



Saint Josemaría Escrivá

Founder of Opus Dei

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Saint Josemaría Escrivá, teacher of prayer in ordinary life

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Saint Josemaría Escrivá has a place among the masters of spirituality in the history of the Church, for several reasons. Above all, because he is a saint for our times (he was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2002), who spread the universal call to holiness, in a specific way, to thousands and thousands of Christians.

To achieve holiness it is indispensable to maintain a constant conversation with God, or, to put it in another way, to pray. This does not consist only in the repetition of vocal prayers; it means talking with God, bringing into play all our human capacities: soul and body, head and heart, doctrine and affections. Being holy means being like Jesus Christ; the more closely we imitate him and the more we become like him, developing the sacramental identification received in Baptism, with the help of grace and through our own efforts, the greater the holiness and identification with the Master we will achieve. Hence the importance of that “constant conversation” with Jesus. “Sanctity, without prayer?” St Josemaría asked himself in one of his most widely-known books. And he replies concisely, “I don’t believe in such sanctity” (*The Way*, 107).

Itinerant contemplative

God granted the Founder of Opus Dei the gift, among others, of teaching in practical ways that men and women who live out their lives amidst earthly activities, in work, family life, and the most varied upright professional and social spheres, can and must aspire to holiness without neglecting all those activities. Just the reverse: they have to make use of those things to seek God, find him and love him. This teaching merited for him the title of “itinerant contemplative” in the Decree of the Holy See that acknowledges that he practiced all the Christian virtues to a heroic degree – a pre-requisite for canonization.

This summary of St Josemaría’s life entails some very important consequences. In the first place, there is no type of life, provided it is not opposed to God’s law, that cannot be sanctified. Secondly, nobody is refused the grace to become genuinely

contemplative. Next, it is possible to remain consciously in God's presence amidst the most absorbing work, to converse with him in the clamour of the world, without deserting the place we each occupy in human society. To sum up: living as a man or woman of prayer is not something reserved for those who receive a special calling to the priestly or religious life. Contemplative life, precisely because it is a requisite on the path to holiness, is a way that is open to all of us.

St Josemaría Escrivá was called by God not only to proclaim this message but to teach people to practice it to the full. His example, the teachings he gives in his writings, and above all the reality of countless people who take inspiration from his spirit to sanctify themselves in the middle of earthly affairs, are a clear expression of the validity of what the Second Vatican Council declared about the universal call to holiness. They also provide a concrete way of practicing Pope John Paul II's proposal at the beginning of the new millennium, when he exhorted Christians to deepen in the "art of prayer", in order to aspire to a "high measure" of holiness in their daily lives.

Before showing some of the basic points of the teachings on prayer given by this master of Christian living, I would like to quote the beginning of a homily that goes under the significant title of "Life of Prayer". St Josemaría wrote: "Whenever we feel in our hearts a desire to improve, a desire to respond more generously to Our Lord, and we look for something to guide us, a north star to guide our lives as Christians, the Holy Spirit will remind us of the words of the Gospel that we 'ought to pray continually and never be discouraged' (Lk 18:1). Prayer is the foundation of any supernatural endeavour. With prayer we are all-powerful; without it, if we were to neglect it, we would accomplish nothing" (*Friends of God*, 238).

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