

William KEENAN, *St. Josemaría Escrivá and the Origins of Opus Dei. The Day the Bells Rang Out*, Leominster, Gracewing, 2004, 316 pp.

The value of this book lies in that it is the work of an English professional journalist who worked for the Daily Express both in Fleet Street and in its Manchester office, and later, for many years, for the Daily Mirror. William Keenan is also the author of three detective novels, and of a number of plays for BBC radio. In everything he has written one can detect a characteristic Catholic focus on all matters of daily life.

The book we are examining, and some of his plays, do, in fact, deal with Catholic matters directly. Specifically, one of his plays is based on the life of Saint Margaret Clitherow, the English Martyr crushed to death for her faith in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I; another brings the listener into the family homes of the three children to whom the Virgin Mary appeared at Fatima. Indeed Keenan had also, prior to publishing this book, written a play entitled *The Day the Bells Rang Out* on the early life of Mgr Josemaría Escrivá, and a pamphlet on the Founder of Opus Dei, coinciding with the decree of the Holy Office by which he was accorded the title of “Venerable” (9 April 1990)<sup>1</sup>.

Keenan uses the official sources (mainly in English translation). He just ‘tells it as it is’, which to any honest reader is something to be grateful for.

An English speaking reader will also welcome this book written in very readable English, that flows easily through extensive quotations taken from Monsignor Escrivá’s own words in Spanish, and other long passages in English translation taken

<sup>1</sup> *The Venerable Monsignor Escrivá Founder of Opus Dei*, Dublin, Veritas, 1990.

from the sources. More about the sources later, but it is worth noting that, with the exception of the work of John Coverdale<sup>2</sup>, written directly in American English, and the *Beatification Booklet*<sup>3</sup>, Keenan's book relies almost entirely on translations of works written in other languages, mainly Spanish.

Another noticeable feature is the deference with which Keenan deals with Spanish proverbs and the plays on words in which St Josemaría often humorously indulged<sup>4</sup>. Recounting events which took place in the last century, and in a foreign country, often requires an explanation to avoid giving an impression of strangeness to a modern British reader. One can recall what G. K. Chesterton<sup>5</sup> says about the mistake English people make in thinking that because foreign things are strange and at times amusing; they are therefore to be thought as wrong or absurd. The author also has the merit of showing an engaging sympathy with aspects of Spanish life and language which are important for understanding the meaning and significance of the many stories and sayings to be found in the sources he has used. He shares with the reader, details loved and appreciated by members of Opus Dei and people close to it. These may seem foreign or extraneous to a certain strictly academic cast of mind, but they are nonetheless important for engaging with the family spirit of Opus Dei.

Some of the chapter headings pick up revealingly the more dramatic moments in an important portion of St Josemaría's life: The House Facing the Barracks; The Mobs go on the Rampage; The Antechambers of Death; A Crime Punishable by Death; The Door the Militia Failed to Open; The Plan to Escape.

The work is presented by Gracewing the publishers as a "compelling biography, covering the early years of the Life of St Josemaría Escrivá, [it] reads like a thriller, but it is much more than a breath-taking adventure". It begins with a dramatic description of the storming of a barracks in Madrid, just opposite where St Josemaría was staying in a hall of residence for students. This was effectively the start of the Spanish Civil War. It ends with a brief description of the escape of the Founder together with seven companions from the Republican zone, across the Pyrenees to France, where he was to enter the Nationalist zone. Keenan goes no further, however, into the work he would carry out in the preparation for the expansion of Opus Dei once that war was over. In a short Epilogue a few lines are added to describe what happened to each one of the fugitives, completing the stories also of Isidoro Zorzano and Alvaro del Portillo, who played significant parts in supporting the Founder, respectively, in the opening years, and in the decades that followed.

<sup>2</sup> *Uncommon Faith*, Princeton, Scepter, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Blessed Josemaría Escrivá Founder of Opus Dei*, Opus Dei Central Information Office, Rome, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> English literary and spoken culture relies heavily on such plays on words.

<sup>5</sup> *What I Saw in America*, London, Hodder and Staughton, 1922, page 2: "The first principle is that nobody should be ashamed of thinking a thing funny because it is foreign; the second is that he should be ashamed of thinking it wrong because it is funny. The reaction of his senses and superficial habits of mind against something new, and to him abnormal, is a perfectly healthy reaction. But the mind which imagines that mere unfamiliarity can possibly prove anything about inferiority is a very inadequate mind".

In general the use of the imaginative touches which bring to life what would otherwise be a list of facts, is to be welcomed when it is backed by references to the sources. Keenan knows how to bring in the spiritual considerations which link “lucky escapes” from capture or execution, with the power of prayer and mortification in St. Josemaría. He also takes for granted that St. Josemaría’s, spirit of divine filiation, alongside his devotion to the Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph and the Guardian Angels, helped him keep alive his peace and hope in the future.

Small details may have escaped the author, but the panorama is captured admirably, Keenan quotes, for example, the French author, François Gondrand<sup>6</sup>, who says that St Josemaría “discovered one Madonna, which had gone unnoticed by the iconoclasts: it was chiselled in the stone base of the monument to Christopher Columbus, in the Plaza de Colón”. The unobtrusive figure of Our Lady on the base of a column recalled one of the three ships Columbus took on his first voyage of discovery, *La Santa María*<sup>7</sup>. Slight inaccuracies and variations of detail are to be expected from oral reports as from written memories. It is not surprising that the sources used by William Keenan differ in certain points.

Keenan with a journalist’s skill has been able to cull selected information from among the many published works and from oral testimony handed down by Alvaro del Portillo in particular in many get-togethers in which original sources from St. Josemaría are actually cited.

With a journalist’s imagination he has expanded and interpreted these sources here. The reader suspects that he may have required judicious editorial help to keep his interpretation under reasonable control in places..

Having a look at the sources quoted it is interesting to notice that their abundance shows his familiarity with the secondary literature on the topic.

Keenan is determined to tell his story in an accessible and chronological framework. This has led him to some excessive cross-referencing and repetition which might be ironed out in any subsequent edition of the work

The author aims at making his subject accessible to the ordinary English-language reader rather than at writing a scholarly monograph

The key to understanding the purpose of the book may be found in its last few lines: “Father Josemaría’s teaching about the universal call to sanctity and the role of laymen and women became a keynote of Vatican II and is now the official teaching of the Catholic Church. He was canonised by Pope John Paul II and became Saint Josemaría, the pioneer of lay sanctity on 6 October 2002”.

Richard A. P. Stork

<sup>6</sup> GONDRAND, François, *At God’s Pace*, London, Scepter – New York 1989, pp. 145-146.

<sup>7</sup> This monument has now been removed to the side of the wide avenue, and is no longer in the centre of the Square.