

# Mother of God and Mother of Mankind

## A Study of St. Josemaría's Marian Devotion and Unity of Life<sup>1</sup>

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Devotion to Mary is one of the defining features of St. Josemaría's personality and spiritual life. He never wanted to put himself forward as a model in anything, because, as he always said, the only model is Christ. He did not hesitate to add, however, that if his children wanted to imitate him in something, it should be in his love for our Lady.<sup>2</sup>

The depth and richness of his devotion to Mary cannot be adequately described in this short article. We will focus on only one aspect here: the relationship between his Marian devotion and the unity of life that he preached and practiced. Unity of life, a defining feature of his own life, represented a significant new concept in the Church.<sup>3</sup> It is also closely related to the universal call to sanctity and the fully lay spirituality that were integral to the founder of Opus Dei's teaching.<sup>4</sup>

1. This study makes extensive use of the writings of the founder of Opus Dei. To avoid undue repetition, I will include his name as author only the first time that each of his works is mentioned.

2. See Javier Echevarría, "El amor a María Santísima en las enseñanzas de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Palabra*, no. 156-157, August-September 1978, p. 345.

3. The importance of unity of life was a constant teaching of the founder of Opus Dei, who above all practiced it in an eminent way, as is amply attested to by those who knew him well: see *The Pontifical Decree on the Heroic Exercise of the Virtues by the Servant of God Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, April 9, 1990: AAS 82 (1990) 1451. Manuel Belda calls him a pioneer in this point of the spiritual life: Belda, M., "El Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, pionero de la unidad de vida cristiana," in *El cristiano en el mundo. En el Centenario del nacimiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Publication Service of the University of Navarre, Pamplona 2003, pp. 467-482. The expression "unity of life" is absent from earlier treatises and manuals of theology, nor is it found in the most important dictionaries and encyclopedias devoted to spirituality: see de Celaya, I., "Vocación cristiana y unidad de vida," in *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, Eunsá, Pamplona 1987, p. 954. However, this expression is used by the Second Vatican Council: *Lumen Gentium*, no. 35; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 4; *Ad Gentes*, no. 21; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 4; and it has been used various times by John Paul II, in the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*: nos. 34, 59 and 60. See Belda, M., "La nozione di 'unità di vita' secondo l'Esortazione Apostolica 'Christifideles laici,'" in *Annales Theologici* 3 (1989) 287-314.

4. The homily that he gave in Pamplona on October 8, 1967 is especially significant in this regard. It is published in *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, New York 1981, nos. 113-123; also see *Christ Is Passing By*, especially nos. 95-101 and 107-113. See also the studies of Juan B. Torelló, "La

Both features of his spiritual life, Marian devotion and unity of life, have been written about extensively, and there are numerous references to these topics in studies related to Opus Dei and its founder.<sup>5</sup>

Marian devotion, of course, is not the foundation for a Christian's unity of life. Nor can one say that Marian piety is its substance or its theological perfection. However, St. Josemaría's life teaches us that Mary, in a certain respect, can be considered a model and principle of unity of life, in a way that is analogous to how Christ himself is the center of a Christian's existence and the model for his life, with all due differences that will be pointed out below.

### 1. The universal role of our Lady in the personal piety of St. Josemaría

The founder of Opus Dei's own writings and the testimonies of those who knew him make clear that his Marian devotion was strong and constant, expressed in filial and trusting prayer.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, his devotion to Mary

espiritualidad de los laicos," in *La vocación cristiana*, Palabra, Madrid 1975, pp. 49–75; Fernández, A., "Espiritualidad esencialmente secular: Comentario al número cuatro del decreto *Apostolicam actuositatem*," in *Vocación y misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, Facultad de Teología del Norte de España, Burgos 1987, pp. 595–625; Aranda, A., "Perfiles teológicos de la espiritualidad del Opus Dei," in *Scripta Theologica* 22 (1990) 89–111.

5. As far as unity of life is concerned, the following studies can be added to those already cited above: Celaya, I., "Unidad de vida y plenitud cristiana," in Rodríguez, P., Alves de Sousa, P., Zumaquero, J. M., Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei, Eunsa, Pamplona 1985, pp. 321–340; Rodríguez, P., *Vocación. Trabajo. Contemplación*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1986, pp. 118–122 and 212–218; J. L. Chabot, "Responsabilidad frente al mundo y libertad," in Belda, M., Escudero, J., Illanes, J. L., O'Callaghan, P., *Santidad y mundo*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1996, pp. 249–275; Polo, L., "El concepto de vida en Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," in *La personalidad del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1994, pp. 165–195; Illanes, J. L., *Mundo y santidad*, Rialp, Madrid 1984, especially pp. 80–90 and 222–225; Yanguas, J. M., "Unità di vita e opzione fondamentale," in *Annales Theologici* 9 (1995) 445–464; Illanes, J. L., *Mundo y santidad*, Rialp, Madrid 1993, pp. 220–236; Aranda, A., *La lógica de la unidad de vida: Identidad cristiana en una sociedad pluralista*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2000, esp. pp. 121–146.

As far as his Marian devotion is concerned, the abundant writings of the founder of Opus Dei on our Lady can be consulted. This topic is given great importance in the biographies by Salvador Bernal, Andrés Vázquez de Prada, François Gondrand, Peter Berglar, A. Sastre, J. M. Cejas and others. Among the theological studies of his Marian devotion, one might cite: Orozco, A., *Mirar a María*, Rialp, Madrid 1980; Escartín, J. M., "Devoción y amor a María en Camino" in J. Morales (ed.), *Estudios sobre Camino*, Rialp, Madrid 1989 (2nd ed.), pp. 319–337; Delclaux, F., *Santa María en los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid 1993; Aranda, A., "María, Hija predilecta del Padre," in *Estudios marianos* 66 (2000) 313–342; *El "bullir" de la sangre de Cristo*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, pp. 178–201; Riestra, J. A., "La maternità spirituale di Maria nell'esperienza mariana di san Josemaría Escrivá," in *Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Inaugurazione a. 2002/03* (2002) 97–111; P. Rodríguez, in *Camino: Edición crítica*, Instituto Histórico Josemaría Escrivá, Rialp, Madrid 2002, pp. 627–642.

