



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Josemaria Escriva's love for the virtue of poverty

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The article below is a translation of one that appeared in the Spanish daily ABC on June 26, 1985, the tenth anniversary of St Josemaria's death.

The Philippines are currently undergoing a grave economic crisis. With God's grace and the untiring efforts of men and women of good will, let us trust that the situation will improve. As Christians, we can at least be consoled by St Paul's words, "*Diligentibus Deum, omnia cooperantur in bonum* (Rom 8:28): all things work together for the good of those who love God."

In these brief lines I would like to share with you some ideas that I have gathered of the spirituality contained in the writings of the founder of Opus Dei, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer. These ideas are very useful for everyone, and especially for many Filipinos in these difficult times. Msgr. Escriva used to sum up St Paul's theme by shortening the phrase to "*Omnia in bonum!* – it's all for the best!" Everything will work out in the end.

This is not an expression of mere resignation when faced with a difficult or seemingly desperate situation. Just the opposite: it's an expression of genuine Christian hope in tackling real, objective difficulties.

When we consider the virtue of poverty, if we meditate on Christ's infancy as told us in St Matthew's and St Luke's Gospels, one impressive truth stands out: that our Lord Jesus Christ chose to be born poor and live in a poor family. Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family, possessed almost nothing. So Jesus Christ was born in very poor surroundings. God made Man was born in a stable, a shelter for animals. He was laid in a manger, a place for putting animal feed.

In a beautiful homily on poverty entitled "Detachment", the founder of Opus Dei invites us to reflect on these considerations. "The detachment which our Lord preached, and which he expects from every Christian, necessarily brings with it

external manifestations. Jesus ‘began to do and to teach’ (Acts 1:1). Before teaching with words he proclaimed his doctrine with deeds. You have seen that he was born in a stable, in the most abject poverty, and that the first time he slept on this earth was on straw in a manger” (*Friends of God*, 115).

I have known Opus Dei for twenty years now, and throughout that time I have always been impressed by its emphasis on the apostolate of doctrine. The apostolate of Opus Dei is truly a continual catechesis. In this task of spreading sound doctrine, Msgr. Escriva always followed the example set by our Lord of “doing and teaching”. The members of Opus Dei certainly can well imitate their founder, who, before teaching in words, proclaimed the doctrine with his deeds. Especially during the years following the founding of Opus Dei in 1928, Msgr. Escriva suffered some of the most extreme forms of material need. There were times when he could only have one meal a day, and sometimes he was obliged to sleep on the kitchen floor because there was no room anywhere else in the places where the first members of Opus Dei were living.

I have often referred to an amusing saying by St Teresa of Avila, “money is the devil’s dung, but it makes very good manure.” In a truly providential way the spirit of Opus Dei has influenced all noble human spheres through what its founder used to call “Christian materialism”. I feel admiration for the people of all kinds who practice the spirit of Opus Dei, fearlessly employing material instruments which need money to run, in order to carry out a generous apostolate of Christian formation for countless men and women through retreat centers, student residences, technical training institutes, youth clubs and other centers in which they provide doctrinal and spiritual formation. This “Christian materialism”, as Msgr. Escriva explained it, is the most effective way of using the good “manure” for the glory of God.

Poverty is a very Christian virtue because Christ our Saviour, who is riches itself, chose to be born poor and live his life on earth among the poor. We have to realize that Christian poverty is a virtue that everyone who wants to be a faithful follower of Christ needs to practice.

I have often heard from the members of Opus Dei in my archdiocese that Msgr. Escriva always taught them that holiness is for everyone, and that it is achieved through a sincere effort to practice all the Christian virtues – heroically if necessary. In our current economic situation we are offered many opportunities to practice the Christian virtue of poverty heroically.

Vatican II reminded us that holiness is not only for those who make public

profession of their dedication to God as religious or priests, but for all Christians, including ordinary lay-people. Therefore ordinary Christians who wish to achieve the fullness of Christian life must inevitably practice this virtue of poverty.

Of course, the way it is practiced will vary depending on an individual's specific calling within the Church. Msgr. Escriva, in *The Way*, a best-seller of spirituality, offers us a practical Christian guideline: "Try and live in such a way that you can voluntarily deprive yourself of the comfort and ease you wouldn't approve of in the life of another man of God. Remember, you are the grain of wheat of which the Gospel speaks. If you don't bury yourself and die, there will be no harvest" (*The Way*, 938).

For most Christian men and women, ordinary citizens of the world, the practice of the virtue of poverty will be in the context of their family. This includes, among other things, trying to keep within the family budget, economizing as much as possible. It requires a serious effort from each member of the family not to fall into consumerism or any other form of materialism.

For a Christian family, poverty means not going after material possessions as though they were this life's main source of happiness. For ordinary men and women, Christian poverty means not so much renouncing the things of this world, as not setting one's heart on them. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," our Lord told the early Christians (Lk 12:34).

We need to understand this virtue correctly. Sometimes we tend to consider poverty as an evil in itself, as an absolute evil. But we are wrong: poverty is a virtue. Perhaps that is easier to understand if we call it by its other name: detachment. Poverty is a certain letting go of material possessions, a self-denial that we are ready to practice for love of God. The virtue of poverty consists of knowing exactly how to use the things of this world, which are gifts from God, as means to achieve higher things, and not as ends in themselves.

In this regard I would like to refer to another service offered by Opus Dei to the Church and the whole of society. Opus Dei teaches in practical ways what the true spirit of poverty means, without ever dissuading the poor from making every effort to improve their living conditions. Through its centers and in the homes of its faithful, Opus Dei shows that poverty does not mean dirt, bad taste or a chaotic lifestyle.

Poverty demands a heroic effort to keep things spick and span and in good condition. It means taking care of everything one uses. It means making things

last a long, long time. Obviously, all of that involves developing other complementary virtues like order, tidiness and diligence. I can honestly assure you that all the centers of Opus Dei I have visited are living examples of a genuine spirit of poverty. They are spotlessly clean, set up in very good taste, and are always the result of the efforts of the people who live there to overcome the human failings of botched work and neglect. Considering the urgent need to teach everyone, including Filipinos, the virtue of caring for the tiniest details in ordinary work, this aspect of Opus Dei's spirituality is an effective response to the demand that we each have to face, that of achieving perfection in our daily occupations.