this grace.

However, the content of the message (that we will now illustrate) in the light that emerges from it, also offers enlightening prospects for evangelization. In its universality - that goes beyond every barrier of race, cultural background, or geographical origin - we can recognize the brilliant, perennial general lines of the Gospel.

## **2. Perennial timeliness**

When he began his ministry at the end of the 1920s, his message seemed outstandingly new. On the one hand, he renewed the consciousness of the active role of the laity in the Church's mission; on the other, he called for a new theological perception of earthly realities: the world was no longer seen principally as the realm of sin, a reality to be kept at a certain distance to preserve oneself from contagion, but as a reality endowed with divine meaning, created by God and marked by his active presence, redeemed by Christ and in need of being led back

to God today.

These new things were the result of the Holy Spirit's action in the history of the Church, they were born from an inexorable process of maturation.

In this sense, the message of Saint Josemaría belongs to the perennial patrimony of the Church, as the papal decree of his heroic virtues stresses: "This message of sanctification in and of earthly realities appears providentially timely in the spiritual situation of our day, so inclined to exalt human values, yet so prone to give in to an immanentist vision of the world, cut off from God. On the other hand, in inviting Christians to seek union with God through work, the perennial task and dignity of the human person on earth, this timeliness is destined to endure over and above the changing ages and historical situations, as an inexhaustible source of spiritual light".

In fact, to the problems of a society in rapid change, the teaching of Saint Josemaría offers the latest answers that have nothing to do with the fashions or trends of the moment. The decree of his heroic virtues continues: "*Regnare Christum volumus!* (We want Christ to reign). This was Msgr. Escrivá's programme: to put Christ at the peak of all human activities: from every situation and profession his ecclesial service promoted an upward movement rising towards God of people immersed in temporal realities, in accord with the promise of the Saviour in which he saw the heart of the pastoral phenomenon of Opus Dei: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." In the Christianization of the world from within (its own realities) lies the special merit of his contribution to the advancement of the laity.

### **3. The heart of his message**

The life of the founder of Opus Dei was the most eloquent application of his message. This emerged clearly from the cause of canonization. The lesson of every saint becomes explicit in the coherence between his life, his preaching and his writings. Saint Josemaría spoke of "the mute eloquence" of works: "Love means deeds and not sweet words" (*The Forge*, 498). What do saints talk to us about? There is one, simple, inexhaustible answer: God. Each one of them throws light on a particular feature of the infinite riches of the mystery of Christ.

In an even cursory analysis of Saint Josemaría's works published so far, one finds a deep perception of the mystery of the Incarnation from which his charism flows. The three fundamental aspects of the doctrine that constitutes the backbone of the thought of the founder of Opus Dei stem from the same root. I am referring to the proclamation of the universal call to holiness in its subjective, objective and

cosmic dimensions, which I shall explain briefly.

The subjective viewpoint. In Christ, the Son of God made man and the Redeemer of the world, we received the gift of the divine adoptive sonship. So in the Son, we are configured to Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. Holiness can also be described as the fullness of the development of the grace of the divine sonship in the soul. The proclamation of the vocation of all men and women - regardless of their state - to the perfection of divine charity is founded on this primary truth. In an unforgettable mystical experience in October 1931, while Saint Josemaría was crossing Madrid in a tram, the Lord gave him an extraordinarily deep vision of the gift of adoptive divine sonship in Christ.

The objective viewpoint. Not only did he proclaim forcefully that every one is called to holiness; but also that all our ordinary activities are a means to, and an opportunity for, sanctification and do not constitute their own world, outside the ordinary one, within the reach of only a few. In the Word made flesh God assumed in himself and divinized the human reality, the whole of the human being. Every aspect of created reality is informed and transformed by this exaltation in God. Before the breadth of the panorama spread out before his eyes, Josemaría Escrivá, deeply moved, was able to exclaim, "The divine paths of the world have been opened up" (*Christ is Passing By*, 21).

The Kingdom of heaven is established on earth through every human activity, even the simplest, as long as it is done in the Spirit of Christ who, for 30 years, worked quietly in Nazareth. The pattern of the usually unvaried daily life of anyone of the faithful, reveals an intrinsic divine dimension: "The days seem the same, even monotonous. But don't forget that our condition which is apparently so common has a divine value. God is interested in everything we do, because Christ wishes to become incarnate in our things, to vivify from within even our most insignificant actions" (*Christ is Passing By*, 174). Daily life, professional work, as the place and material of sanctification: we will return to this point so full of consequences not only for spirituality, but also for pastoral work.

The doctrine of the universal vocation to holiness also possesses an undoubtedly cosmic component: the Christian's work sanctifies the world. The Apostolic Brief for Josemaría Escrivá's Beatification says: "The revelation of the connection between the natural dynamism of human work and that of grace, while affirming the primacy of the supernatural life of union with Christ, expresses the latter in an incisive effort for the Christian animation of the world by all the faithful. In this context, Venerable Josemaría Escrivá showed the full redemptive power of faith and its transfiguring force in individual persons and in the structures in which

human ideals and aspirations are moulded."

In the situation that these words call to mind it is impossible not to hear the echo of that well-known passage of the Letter to the Romans: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now." Into this framework fits another mystic experience granted to the Saint on August 7, 1931, during the celebration of Mass: "At the moment of the consecration, while lifting up the sacred host, without losing my recollection and without becoming distracted...there came to my mind with extraordinary force and clarity that passage of Scripture: *et si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum* (when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself). Generally, when confronted with the supernatural I am afraid. Then comes the *ne timeas* (do not be afraid) it is I." And I understood that it will be the men and women of God who will raise up the Cross with the teachings of Christ placing them at the peak of all human activities.... And I saw our Lord triumphing and drawing all things to himself."