6. The testimony of the first Prelate of Opus Dei is especially important in this regard. For example, in the book *Immersed in God*, he said: "To respond fully to this request [the interviewer had asked him to speak about St. Josemaría's Marian devotion] one would have to write a treatise!

"It is important, first of all, to keep in mind that the founder of Opus Dei, endowed as he was with a very rich sensibility, was not inclined to sentimentality. Even his Marian devotion, therefore, was distinguished by the profundity of its theological content. By this I mean that it was based not so much on 'reasons of the heart' as on faith—faith, that is, in the prerogatives given by God to our Lady and in her role in our redemption.

"He visited countless Marian shrines. His pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City is of particular historical importance. He made this pilgrimage in May 1970, for the intention of asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to be mindful of the needs of the Church and to bring to completion the canonical journey of Opus Dei.

"In December 1973, referring to his travels from one Marian shrine to another, he said emphatically, 'I'm doing nothing but light candles, and I'm going to keep on doing that as long as I've got matches.'

was harmoniously integrated with the others facets of his spiritual life. It was not something isolated or independent, nor did it take the preeminent place reserved for the Blessed Trinity and Christ's Sacred Humanity. "I can vouch for the fact that these were his principal devotions: (1) the Most Holy Trinity, God One and Three (he conversed with each of the three Persons, one by one: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit); (2) our Lord Jesus Christ, above all, his presence in the Eucharist, his Passion, and the years of his hidden life; (3) the Blessed Virgin Mary; (4) St. Joseph; (5) the holy angels and archangels; and (6) the saints: in particular, the twelve apostles; the saints whom he chose as intercessors for certain aspects of the apostolate of the Work ... and other saints such as Anthony the Abbot and Teresa of Jesus; and the early Christians."<sup>7</sup>

Of the many features that might be highlighted in his love for our Lady, we will now look at those that most directly affected his unity of life. The most important is his constant effort to seek out Mary, placing her, along with Christ, at the center of his life.

*a) Constantly seeking our Lady*

St. Josemaría sought out Holy Mary's company in his work, in his prayer, in his apostolic action. "In 1970," the current prelate of Opus Dei recalls, "while making a novena to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, he told us that he remembered with perfect clarity the first time that he went to our Lady with the full realization that he was praying to her. Filled with filial piety, he invited each of us to do the same: to evoke that first meeting, praying to our Mother with the same innocence and trust for the intentions we bore in our heart and soul, going to the help of Mary, the all-powerful suppliant. He was two or three years old when he began to pray to our Lady in the Cathedral of Barbastro, before a statue of the Dormition. He advised me to follow a devotion that he himself lived: to affectionately kiss the forehead of an image of our heavenly Mother, and with the piety of a child tell her, 'come with me.' On more than one occasion, he spent as much time as he could calling continually to our Lady: Mother, Mother, my Mother! And full of trust, he abandoned in her hands the needs of the Church and of souls.

"He never tired of preaching the urgent need to have recourse to the Most Holy Virgin. For example, in 1953 he told us: 'Perhaps we need to consider Christ

<sup>7</sup> "His love for the Blessed Virgin Mary impelled him to keep a close eye on everything connected with devotion to her. For example, whenever he commissioned a painting or a statue of our Lady with the baby Jesus, or a picture of the holy women at the foot of the cross, he recommended that the artist try, as much as possible, to make Jesus look like his mother. Christ must, after all, have looked a lot like Mary, since his conception in her womb did not involve a man, but came about through direct intervention by the Holy Spirit; but only a soul very much in love would have placed so much importance on this detail. (Alvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God* (an interview conducted by Cesare Cavalleri), Scepter Publishers, 1996, pp. 137-139.)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. On the Trinitarian and Christocentric substance of St. Josemaría's spiritual life and Marian devotion, see A. Aranda, "María, Hija predilecta del Padre," cit., pp. 324-331; F. Delclaux, *Santa María en los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, cit., pp. 64-146.

<sup>8</sup> Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del beato Josemaría Escrivá*, pp 253-254. See Echevarría, "El amor a

as much ours as Mary considered him hers. He was her life and the reason for her existence. Without Him, Mary couldn't work, or rest, or live. And if we are faithful, the same should constantly be true of us.' On April 30, 1968, as he used to do when he began the months or periods of the year during which the Church fosters devotion to our Lady in a special way, he recommended to us: 'In our dealings with Mary, during the month of May that begins tomorrow, I would like each of us to start making an extra small sacrifice, a bit more of study, some work that is better finished, a smile.... It will be a sacrifice that stems from our piety and is a proof of our self-giving. Let yourself be led by her with generosity. We can't stop striving to love more each day the Love of loves! And with Mary we will be able to accomplish this, because our Mother lovingly lived a complete self-giving.'

