



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## The Human Realism of Sanctity

*Joaquín Navarro Valls*

"In the twentieth century, we have witnessed a clarification of the role of the ordinary Christian in the Church". According to an article published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Navarro Valls affirms that since the foundation of Opus Dei in 1928, Josemaria Escriva's contribution to this new awareness has been enormous. "It allows us to see -explains Navarro - that the saint does not live in a world of shadowy appearances, but rather in our real human world, in which there is a 'divine something' that is already there waiting for the person who knows how to discover it".

In our day, sanctity is an enigmatic word. This is one of the consequences of the grave shortage of adequate models which is so characteristic of our culture. Heroes are thought to live on only in literature, and the saint only in the inoffensive penumbra of the temple. In life, that is to say, in our immediate circumstances, both seem to exist only in unrealistic shadows, as archetypes who are closer to myth than to models from which we can learn or whom we can imitate.

The notion of sanctity, as it is commonly understood, first came to us through the visual arts of iconography and religious images, and later on through hagiographic and apologetic literature. I do not believe that any of these art forms actually can adequately depict the lives of the saints.

The saint who appears in most of the iconography of the Catholic imagination responds above all -and this seems natural- to the criteria of visual symbolism, which tries to represent the person in a paradigmatic moment of his or her existence. Art -and above all Baroque art- abstracts the habitual, the everyday, that which actually takes up the greater part of the spiritual energy of a person. It concentrates instead on the episodic and the grandiose, whose exceptional nature could seem to offer more expressive options for art than does the ordinary.

The very idea that everyone is called to be a saint is not common in the works of

spiritual authors, or at least it has not been for the last ten or twelve centuries. And what is even more rare in these authors is the idea that these realities which we call 'civil' and which spiritual writings catalogue as 'the world' that is to say, all that constitutes work, family and social relations can not only be the backdrop of sanctity, but rather that they can be the means, instrument and matter of sanctity. It is usually said that one can achieve sanctity despite these human circumstances. However the idea that these circumstances are the very place and occasion of the encounter with God were far from being taken into serious consideration.

In the twentieth century, we have witnessed a clarification of the role of the ordinary Christian in the Church. A fundamental element in this task of clarification is the consciousness of the call to live the plenitude of Christian life in and from the circumstances of one's life, in the context of one's everyday activities. The decisive documents of Vatican Council II, which concluded in 1965, contain this broadening of the theology of the laity. Josemaría Escrivá has made an enormous contribution to this new consciousness since 1928 when he founded Opus Dei.

The visual image of sanctity, as it has been frequently represented for many centuries, could lead us to think that only exceptional circumstances provide an adequate setting for the life of a saint. Nevertheless, when one has really known a saint, when one has crossed paths with one, one realizes the need to modify such ideas of sanctity.

We see that we need to change our idea because it may not have been completely realistic, and it may have been lacking in substance or in proportion. While contemplating those images, we were perhaps seeking for signs of the extraordinary, and in finding them, it could have seemed to us that sanctity was fundamentally rooted in something completely beyond the natural order. In short, we could have inferred from the fact that sanctity is related with God, that it had no relation with material reality and what is human.

However Josemaría Escrivá allows us to see that the saint does not live in a world of shadowy appearances, but rather in our real human world, in which there is a 'divine something' that is already there waiting for the person who knows how to discover it. This real world is in fact the very matter of sanctity which is offered to the Christian, and that which each one of us deals with everyday, such that every moment of our lives can be filled with divine transcendence.

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