

## A Message which is Simple yet Profound

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*The perspective of her presentation has a distinctly eastern flavour, rich in images and personal reflections. She explains how, in a country where living a Christian life has not been easy, where Catholics are a minority, and where the effects of an atheistic education still persist, she was helped by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría to discover the possibility of being a saint. At the beginning of her presentation she recounted that she was baptised in the Orthodox Church at the age of 5. In August 2000, she embraced the Catholic faith.*

Before I came to the Church I did not care very much about God, and I can tell you why. Believing in God was prohibited during the Soviet era. But when the countries of the former Soviet Union became independent, crowds of people poured into the churches. They wanted to find God, but they did not know how, because they had not been taught about Him. There were no books to tell us the truth about God or the Church, and the people were wandering in darkness.

But now we have put these negative experiences behind us, and we are not afraid to recall them. On the contrary, when I compare those times to the present, I feel proud of my country, where religion is now a matter of free choice. The attitude towards God and believers has also changed a lot. A vivid example: during the Soviet period the word ‘God’ was written in small letters — ‘god’ or ‘bible’. Today in the mass media and in books, it is written with a capital ‘G’. People have come to understand that faith should never be condemned.

But let me return to my path to God. Years ago, I only prayed because I was afraid of being punished by God. Nevertheless, I was already being punished because I was far from Him. I did not know much about God or the Holy Trinity at that time. My image of God was very vague — the Creator who gave life to people. That was all. I did not think about sins — I could not recognise them

from other deeds; I never thought about God's Love, about all His precious gifts; I never thought that people could be close to Him. Later I started reading a lot, but what I read only affected my mind, not my heart. Until I came to the Church, and even after, I could not see myself as a child of God. I saw myself rather as a piece of clay, that could never reach heaven and the Father.

Soon I came to understand that it was impossible to go on living far from God. One who lives in a dark dungeon must dream about seeing light. But a deeper understanding came when I learned about Purgatory. Purgatory is not Hell, but the souls there still suffer because they are deprived of seeing God. They need our prayers to leave that sombre place and enjoy union with God in Heaven. But why do some people want to turn their lives into a sort of purgatory by closing their eyes to God? Why do they try their best not to notice obvious things? They hear Jesus Christ knocking at their door, but they refuse to open it, saying: "Nobody is there". Unlike the Holy Souls in Purgatory, people who try to live without God do not understand that life without Him is just existence; it is like a winter valley, without grass or flowers. Even if a small flower appears, it will be killed by severe winds — by sins, despair, disappointment, lack of faith. Could I live such a life, especially when I learned that there was a cure for it? So I decided that I must seek God and never go far away from Him again.

I started seeking God and I took what I think is the most difficult route to come to Him — through knowledge. I wish I could have said at that time: *Domine, ut videam!*<sup>1</sup> I read piles of books and when the priest asked me: "Why would you like to become a member of the Church?" I said: "I know a lot of good things about your Church!" Now I know that the easiest way to come to God is to pray and to talk to Him, to feel Him in your heart, to call Him your friend, to be 'madly in love' with Him, as Blessed Josemaría would say.

I think that a person who tries to find his way to God is like a child who wants to find the road home. His faith is new-born and he needs a wise advisor who will take him by the hand and show him the right way. Blessed Josemaría is just such a teacher. He explains, in simple words, how to live a life illuminated by God's love; and how to become a saint in your everyday life and illuminate the path for other people. What appealed to me in his teaching is that he talks with me like a friend. He never says: "Do it! I said — do it! [...] Hey, why don't you do it?" His words penetrate into my heart. Sometimes he may say something that one does not like to hear. But Blessed Josemaría does not want to hurt us — he treats us as equals; that is why he is honest. "Don't be

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Lk. 18, 41; *Friends of God*, 127.

afraid of the truth, even though the truth may mean your death”<sup>2</sup> [...] I think I will be always thinking about these words.

Most of all, I like one expression of Blessed Josemaría: “friends of God”<sup>3</sup>. I used to think that there would always be an abyss between God and me, that men were slaves, not friends, even though Jesus Himself called them ‘friends’. But Blessed Josemaría teaches that although we must praise and love the Lord, He is also our Friend. He is closer to us than we have ever imagined. He is knocking at the door of our heart — is there any reason to keep it shut?

Can we learn to be saints when we are young? Sometimes we can think that it is hard to be a believer in the contemporary world. Some friends think that the ideals of the Bible cannot attract young people and are only for grandmothers. Young people can be deeply immersed in the world of rock music, dances, drugs and alcohol, and it can seem that they do not care about the Christian life.

No. It should not be like that. Everybody has a chance to come to God. There have always been people (and not only young ones), who try to make living the faith or Christian life difficult. Blessed Josemaría even faced companions in the seminary who laughed at his piety. Later he often experienced mistrust bordering on hostility, but that did not stop him. His idea of becoming a saint can be applied to everybody. The Bible says: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”<sup>4</sup>. And I think that young people need this most of all.

When you are young, you can often be tempted to despair — life can be so complicated and full of temptations that you do not know what to do. You can be disappointed with yourself: “How can I become a saint if I cannot even act like a normal person? Saints are great, and I am nobody”. But according to Blessed Josemaría, common people like you and me can also become saints. Although Blessed Josemaría had many virtues and a strong faith, he was, nevertheless, like us. As a child he was sometimes naughty, and he also had doubts and sad thoughts. But he achieved his goal — and we can do it too.

Not every young person can leave everything and go wandering here and there ‘around the’ world like St. Francis. But we read in *The Way* that the saints were normal people, and that they conquered<sup>5</sup>. Blessed Josemaría teaches that our small mortifications are dear to God. God will never refuse our gifts. At the same time, he says that everything that does not lead to God is an obstacle and that one must reject such things<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Way*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. *Friends of God*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Mat. 5, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *The Way*, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *Christ is Passing By*, 158.

I think that aside from all of his great ideas and suggestions, young people will be especially attracted by the tone of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. Youngsters often feel themselves alone in this world, oppressed, that no one pays attention to their needs and thoughts. They lack friends and the kind words of their relatives. I have experienced moments when I would give the whole world for a friend. But nobody said to me the words “you and me”, like Blessed Josemaría does. He can become your friend, and you can find a lot of friends among the people attracted by his teaching. But what is really important is that Josemaría Escrivá shows us the way to our greatest friend — God. Some years ago I used to say: “Nobody cares about me. Nobody will lift a finger for me if I ask them”. But now, looking at the altar, I think that there is Someone who cares. Someone who not only cares, but who gave His life for me. We young people are often too much possessed by pessimism and pay too much attention to small problems. Still, they cannot be compared with the sufferings of Jesus who died on the Cross for us. Blessed Josemaría always makes us think about this.

Great teachings are not only for a certain period in history; they are for all time. That is why the teachings of Blessed Josemaría attract me. His teachings have no limits. People, both young and old, are united, as age means nothing and, according to Josemaría Escrivá, we should be like children, no more than three years old<sup>7</sup>. Both men and women can come to this source — again, no limits. They have a chapel in their heart and they can hear God speak to them in whispers. And — what I like most of all — they will never ‘grow up’. Rather, their faith will grow from day to day.

Reading Blessed Josemaría’s books, I thought about the rainbow. In ancient times, people thought of it as the bridge between their world and the kingdom of God. Blessed Josemaría’s teaching is like a bridge between us and God, a bridge of all the colours you could ever imagine, a rainbow that will bring us to heaven.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. *The Way*, 868.