"He emphasized the need to deal with our Lady in order to reach the Blessed Trinity. In 1970 he said: 'Place your heart, all your love, in the Blessed Trinity. To do so, start with your devotion to our Lady, because, even humanly, she is very close to God, and is the most perfect creature, *sine macula, sine ruga*, without spot or wrinkle. And God does not deny her anything. Mary necessarily will lead you to her Son, who will introduce you to the Father, and you will receive the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the tree of the Cross.'"<sup>8</sup>

### b) *Going to our Lady in everything and for everything*

Referring to his constant recourse to Mary, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo noted that "he habitually ended his homilies and meditations with an invocation to our Lady. In his book *Holy Rosary* he left us moving examples of his contemplation of the principle mysteries of the life of Jesus and Mary, and also his other works, beginning with *The Way*, are impregnated with Marian devotion. Each chapter of *Furrow* and *The Forge* ends with some thought about our Lady."<sup>9</sup>

The fact that he always concluded his preaching, whatever the topic might be, with a dialogue with our Lady was not simply a means of infusing devotion to the Mother of God in his hearers. It was something spontaneous and almost necessary for him to have recourse to Mary in any situation or event. Besides asking our Lady to intercede before God for his needs, he also looked to Mary as an example and model for his own life. The founder of Opus Dei learned many things from

María Santísima en las enseñanzas de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," op. cit., pp. 341–345.

9. And he adds: "He established the custom of placing in each room of Opus Dei centers a simple and artistically tasteful image of our Lady. He taught us to direct a glance towards it, and to give our Blessed Mother an affectionate interior prayer of greeting, whenever we enter or leave a room.... Our founder suggested placing in certain areas of our centers—laundry rooms and kitchens, for example—pictures that show our Lady doing washing, cooking, or feeding the child Jesus. In this way, those of his daughters whose chosen field of service is domestic administration can have a constant reminder of this ideal: that in all that they do to tend to the needs of the household, they should strive to imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Our Father used to say to his daughters that since they didn't have a foundress, they ought to consider the Blessed Virgin Mary their foundress. And to ensure that they wouldn't forget this, he established that in all the women's centers, each chapel should be furnished with an image of our Lady" (Del Portillo, A., *Immersed in God*, op. cit., pp. 138–139).

10. "Carta pastoral con ocasión del Año Mariano 1987/1988," no. 24, in *Romana*, 3 (1987) 77.

Mary. He went to her in search of help, and also to learn. In *Furrow*, when dealing with the “human virtues” of a follower of Christ, he turns often to the example of Holy Mary. All the chapters of *Furrow* end with a thought related to the Blessed Virgin. Any effort by a Christian to grow in virtue leads to identification with Jesus, and the safest and most direct path to this goal is devotion to Mary.

### c) *Mary as a model and principle of unity of life*

Thus St. Josemaría had recourse to Mary as a model for every virtue and as an example in every circumstance and activity, going to her “in everything and for everything,” as his successor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, aptly put it.<sup>10</sup> Our Lady was present in every aspect of his piety, his apostolic activity and his work. One can safely say that his entire life was Marian. This universal presence of our Lady in the founder of Opus Dei’s life, never separable from the Triune God or from Christ, made her a constant reference point for him: for growing in virtue, for carrying out his work in a holy way, for bringing souls to God, for bringing forward the mission he had received from God, Opus Dei. In short, love for our Lady led him to a unity of life in all that he did and said, in a way that was analogous to the role Christ played in his life and dependent on Him.

## 2. Referring everything to our Lady in the writings of the founder of Opus Dei.

St. Josemaría’s fundamental intuition in this regard can be summed up in the following reflection: our Lady’s help and example “in everything and for everything” stems directly from the fact that she is our mother. Indeed, it is proper to a mother to teach her child all that she knows, and to provide her assistance, especially when she sees her child in need or affliction. “If I were a leper my mother would kiss me. She would kiss my wounds without fear or hesitation. —Well then, what would the Blessed Virgin Mary do? When we feel we are like lepers, all full of sores, we have to cry out: Mother! And the protection of our Mother will be like a kiss upon our wounds, which will then be healed.”<sup>11</sup> There are many other similar texts in St. Josemaría’s writings.<sup>12</sup> They testify to his faith in Mary’s divine maternity and her spiritual maternity over all men and women.

### a) *Mary’s universal motherhood*

The foundation of St. Josemaría’s Marian devotion is his faith in Mary as mother of God and mother of mankind. Contemplation of Mary’s divine

11. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, Scepter, New York, 1989, no. 190.

12. Here is another illuminating quote, taken from Salvador Bernal, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, London – New York 1977, p. 228: “I had an image of our Lady.... I called it the Virgin of the kisses. I never went in or out of that first residence of ours without first going to the Director’s room, where the image was, and kissing it. I don’t think I ever did it mechanically. It was a human kiss, the kiss of a son who is afraid.... But I have said so often that I am not afraid of anyone or of anything, so we’d better not say afraid. It was the kiss of a son who was worried that he was too young and who went to seek in our Lady all the tenderness of her affection. I went to seek all the fortitude I needed in God through the Blessed Virgin.”

13. In his homily, “To Jesus, Through Mary,” he speaks of the custom of dedicating Saturdays to our

maternity is often stressed in his writings.<sup>13</sup> “Mary is called the mother of God because she conceived the Word-made-flesh in her womb and He was born of her. This dogma of our Lady’s divine motherhood constitutes the source and root of the privileges with which God freely adorned her.”<sup>14</sup> From this strictly theological and Christological consideration, he moved to an anthropological perspective; from contemplating Mary’s maternity with respect to the Head, he went on to considering her maternity with respect to the members, the Church. “Our Lady is our mother. This is a truth that I have tried to make my own, and that I have preached continually, and that every Catholic has heard and repeated a thousand times, until it becomes deeply imbedded in the intimacy of one’s heart and assimilated in a personal and vivid way.”<sup>15</sup>

Contemplating the mystery of Mary in her divine maternity, a constant feature of Catholic tradition, is joined to contemplating her spiritual maternity over men and women, a teaching that Vatican II has reaffirmed.<sup>16</sup> St. Josemaría’s example is especially significant, since he unites these two aspects of Mary’s maternity. He distinguishes our Lady’s divine maternity from her spiritual maternity, but never separates them. Rather he unites them in a single phrase, “mother of God and mother of mankind.”

