

A Decisive Encounter with Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

Leonardo Mondadori

He studied Philosophy and Literature and, starting in 1972, he worked for the publishing group 'Arnoldo Mondadori Editore', of which he was vice-president from 1982 until 1991, after which he was president until his death in 2002. He was also president of the 'Retequattro' television channel. Several months before his death, he published an interview-book with the writer Vittorio Messori, 'Conversione. Una storia personale' ('Conversion, a personal story'), in which he recounts his journey toward the faith.

My first encounter with Blessed Josemaría took place in a manner very much in keeping with the charisma that God chose for Opus Dei. It occurred during the final phase of study before the publication of *The Way* by our publishing house. Almost without wanting to, I discovered this proposal of Christian life — so well suited to my ideals of perfection in professional life — in my very own place of work. It was there that I came across the idea that the commitment of ordinary Christians should be manifested in a calm and constant struggle to sanctify oneself, without any need of external show. This, my first meeting, took the form envisioned in the brilliant point 799 of this book, *The Way*:

“What amazes you seems quite natural to me: God has sought you out right in the midst of your work.

That is how He sought the first, Peter and Andrew, John and James, beside their nets, and Matthew sitting in the custom-house.

And — wonder of wonders — Paul, in his eagerness to destroy the seeds of Christianity!”

Nevertheless, this first encounter was not decisive. In virtue of the contacts which we had for the publication of the book, I was given the opportunity to meet an engineer who is a faithful of Opus Dei (his profession is by no means a trivial matter to him). At the beginning, our meetings were strictly professional, but little by little they developed into enjoyable conversations, imbued with a

spirit of true friendship and mutual understanding. Without trying to hide from me the truths or commitments involved in a genuine Christian life — some of which were in direct opposition to the life that I was leading — he showed great respect for my freedom and he limited himself to offering to introduce me to a priest with whom I could start spiritual direction and go to confession regularly. And that was what happened.

This was the beginning of my adventure — as passionate as it is ordinary — of struggling to make the occupations of this world compatible with the tension towards the eternal. This interplay was aptly summarized in a few words addressed to me by the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría: “no matter what you do, do it as well as you can”. And all of this is to be done in a peaceful way with realistic optimism. This is the spirit which I wanted to reflect in the title of the book I had printed recently which records some of my experiences. Vittorio Messori, who had the task of preparing the material for publication, helped me to see the similarities between my discovery and that of C.S. Lewis, who called his personal testimony, *Surprised by Joy*.

However, this rediscovery of the genuine values of Christian life could not wipe away my previous life. Rather, it urged me to face the consequences of the path that I had followed, and the numerous accounts which still needed to be settled, which included serious family breakdown, and the need to rectify many things which were done well from the human point of view, but which needed to be offered first of all to God.

Starting on a path such as this is no easy matter. However, I received the help that I needed in the riches which form a part of the Christian tradition: in addition to ‘consultations’ with a spiritual director, I saw the need to speak with God and with Our Lady every day, and to approach the sacraments as meetings with a loving Father and not as mere social or cultural formalities.

Many of my friends and relatives questioned me in a diplomatic and politically correct way, to see if I was aware that this sort of openness and docility was only appropriate for weak willed people and for those who did not have anything else to fall back on. Unfortunately, this vision of Christianity which Blessed Josemaría tried to overcome — above all with his example — is quite common in our society. It is undeniable that one needs a certain dose of humility in order to accept the challenges implicit in such elemental things as keeping some distance from one’s own opinions and capacities, in order to combat the desire of drawing unnecessary attention to oneself. However, contrary to popular belief, the true exercise of freedom and the development of one’s God-given capacities requires as much effort as any other human activity which is really worthwhile engaging in.

In this life which is so ‘everyday’, one learns how to carry the Cross of Jesus by learning how to renounce one’s own opinions, something which is far from

easy. The main obstacle faced by many people is their reluctance to detach themselves from certain convictions that help them to conceal their desire to avoid having to abandon their vices and frivolity. As I have pointed out above, considerable effort is required to initiate a serious examination of these aspects, and above all, to form one's conscience properly and act in accordance with it. This struggle is utterly opposed to any form of 'soft Christianity', which is an attempt to avoid frightening people and fails either to convince them or to win them over. I have discovered a 'smiling' and sporting attitude in the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, even in his preaching on the Cross.

I would like to return now to consider some of the effects which this change has produced in my life. The first area which I had to contend with was that of my own family life, marked as it was by two matrimonial failures. I want to emphasize the fact that these are not problems to be 'resolved and archived', as many seem to think, an attitude which is embodied in the idea of a person "having the right to re-make his or her own life". This is not so because these consequences form a very intimate part of the personal drama of each of the individuals involved in the shipwreck of a home. In any case, I can attest to the fact that the resources offered by the Christian life enable one to considerably improve one's personal relations, which otherwise would be left with nothing more than precarious palliative solutions.

Professional work is another of the fields in which I have had to embark upon this supernatural endeavour. The words of the Founder of Opus Dei about the need to give effective testimony in all of the aspects of one's work, have helped me considerably in this regard. In addition to having a great love for my professional work, which is a family inheritance, I have been able to see for myself how important it is to take advantage of human structures in order to do good. While I was away from the publishing house for a period during the Mondadori shareholder war, I tried to start another project in this field. I then learned how difficult — if not impossible — it is to fight a war by oneself in some professional fields. One time, when I had the opportunity to comment on this experience to Gianni Agnelli, he said to me: "I understand: if I left Fiat, it would not be to open a mechanic shop, however stylish it might be..." In this way, I have learned to give a positive meaning to the opportunities which present themselves in my work, in order to promote useful quality publications, and to take advantage of the occasions provided by my family and professional life in order to help charitable causes.

I could not conclude these reflections without making reference to the role that the Christian life has played in dealing with physical suffering. I have been suffering from a 'long-term' illness for almost five years now, a period during which I have received very high quality medical attention, as would be possible to

many other people. The critical difference has been having had the opportunity to deal with this illness in a Christian way. In addition to the strictly spiritual consolation that I have received, it has been an invaluable help to have friends who have truly been like a family to me, and above all, to have been given the chance to improve my relationships with my own children.

For all of this, and for many other things which I could mention, I want to sincerely thank God for my encounter with the Founder of Opus Dei.