



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [Documentation](#) - [Articles and studies](#) - Words from the New Testament, meditated on by the Founder of Opus Dei

Words from the New Testament, meditated on by the Founder of Opus Dei

Francisco Varo

The first issue of *Studia et Documenta*, the journal of the Istituto Storico San Josemaria Escriva in Rome, contains a study by Professor Francisco Varo of eight small pages written by St Josemaría, headed “Words from the New Testament meditated on frequently – June 1933”.

This document contains 112 short quotations from the New Testament with some occasional brief annotations. After an introduction describing the original manuscript, Varo presents the text of the document, some notes on the historical context in which it was written, a conjecture as to how it came to be written, and an initial reflection on its contents.

In this document, writes Varo, Jesus is not seen merely as an admirable figure who can be glimpsed from words written two thousand years ago. In it, the Risen Jesus lives now, and is seeking disciples to live with him and work at his side, in these times too. He is seeking women and men who will become one with Christ and make him present in the world.

The document illustrates St Josemaría’s spiritual life and priestly labours in the first years of Opus Dei. It is stored in the general archive of the Opus Dei Prelature.

Historical context

To gain an idea of the context in which the notes were written, it is important to bear in mind the type of work and concerns that occupied St Josemaría in the months preceding the date when he wrote them down. This was basically how to put into practice the will of God that he had seen clearly on October 2, 1928 – how to do Opus Dei.

In January 1933 he began to give classes of Christian formation to young men. From then on new vocations began to come to Opus Dei, who needed to be guided in their new path, and to these he devoted all his attention. Among the regular practices of Christian piety that he recommended was reading and

meditating on the books of the New Testament, as an indispensable way of getting to know Jesus Christ and developing a personal relationship with him. A proof of this is the dedication that St Josemaría wrote inside the cover of a book on the Passion of Jesus that he gave Ricardo Fernandez Vallespin, an architecture student whom he had met a few days before and who would join Opus Dei at the end of that summer. St Josemaría wrote:

+ Madrid, 29 May 1933

May you seek Christ.

May you find Christ.

May you love Christ.(1)

Content

What matters about this document is the choice of passages – the reason why these hundred or so quotations were chosen, out of the thousands of verses contained in the New Testament.

The quotations selected are brief phrases through which ordinary Christians who have received a divine calling to seek holiness in their daily work and carry out intense apostolate in their family and social surroundings, can take the life of Jesus and his Apostles as a real and accessible reference-point for their own lives.

To begin with, there are several texts that from different viewpoints and with a variety of shades of meaning, invite readers to think about the calling to follow Christ and cooperate with him in the great task of the Redemption: see the texts numbered by St Josemaría 2, 57 and 96. (All New Testament quotations are given here in English for ease of understanding, although St Josemaría gave them in Latin.)

2 Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Mt 4:19 – Jesus to Peter and Andrew.)

57 For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor 9:16)

96 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)

This invitation is a completely unmerited gift from God:

16 In truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. (Lk 4:25-27)

23 After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, “Will you also go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (Jn 6:66-69)

47 And those whom he predestined he also called. (Rom 8:30)

50 Consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. Therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:26-29, 31)

99 But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, “Why have you made me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? (Rom 9:20-21)

It is a calling that requires people to adopt the perspective of faith so as to view their own lives and actions within the context of God’s plans for salvation:

15 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will. (Mk 11:23-24)

76 He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:24)

77 I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service. (1 Tim 1:12)

86 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 Pet 3:8)

97 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Rev 3:21)

107 “Increase our faith!” (Lk 17:5). He has just spoken of temptations to sin (millstone) and then of how often we must forgive the repentant sinner. Then the Apostles ask, *Adauge...* [Increase...]

This in turn demands deep humility. The only appropriate response to this calling is unreserved self-giving to God’s will:

5 “Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples he said, “Here are my mother and my brethren! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mt 12:48-50)

9 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who

have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Mt 19:12)

21 My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. (Jn 4:34)

91 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. (Mt 18:8)

92 For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. (1 Tim 6:7)

93 No-one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Mt 6:24)

94 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." (Rev 3:14-16)

A fully generous response to grace makes it possible for people to bear abundant fruit and achieve the fullness of life:

1 Bear fruit that befits repentance. (Mt 3:8 – St John the Baptist to the Pharisees)

3 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you have been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. (Mt 11:23 – misuse of graces)

18 Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. (Lk 21:3)

56 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (1 Cor 7:19)

72 You have put off the old nature with its practices (Col 3:9)

80 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (Jas 1:22)

81 What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? (Jas 2:14)

The phrase that comes right at the end of the list of quotations sums up in St Paul's words a basic attitude for every Christian, which is also extremely appropriate for an apostle in the middle of the world. "Owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8).

St Josemaría did not read the New Testament like something from another era, but looked at his personal life in the world of his own day, and turned to the sacred

texts as a reference-point for evaluating his experience in its true supernatural dimensions.

As can be seen, in its essentials the document sets out the basic outlines of Opus Dei itself. Ever since Opus Dei was founded on October 2, 1928, St Josemaría was aware that what God was asking him to do was not the result of a human decision in order to supply the needs of the Church in a particular country at a particular time, but was something that lay at the very heart of the Christian message. He said as much in one of his letters:

After all these centuries, the Lord wants to use us so that all Christians may discover, at last, the potential of ordinary life – of daily work – for being sanctified and for sanctifying, and the effectiveness of evangelizing by example, friendship, and a building up of trust. Our Lord Jesus wants us to proclaim today, in a thousand languages, in every part of the world, that message, as old and as new as the Gospel. He wants us to do it with the gift of tongues, so all will know how to apply it to their own lives.(2)

This document, written less than five years after the founding of Opus Dei, and when the very first vocations to it had hardly begun to arrive, is eloquent about the fact that the message of Opus Dei is truly “as old and as new as the Gospel”, as St Josemaría wrote so simply.

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Notes

1. See Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, 1997, vol. 1, p. 380.
2. Letter dated January 9, 1932, no. 91. Quoted in Vazquez de Prada, op. cit., p. 438.