This exact expression appears only in a few places in his writings,<sup>17</sup> but the concept is found frequently there, although using other words: for example, “Mother of Christ, Mother of Christians”;<sup>18</sup> “Mother of God and our mother”;<sup>19</sup> “Mother of God, my mother” (or “your mother”);<sup>20</sup> “Mother of God” (or “Mother of Christ”), “Mother of the Church.”<sup>21</sup> The chapter in *The Way* dedicated to our Lady focuses on Mary’s maternity both with respect to the Word and with respect to mankind. Some points refer to both, while some refer to one or the other.<sup>22</sup>

St. Josemaría often spoke of Mary’s spiritual maternity over all mankind, for example, in this quote from *Christ Is Passing By*: “For Mary is closely tied to the greatest sign of God’s love—the Word made flesh who took upon himself our sins and weakness. Faithful to the divine purpose for which she was born, Mary continues to spend herself in the service of men, who are all called to be

Lady by “doing some special little sacrifice for her and thinking particularly about her motherhood.” St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1974, no. 142. In regard to the Marian contemplation of the founder of Opus Dei, see Aranda, A. *El “bullir” de la sangre de Cristo*, op. cit., pp. 190–192

14. St. Josemaría, “La Virgen del Pilar,” in *Libro de Aragón*, Zaragoza 1976. See also St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, Scepter Ltd., London, 1981 (1 ed.), nos. 274 and 291.

15. St. Josemaría, “Recuerdos del Pilar,” article published in *El Noticiero*, Saragossa, Oct. 11, 1970.

16. The Second Vatican Council, solemnly taught the maternity of Mary with respect to mankind, based on her divine maternity and on her cooperation through love in the birth of new members of the Body of Christ: see Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, ch. VIII, esp. nos. 53 and 56, and 60–62.

17. See, for example, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 140; *Friends of God*, no. 155.

18. *Christ Is Passing By*, subhead at no. 140.

19. *Ibid.*, no. 142; *Friends of God*, in the title of the homily dedicated to our Lady and in no. 275.

20. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, New York, 1985, nos. 496–497.

21. “La Virgen del Pilar,” op. cit.; *Friends of God*, nos. 280–282.

22. They appear together in nos. 497, 506, 507, 512 and 516.

23. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 140.

brothers of her son Jesus. The Mother of God is also truly the mother of men.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to provide a biblical reflection on the mystery of Mary which helps explain why her maternity extends to all mankind.<sup>24</sup>

In *Friends of God* he returns to the same subject: “Jesus is comforted anew by the quiet, loving presence of his Mother. Mary does not shout; she does not run about frantically. *Stabat*: she is there, standing next to her Son. It is then that Jesus looks at her, and then turning his gaze to John he exclaims, ‘Woman, this is thy son. Then he said to the disciple, This is thy Mother’ (John 19:26–27). In the person of John, Christ is entrusting all men to his Mother, and especially his disciples: those who were to believe in him.”<sup>25</sup> On other occasions, he cites Fathers of the Church who defend her spiritual maternity: “She can truly be called the Mother of Christians. As St. Augustine puts it: ‘With her charity she cooperates in the birth of faithful to the Church and they are members of a head, of which she is effectively Mother in the flesh’ (*De Sancta Virginitate*, 6; PL 40, 399).”<sup>26</sup>

His Marian devotion is deeply marked by his Christology. Mary’s motherhood over the disciples, the Church, and all mankind, is seen as a function of the different ways people can belong to the Body of Christ, as St. Thomas Aquinas explained it.<sup>27</sup> This Christological focus explains his insistence on link-

24. *Ibid.*, nos. 140–141.

25. *Friends of God*, n. 288; see also nos. 274–276. The same idea appears in “La Virgen del Pilar,” *op. cit.*

26. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 141.

27. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 8, 3: “Haec est differentia inter corpus hominis naturale et corpus Ecclesiae mysticum, quod membra corporis naturalis sunt omnia simul, membra autem corporis mystici non sunt omnia simul, neque quantum ad esse naturae, quia corpus Ecclesiae constituitur ex hominibus qui fuerunt a principio mundi usque ad finem ipsius; neque etiam quantum ad esse gratiae, quia eorum etiam qui sunt in uno tempore, quidam gratia carent postmodum habituri, aliis eam iam habentibus. Sic igitur membra corporis mystici non solum accipiuntur secundum quod sunt in actu, sed etiam secundum quod sunt in potentia. Quaedam tamen sunt in potentia quae nunquam reducuntur ad actum, quaedam vero quae quandoque reducuntur ad actum, secundum hunc triplicem gradum, quorum unus est per fidem, secundus per caritatem viae, tertius per fruitionem patriae. Sic ergo dicendum est quod, accipiendo generaliter secundum totum tempus mundi, Christus est caput omnium hominum, sed secundum diversos gradus. Primo enim et principaliter est caput eorum qui actu uniuntur sibi per gloriam. Secundo, eorum qui actu uniuntur sibi per caritatem. Tertio, eorum qui actu uniuntur sibi per fidem. Quarto vero, eorum qui sibi uniuntur solum potentia nondum ad actum reducta, quae tamen est ad actum reducenda, secundum divinam praedestinationem. Quinto vero, eorum qui in potentia sibi sunt uniti quae nunquam reducuntur ad actum, sicut homines in hoc mundo viventes qui non sunt praedestinati. Qui tamen, ex hoc mundo recedentes, totaliter desinunt esse membra Christi, quia iam nec sunt in potentia ut Christo uniantur. [This is the difference between the natural body of man and the Church’s mystical body, that the members of the natural body are all together, and the members of the mystical are not all together—neither as regards their natural being, since the body of the Church is made up of the men who have been from the beginning of the world until its end—nor as regards their supernatural being, since, of those who are at any one time, some there are who are without grace, yet will afterwards obtain it, and some have it already. We must therefore consider the members of the mystical body not only as they are in act, but as they are in potentiality. Nevertheless, some are in potentiality who will never be reduced to act, and some are reduced at some time to act; and this according to the triple class, of which the first is by faith, the second by the charity of this life, the third by the fruition of the life to come. Hence we must say that if we take the whole time of the world in general, Christ is the Head of all men, but diversely. For, first and principally, He is the Head of such as are united to Him by glory; secondly, of those who are actually united to Him by charity; thirdly, of those who are actually united to Him by faith; fourthly, of those who are united to Him merely in potentiality, which is not yet reduced to act, yet will be reduced to act according to Divine predestination; fifthly, of those who are united to Him in potentiality, which will never be

