



# Saint Josemaría Escrivá

## Founder of Opus Dei

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## How the founder of Opus Dei practised the spirit of mortification

*Javier Echevarria*

In his book *Christ is Passing By*, n. 97, Saint Josemaría wrote: “In thinking about Christ's death, we find ourselves invited to take a good hard look at our everyday activities and to be serious about the faith we profess. Holy Week cannot be a kind of ‘religious interlude’, time taken out from a life which is completely caught up in human affairs. It must be an opportunity to understand more profoundly the love of God, so that we'll be able to show that love to other people through what we do and say”.

### The prayer of the senses

Msgr. Escrivá practised corporal mortification and penance because he saw them as an indispensable means to union with God and apostolic effectiveness. He often talked about the prayer of the senses, shown in corporal and interior sacrifices, and in the spirit of atonement, which leads one to deny oneself for love.

In the book *Memoria del Beato Josemaría* (“Remembering Blessed Josemaría”), Bishop Javier Echevarria responds to questions and promptings about how the founder of Opus Dei practised the spirit of mortification.

In *The Way*, n. 856, the Founder of Opus Dei talks about the “paradox that whoever wants to follow the ‘little’ way in order to become a child, needs to add strength and virility to his will”. So I thought it would be opportune to tackle the subject of mortification and penance, love for the Cross, and the spirit of contrition.

### Moved by his love

He often spoke to us of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. He showed us how Christ went to the extreme of self-giving to wipe out all the deficiencies of mankind, moved by his love which was full of happiness and freedom: *oblatus est quia ipse voluit* (“he was offered up because it was his will,” Isaiah 53:7). On

September 1, 1971, Msgr. Escrivá expressed this inner conviction: “I feel certain that it is necessary to crucify the memory, the understanding and the will: there is a nail for each human faculty!”

He had the oratory where he normally celebrated Mass in Rome decorated with a design of thistles and roses. From his early youth he often used to recall the motto *Per aspera ad astra* – through rough places, to the stars – and also used it as a motif in the decoration. On one occasion he was showing his oratory to some people, and said: “*Per aspera ad astra*. For me, those words have always been a wake-up call: to get to Heaven we have to suffer, empty ourselves, get rid of our own ego, leaving ourselves totally at the disposition of the Will of the Blessed Trinity!”

### **As natural as our heartbeat**

He accepted active and passive mortifications joyfully; he wanted our Lord to be the owner of his life at every moment, when he experienced the joy of work and when he met suffering. I think that the following words, dating from 1963, sum up his attitude very well: “We have to die little by little, through continuous mortification in a thousand details; but that isn’t something to be scared of, because it should become as natural as our heartbeat. Right now I don’t notice my heartbeat, but it is moving, it is beating. And alas for the day it stops! I’ll say the same to you: in your spiritual lives, the life of your hearts, that heartbeat, that effort, means mortifying yourselves at every moment, and **staying in loving conversation with our Lord**, appealing to the intercession of Mary, and Joseph, and your Guardian Angels.”

That continuous heartbeat requires a personal effort; it isn’t something natural or automatic. In fact it usually means having a plan of mortifications, both big ones and small ones.

More than once, Msgr. Escrivá asked us, very simply, “How many dozens of habitual mortifications do you have?” When I first met him he was suffering from diabetes, and I realized that he was making many sacrifices in order to carry off the painful symptoms of this disease with style and elegance.

### **In daily things**

He mortified himself mainly in fulfilling his plan of life. He set aside his personal tastes, and kept strictly to the timetable of the house, without making himself an exception or making excuses for himself, despite his illness.

Very naturally, he used to avoid adopting comfortable positions while he was working or chatting to people. He didn't lean back in his chair; or cross his legs when he was sitting down. For the last years of his life he used to sit in a high chair which prevented him from resting his feet on the floor.

In 1954 he described this constant effort in daily things in order to offer them to our Lord, in these terms: "I can't go around hunting lions here, because in the first place there aren't any, and in the second place, unless I stay on guard, being vigilant, and cutting myself off from everything that doesn't unite me with God, I won't be capable of seeing anything that he asks of me. But by seeking that finesse in love, and sensitivity in little things, our daily lives, from morning to night, are a service, a continual penance to give glory to God. And the effort we put into little things – *in pauca fidelis!* Faithful in little things! – also serves to humble us, because we reach nightfall with the conviction that we aren't worth anything. In my examination of conscience I often have to say: 'Josemaría is not happy with Josemaría'; because there are many things that I could have done and chose not to. Unless we exercise ourselves in the little things, we would believe ourselves victors, and get proud, since on the basis of false experience we'd imagine we could be faithful in great things. But the daily reality is that in little things, we often aren't generous at all."

### **The example of Jesus Christ**

A classic chapter of Christian asceticism has to do with mortifications at meals. This recalls the example of Jesus Christ, who fasted in the desert (Matthew 4:2), was hungry on a journey (Matthew 21:18) and experienced burning thirst (John 4:7).

Msgr. Escrivá never ate anything at all outside of meals. Lunch lasted for only a few minutes unless he had guests. For some periods he would do without salt, and didn't have sugar in his coffee, even after he was cured of his diabetes. There were also times when, with the permission of his spiritual director, he kept a strict fast for two or three days, taking just a little water and a small piece of bread.

He never left anything on his plate, whether it was too salty or not salty enough, undercooked or overcooked. He would try to take more of things he didn't like so much, and less of things he liked. He would take any piece of food that, through nobody's fault, had got spoilt, and if there was something he thought would damage his health he would not take it, but never asked for anything to replace it.

At many meals we had to press him to drink water, because he drank very little of it during the day. That was a mortification he had had for many years – sometimes he offered the sacrifice of drinking no water at all except at the ablutions at Mass.

As for drinks, for most of his life he didn't drink so much as a glass of wine with a meal. As time went by, because of renal insufficiency the doctor prescribed Fiuggi mineral water, which is a very ordinary brand in Italy. In the last three or four years of his life, again at his doctor's recommendation, he changed to Evian, whose mineral content is different, because it was found that he was losing a great deal of potassium. It was a mortification for him to drink the quantity of water – a litre – the doctors told him to, but additionally, he tended to drink less water at meals and we had to insist, especially when it got really hot in Rome in the summer.

When he had guests for a meal, out of a sense of hospitality he made sure that the meals were good and well presented. But he made sure that he himself took just the minimum, without any concessions, and chose the least attractive and plainest food there was. Many of his guests said afterwards how impressed they'd been by his manners, because he never made them feel that they should not eat as normal.

### **The faithful fulfilment of one's duties**

Although he understood that the mortification which is most pleasing to God is the faithful fulfilment of one's duties, he also practiced severe corporal penances. As well as solid theological reasons for this, one can also see in it the **sporting spirit** in which he undertook his ascetical struggle.

### **When you really love**

He used the **disciplines** and the **cilice**, with the permission of his spiritual director. For a time, when his diabetes was at its height, in Rome, he had to stop using them because his doctor forbade them: any slight abrasion, however small, would get infected and make his state of health worse.

He practised in his own life what he always taught: "**When you really love, no sacrifice is hard; love hopes for everything and gives everything.** The only explanation for Christ's Passion is love. Mortification is the prayer of the body and the soul. Put love into it, and everything you do will seem little."

**From *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Javier Echevarria and Salvador**

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