#### **4. Daily life**

In connection with the doctrine of the universal vocation to holiness, the Saint loved to use this threefold expression: We have to sanctify our work, we have to sanctify ourselves in our work, and we have to sanctify others through our work (*Christ is Passing By*, 122). Look at this passage: "For there is no human undertaking which cannot be sanctified, which cannot be an opportunity to sanctify ourselves and to cooperate with God in the sanctification of the people with whom we work" (*Christ is Passing by*, 10). Thus work appears as the central point around which the person's life revolves and the focus of his whole life. For ordinary Christians, it articulates their daily response to the mission received from God on earth.

In the teaching of this man, a saint, work reveals - in Christ and in the Christian - a supernatural dimension which increases its value, to such an extent that he did not hesitate to assert: "Your human vocation is a part - and an important part - of your divine vocation. That is the reason why you must strive for holiness, giving a particular character to your human personality, a style to your life; contributing at the same time to the sanctification of others, your fellow men; sanctifying your work and your environment: the profession or job that fills your day, your home and family and the country where you were born and which you love" (*Christ is Passing By*, 46). It is hard to imagine a more convinced assertion of the lay state as a form of the saving presence of the Church in the world.

From all this it can be seen that Saint Josemaría took work in the broadest sense,

as an activity, the work of the human being. From this point of view, it becomes one with daily life: that series of events, important or seemingly insignificant, which are interwoven in the day of the ordinary faithful. This passage, from one of his homilies, offers a few evocative ideas for spiritual life: Speaking with theological rigour "Nothing can be foreign to Christ's interest without being limited to functional categories; we cannot say that there are things - good, noble or indifferent - which are exclusively profane. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death" (*Christ is Passing By*, 112). Let us examine this point which, as said, plays a central role in the teachings of Saint Escrivá.

A few brief ideas from *The Way*: "'Great' holiness consists in doing the 'small duties' of each moment" (817). "Do everything for Love. Thus there will be no little things: everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism" (813). "Have you noticed how human love consists of little things? Well, divine Love also consists of little things" (824). It can be said that the entire work of Saint Josemaría unfolds like a hymn, a hymn of praise for the supernatural and human value in daily life lived in union with Christ, the Word made flesh. It is not only the site, but also the material for holiness, where the most insignificant gesture becomes prayer. Those who glimpse the supernatural dimension in day to day life, those who live it as an active search for the encounter with Christ, take part in their own daily transfiguration. For the eyes of faith, even what at first may seem grey, flat or dull, reveals God's presence: "There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations; and it is up to each person to discover it" (*Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, 301).

At times his prayer reaches peaks that seemed to be reserved for the expressive power of the poet: "We are poor creatures, yet with the help of grace we find pure gold, emeralds and rubies where others can only see the bottoms of bottles", said Saint Josemaría. In this regard he also liked to recall that Christians are the aristocrats of love, because everything speaks to them of God. These words offer poetry and theology at the same time: "Heaven and earth, ... seem to meet on the horizon, but where they really meet is in your hearts when you seek to sanctify your ordinary life" (*Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, 301).

## **5. For the world's salvation**

The Christian is the guardian of a patrimony that he cannot keep for himself. In the heart of Saint Josemaría's message, we find engraved with decisive traits the conviction that the universal vocation to holiness is a vocation to the apostolate. The decree of his heroic virtues says that, "he called all the faithful to be inserted

in the apostolic dynamism of the Church, each one in his situation in the world". The reflection in *The Way* is truly unforgettable: "These world crises are the crises of saints" (301).

If we go to the roots, once again we find meditation on the mystery of Christ as the power that feeds this consciousness of faith. Here is an important passage: "Christ has taught us in a definitive way how to make this love for God real. Apostolate is love for God that overflows and communicates itself to others. The interior life implies a growth in union with Christ... And apostolate is the precise and necessary outward manifestation of interior life. When one tastes the love of God, one feels burdened with the weight of souls. There is no way to separate interior life from apostolate, just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as Redeemer. The Word chose to become flesh in order to save men" (*Christ Is Passing By*, 122).

Once again we find the sign of professional work, of social relations that spontaneously but not casually are established in ordinary life, as the normal place of our apostolate. We have all been called to the faith to bring to others the same gift. Recalling a journey made years before to a seaside town, this new saint writes: "One day, after nightfall...we saw a boat approaching the shore. Two dark men bounded from it, as strong as rocks...so weatherbeaten they looked as though they had been cast in bronze. They began to pull in the nets...: they were heavy with shining, silvery fish. They pulled hard, their feet planted in the sand, and with surprising energy. Suddenly a little child arrived...he grabbed the cord with his tiny hands and began to pull with obvious clumsiness. He certainly melted the hearts of those rough, totally unrefined fishermen, and they let the child help them. They did not send him away although he must have been a nuisance more than anything else. I thought of you and of myself...and of myself. Of our hauling in the nets every day, with such expectation. If we present ourselves before God like that child, convinced of our weakness but ready to back his designs, we will reach our goal more easily: we will land the nets, full of an abundant catch, because wherever our strength is lacking, God's power intervenes" (*Friends of God*, 14). Everyone's effort is necessary if the fruitfulness of the Church is to match God's plans.

After thanking the Lord for granting him to beatify and canonize so many Christians in recent years, including many lay people who became holy in the most ordinary living conditions, Pope John Paul II launched his now well-known appeal in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this

direction" (31).

This is a whole, great journey in the Church towards that holiness to which every Christian is called: the personal sanctification of the common Christian faithful so that each one, in turn, may become with his example and his words a centre of spiritual outreach for the salvation of the world.

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