ing the two motherhoods of Mary, both of which are tied to the “whole Christ” St. Augustine spoke of. From contemplating Mary’s motherhood with respect to the Head, one turns to her motherhood with respect to the members. This relationship with God and with all men and women, precisely because it is universal, can serve as the unifying principal of human life in its fullness.

All those who have a mother, have Mary as their mother, either because they receive their human nature through her (true only in one case, that of the Word, since she was a virgin, before, during and after Jesus’ birth), or because they receive her as mother in the order of grace. Mary looks at both God and men with a mother’s eyes. Her motherhood embraces heaven and earth. She stands in relation to the Most High, and also to the humblest intelligent creature, man, who intellectually ranks below all the angels.

Her singular ontological relationship with the divine Being (she communicated a nature to a divine Person) bestowed on Mary a proper and exclusive universality (received as a gift) that all other creatures lack. This universality essentially characterizes her maternity and vice-versa: she possesses this universality because her maternity is divine; for this reason it can extend, and in fact has extended, to men according to the disposition and consent of God. This allows us to make a daring analogy, but one that is not unfounded, with God’s paternity.<sup>28</sup> Considering that Mary’s maternity is, in fact, a singular participation in the divine paternity, one could think that just as all paternity in heaven and on earth derives from the paternity of the First Person (Eph 3:15), so analogically in Mary one finds in a most perfect way all that in creatures pertains to motherhood. Her singular and exclusive relationship with God brings with it that she is not only a mother, but *the Mother*, just she is not only a virgin but *the Virgin*. And we could add that she is not only a woman but *the Woman*, which seems to be suggested by the way Jesus addresses her at Cana and on Golgotha.

Mary’s double maternity was for St. Josemaría an ocean of beauty and love in which one could be engulfed without being satiated. If one has to avoid going too far here (and this is easily assured by saying that she is not above Christ but below Him: Mary is a creature, Jesus is God), we also have to avoid saying too little, if we want to speak with exactitude and propriety. St. Josemaría resolved this tension by saying that above Mary is only God.<sup>29</sup> “The divine Motherhood of Mary

reduced to act; such are those men existing in the world, who are not predestined, who, however, on their departure from this world, wholly cease to be members of Christ, as being no longer in potentiality to be united to Christ.]”

28. Cf. Ocariz, “La filiación divina, realidad central en la vida y en la enseñanza de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer,” in Rodríguez, Alves de Sousa, Zumaquero, *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, op. cit., pp. 188–190; M. Ponce, *María. Madre del Redentor y Madre de la Iglesia*, Herder, Barcelona 1996 (2 ed.), p. 320.

29. *The Way*, no. 496: “How people like to be reminded of their relationship with distinguished figures in literature, in politics, in the army, in the Church! ... Sing to the Immaculate Virgin, reminding her: Hail Mary, daughter of God the Father: Hail Mary, Mother of God the Son: Hail Mary, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit.... Greater than you, none but God!”



is the source of all the perfections and privileges with which she is adorned. Because of it, she was conceived immaculate and is full of grace; because of it, she is ever virgin, she was taken up body and soul to heaven and has been crowned Queen of all creation, above the angels and saints. Greater than she, none but God. "The Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the Mother of God has a certain infinite dignity that comes from the infinite good which is God."<sup>30</sup> There is no danger of exaggerating. We can never hope to fathom this inexpressible mystery; nor will we ever be able to give sufficient thanks to our Mother for bringing us into such intimacy with the Blessed Trinity."<sup>31</sup>

#### b) *Mary's universality as teacher and intercessor*

Mary is the exemplar of every virtue, and especially of unity of life. She is the model, because by her double maternity she is presented to us as the unique realization of the unity of the human and the divine that is found in Christ; and at the same time she is the teacher who instructs us on how to live in accord with this reality. Mary is the most powerful intercessor in everything concerning the salvation of men. Finally, she is a Mother who unites all those who consider themselves her children. We will look at all these points in greater detail in the following sections.

##### 1) *Exemplar and teacher of every virtue*

That Mary is the "mother of God and mother of mankind" explains the universality of her example. Mary is an example in everything and for everything.

This universality, as the Fathers of the Church taught, is related to her fullness of grace and her Immaculate Conception. Mary accepted the Word into her soul before she did so in her body. She was Christ's first and best disciple, which is why he chose her as his mother. At the same time, men and women can take her as an example and teacher of how to be other Christs, Christ himself, *ipse Christus*, with the same sentiments as Christ Jesus (Philip 2:5), attaining the virtues that Christ taught by word and gesture (*gestis verbisque*). "St. Augustine calls our Blessed Lady *forma Dei*, the mold of God ('You are worthy to be called the mold of God')—the mold fit to cast and mold saints. He who is cast in this mold, is presently formed and molded in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ in him.... in a short time he will become similar to God, because he has been cast in the same mold which has formed a God who became man."<sup>32</sup>

St. Josemaría echoed these strands of Christian tradition: "May the soul of Mary,' writes St Ambrose, 'be in each of you, so that you may praise our Lord; may the spirit of Mary be in each one of you, so that you may rejoice in God.' This

30. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 25, 6.

31. *Friends of God*, no. 276.

32. St. Louis-Marie Grignon de Monfort, *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, no. 219.

Father of the Church goes on to say something which at first sight seems bold, but which has a clear spiritual meaning for the life of the Christian. 'According to the flesh, there is only one Mother of Christ; according to the faith, Christ is the fruit of all of us.'<sup>33</sup> If we become identified with Mary and imitate her virtues, we will be able to bring Christ to life, through grace, in the souls of many who will in turn become identified with him through the action of the Holy Spirit."<sup>34</sup>

Closely united to Mary's role as model is her role as teacher of every Christian virtue. In *The Way* St. Josemaría expresses his admiration for our Lady as "teacher of prayer," as "teacher of the sacrifice which is hidden and silent," as the model of "naturalness," of "humility," of "strength," of "simplicity," of "modesty," and of "purity."<sup>35</sup> In *Furrow* he proposes her as an example of all the virtues he will consider, closing each chapter with a reference to Mary. In the homily "Mother of God, our Mother" in *Friends of God*,<sup>36</sup> he comments at length on this reality, which is also stressed in the two Marian homilies in *Christ Is Passing By*.<sup>37</sup> "Our Lady gives us lessons in Fair Love, in faith, hope, charity, knowledge, wisdom. Mary teaches us as a mother does, and, being a mother, she does so quietly. We need to have a sensitivity of soul, a touch of refinement, in order to understand what she is showing us, by what she does more than by what she promises.... In her, all ideals become a reality.... If we truly come to know Mary our Mother, how quickly the supernatural virtues will grow in us!"<sup>38</sup>

Thus we see the full reach of Mary's double maternity. By becoming like our Lady, who is our mother, we become like Christ, who is like Mary because she is also his mother. Becoming like our mother is therefore part of the process of becoming conformed to Christ.

## 2) Singular model of unity of life

Mary, precisely because she is for us an example of every virtue and deed pleasing to her Son, is in a very special way a model of unity of life.

Moral rectitude demands of a person the exercise of all the virtues; while the theological perfection of unity of life means doing everything for love of God, maintaining a constant dialogue with Him. Mary fulfilled these two demands perfectly, as the founder of Opus Dei often stressed: "For over thirty years God has been putting into my heart the desire to help people of every condition and background to understand that ordinary life can be holy and full of God. Our Lord is calling us to sanctify the ordinary tasks of every day, for the perfection of the Christian is to be found precisely there. Let's consider it once more as we contemplate Mary's life. We can't forget that Mary spent

33. St. Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 2, 26: PL 15, 1561.

34. *Friends of God*, no. 281.

35. See *The Way*, nos. 502, 509, 499, 507, 508, 510 and 511 respectively.

36. *Friends of God*, nos. 274–293.

37. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 139–149 and 171–178.

38. *Friends of God*, nos. 284, 292, 293.

nearly every day of her life just like millions of other women who look after their family, bring up their children and take care of the house. Mary sanctifies the ordinary everyday things—what some people wrongly regard as unimportant and insignificant: everyday work, looking after those closest to you, visits to friends and relatives. What a blessed ordinariness, that can be so full of love of God! For that's what explains Mary's life—her love. A complete love, so complete that she forgets herself and is happy just to be there where God wants her, fulfilling, with care, what God wants her to do. That is why even her slightest action is never routine or vain but, rather, full of meaning. Mary, our mother, is for us both an example and a way. We have to try to be like her, in the ordinary circumstances in which God wants us to live."<sup>39</sup>

The Christocentric focus proper to unity of life finds a unique example in Mary, as St. Josemaría said: "I like to go back in my imagination to the years Jesus spent close to his Mother, years which span almost the whole of his life on earth. I like to picture him as a little child, cared for by Mary who kisses him and plays with him. I like to see him growing up before the loving eyes of his Mother and of Joseph, his father on earth. What tenderness and care Mary and the Holy Patriarch must have shown towards Jesus, as they looked after him during his childhood, all the while, silently, learning so much from him. Their souls would become more and more like the soul of that Son, who was both Man and God. This is why his Mother, and after her St Joseph, understand better than anyone the feelings of the Heart of Christ; and the two of them are thus the best way, I would say the only way, to reach the Savior."<sup>40</sup>

The present Prelate of Opus Dei spoke of St. Josemaría's contemplation of our Lady: "He noticed that although Holy Mary's love for our Lord was entirely supernatural, one could not imagine a more human love than that which filled her heart. Mary, by sharing in the mystery of the incarnation through her *fiat!* (which she prolonged throughout her stay on earth), dedicated her body, her senses and faculties, all her being to God. And the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate, thanks to our Lady's supernatural and human response. Thus we learn that the more supernatural we are, the more capacity we will have to draw close to all creatures."<sup>41</sup>

In this context, the phrase "Mother of God and mother of mankind" can help us better understand why the Blessed Virgin is the singular model of unity of life.

This phrase emphasizes, in first place, Mary's motherhood with respect to Christ, who is both human and divine. She is the Mother of Christ according to the flesh, with a full and true human maternity, as the Church has always taught from the beginning, resisting whenever necessary the Docetist or Gnos-

39. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 148.

40. *Friends of God*, no. 281.

41. Echevarría, J., "El amor a María Santísima en las enseñanzas de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," op. cit., p. 342.

tic interpretations that viewed her maternity as fictitious or only apparent. At the same time, hers is a divine maternity because it embraces a divine Person, as the Church defended against the dualistic interpretations proposed by Nestorius and others.

Secondly, Mary is the mother of all men. This spiritual maternity is also both human and divine, although it does not imply carnal generation nor does it involve a divine Person. It is truly human, because it is really manifested in human love, in the love that a woman has for those who are truly her children, children according to the spirit “on many counts.”<sup>42</sup> It is also divine, because it stems from being the Mother of God, and is expressed in a love that is theological charity imbued with maternal warmth, flowing from her love for God.

No creature has attained, or ever will attain, such close likeness to Christ; no one can ever unite the human and divine as closely as in her. The saints can be examples of heroic virtue and teachers of unity of life, as is St. Josemaría. But they will never enjoy a relationship with God and others that is both as divine and human as in Mary.

### 3) *Singular teacher of unity of life*

The founder of Opus Dei explains how Mary is the teacher of unity of life by drawing on the example of his own personal Marian devotion, recommending that we deal with Mary as a child. Bishop Alvaro del Portillo wrote: “Monsignor Escrivá’s teaching brings together the human and the divine aspects of Christian perfection. That must be so when the Catholic doctrine on the Incarnate Word is known in depth and when it is loved, and lived, passionately. The practical and vital consequences of that joyful reality are clearly drawn in *Furrow*. The author has sketched in outline the life and work of a Christian in the midst of the world, fully committed to the noble aspirations that move other men, and at the same time totally directed towards God. The resulting portrait is most attractive.... In clear contrast with this portrait, Monsignor Escrivá also sketches the characteristic features of the frivolous man, lacking in true virtues.... The prescription of a remedy follows the diagnosis of the illness. ‘Nothing perfects our personality so much as correspondence with grace’ (no. 443). He then proposes a very sound piece of practical advice: ‘Try to imitate the Virgin Mary and you will be a complete man or woman’ (ibid.). Next to Jesus, a Christian always discovers his Mother, Holy Mary, and always goes to her for all his needs; to imitate her, to get to know her, to avail himself of her powerful intercession.”<sup>43</sup>

42. *The Way*, no. 497.

43. Alvaro del Portillo, Foreword to *Furrow*. The cited point from *Furrow* reads as follows: “‘A great sign appeared in Heaven: a woman adorned with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars about her head.’ From this, you and I and everyone may be sure that nothing perfects our personality so much as correspondence with grace.”

“Try to imitate the Virgin Mary and you will be a complete man or woman.” St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, Scepter, London, 1988, no. 443.

Getting to know Mary, St. Josemaría taught, helps us to be divine and human at the same time, and thus to be like Christ. The conjunction of the human and the divine, characteristic of a full and perfect unity of life, is intimately related (as St. Josemaría often points out) with the sense of one's divine filiation. For the human and divine natures are united in the Person of the Word, of the Son. Thus one can understand why, to the degree that someone participates in the eternal filiation of the Word through grace, in the same measure he also reflects the union of the two natures in the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. "God wants us to be very human. Our heads should indeed be touching heaven, but our feet should be firmly on the ground. The price of living as Christians is not that of ceasing to be human or of abandoning the effort to acquire those virtues which some have even without knowing Christ. The price paid for each Christian is the redeeming Blood of our Lord and he, I insist, wants us to be both very human and very divine, struggling each day to imitate him who is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*."<sup>44</sup> The imitation of Christ thus necessarily entails the imitation of the union of the human and divine found in Him.<sup>45</sup>

All of this finds immediate application in the case of Marian devotion, as the founder of Opus Dei himself explains: "In our relationship to God, we are not blind men yearning for light and crying in anguished darkness. We are children who know our Father loves us.

"Mary tells us about this warmth and security. That's why her name goes straight to our heart. Our relationship with our own mother may show us how to deal with Mary, the Lady of the Sweet Name. We have to love God with the same heart with which we love our parents, our brothers and sisters, the other members of our family, our friends. And we must love Mary with that same heart, too.

"How does a normal son or daughter treat his mother? In different ways, of course, but always affectionately and confidently, never coldly. In an intimate way, through small, commonplace customs. And a mother feels hurt if we omit them: a kiss or an embrace when leaving or coming home, a little extra attention, a few warm words. In our relationship with our mother in heaven, we should act in very much the same way."<sup>46</sup> The union of the human and the divine leads to a devotion filled with tenderness, shown in trusting and affectionate gestures.

In this respect, it is interesting that the decree on St. Josemaría's heroic exercise of virtues underlines precisely this characteristic of his Marian piety: that it was "imbued with tenderness."<sup>47</sup> Among the many qualities that could

44. *Friends of God*, no. 75.

45. Cf. Ocariz, "La filiación divina, realidad central en la vida y en la enseñanza de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," op. cit., pp. 178-187.

46. *Christ Is Passing By*, no 142.

47. Pontifical Decree on the exercise of heroic virtues of the Servant of God Josemaría Escrivá. AAS 82 (1990) 1454.

have been highlighted, the fact that the principal reference is to tenderness emphasizes that his devotion was both human and divine, stemming from his faith in Mary as the Mother of God and our mother.

Tenderness is something proper to relationships with beloved persons, especially the most intimate ones: with one's mother and father, with brothers and sisters, with spouse and children. In consequence, an authentic relationship with our Lady, based on what our Christian faith tells us about her, cannot lack that characteristic, since she is the Mother of God and also our mother. Tenderness here almost seems to be a necessary sign of authenticity.

Genuine Christian devotion has always been characterized by a harmony between the human and the divine, which was inaugurated on earth with the incarnation of the Word. The Christian authenticity of a specific devotion can be measured, among other things, by how it reflects the union of the human and the divine, both in the devotion itself and in those who practice it.

"Every Christian, by recalling his life, can reconstruct the history of his relationship with our heavenly Mother. This history includes specific dates, persons and places, favors that we recognize as coming from our Lady, encounters laden with a special savor. We realize that the love that God shows us through Mary has all the depth of the divine and, at the same time, the familiarity and warmth proper to the human."<sup>48</sup> Marian devotion thus becomes a path towards unity of life. By fostering this tender relationship with the mother of God, one that is both human and divine, Marian devotion channels a person's piety towards the union of the human and the divine that ought to characterize a Christian's relationship with God.

#### 4) *Universal and all-powerful intercessor*

The advocacy "Mother of God and mother of mankind" also explains why we can go to our Lady "in everything and for everything," taking her as a universal intercessor. The founder of Opus Dei wrote: "Mary is the one who is full of grace and the sum of all perfections; and she is also our Mother. Her power before God is such that she can obtain anything we ask for, and, like any mother, she wants to answer our prayers. Like any mother also, she knows and understands our weaknesses. She encourages us and makes excuses for us. She makes the way easy for us and, even when we think there is no possible solution for our worry, she always has one ready to offer us."<sup>49</sup>

Mary's situation is not that of other mothers, who at times don't know how to or are unable to help their children in their requests. Our Lady always knows the solution and is able to help. This power is not a personal power of her own (she never loses sight of her own littleness before God), but that of her

48. "Recuerdos del Pilar," cited above.

49. *Friends of God*, no. 292.

intercession before the Almighty. She is his Mother and he never refuses her anything.

Christians quickly noticed the intercessory power of Mary and immediately learned to go to her in their tribulations and necessities, as is attested to by the antiquity of the antiphon *Sub tuum praesidium* ["We fly to your patronage"]. The founder of Opus Dei made his own this tradition of trusting faith and prayer, and loved to pass it on to others, based on his own experience. Mary accepted everything from God and made it her own with a total docility and availability. She enjoys such esteem before God (God's eyes rest upon her only with love: she is Immaculate, full of grace before him) that one can truly call her the "all-powerful supplicant."<sup>50</sup> Mary's love for men and women as their mother is so great that she is concerned about the problems of each and every one; and she places her omnipotent power of intercession at their service, so that they may draw closer to her Son, getting to know him, love him and serve him.

"Let us go with our imagination to Cana, to discover another of Mary's prerogatives. Our Lady asks her son to remedy the sad situation of a marriage feast without more wine. He tells the servants: 'Do whatever he tells you.'<sup>51</sup> And Jesus carries out what his mother had suggested to him, with her maternal omnipotence. If Christ acts in this way to help people with a small domestic problem, how can he fail to listen to his mother when she beseeches him for all her children? God wants to grant his grace to all men and women through Mary. 'We are thus,' writes St. Pius X, 'very far from attributing to the Mother of God a productive power of grace—a power which belongs to God alone. Yet, since Mary exceeds all in holiness and in union with Jesus Christ, and has been associated by Jesus Christ in the work of redemption, she merits for us *de congruo*, in the language of theologians, what Jesus Christ merits for us *de condigno*, and she is the supreme Minister of the distribution of graces.'<sup>52</sup> Mary is security, the seat of wisdom; and she, the Virgin Mother, mediatrix of all graces, is the one who will lead us by the hand to her Son, Jesus."<sup>53</sup>

The reference to Mary's "maternal omnipotence" is interesting, since this expression gives the profound theological reason for the efficacy of our Lady's supplications before God. As he once said in a meditation: "*Et erat Mater Iesu ibi* (Jn 2:1). The mother of Jesus was present at the marriage feast.... And how our trust in you grows on seeing how you act on this occasion! Who was it that called you the 'all-powerful supplicant'? But even this name fails to reflect the full power of

50. St. Josemaría took this title from Christian tradition. He used it on various occasions, for example in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 175 and in *Friends of God*, no. 288; in the latter he writes: "*Felix culpa*, the Church sings. Happy fault, that has brought us so great and wonderful a Redeemer. Happy fault, we could add, which has merited that we should receive Mary as our Mother. Now we are safe. Nothing should worry us now, because our Lady, the crowned Queen of heaven and earth, is omnipotent in her supplication before our Father God. Jesus cannot deny anything to Mary, nor to us, who are children of his own Mother."

51. Jn 2:5.

52. St. Pius X, Encyclical *Ad Diem Illum*, February 2, 1904.

53. "La Virgen del Pilar," cited above.

your intercession. In reality, you are not a supplicant, because it is you who gives the orders, knowing that your Son is always ready to follow your every wish."<sup>54</sup>

I referred earlier to the personal experience of St. Josemaría as a source of his teachings about our Lady. I would like to cite here one text which shows clearly that his Marian devotion, grounded on the faith that he had received and studied, grew and developed as a result of his spiritual experience and personal meditation.<sup>55</sup> "I wrote when I was young (with a conviction that perhaps crystallized during the years of my daily visits to Our Lady of the Pillar, 'that to Jesus we always go, and to Him we "return," through Mary.' And since then the Mother of God has given me so many unmistakable signs of her help. I say this openly, just as a notary attests to a deed, so that there be a public record of my gratitude for events that would not have happened if not for our Lord's grace, which always reaches us through the intercession of his Mother."<sup>56</sup>

5) *A mother who acts as a unifying principle in the life of her children*

We have seen that, for St. Josemaría, Marian piety is a path towards unity of life, since it helps us to unite the human and divine dimensions in our relationship with God. Further, he teaches us that Mary acts as a true principle of unity of life by effectively leading us to her Son. Mary in doing so acts as a mother, carrying out in the order of grace what a mother carries out in the order of nature.

On the human level, we know how dependent small children are on their mother, trusting in her completely. With her they feel completely safe. Can we say that something analogous happens with Christians in their spiritual life? St. Josemaría's teachings lead us to say yes. First, because there are many analogies between the relationship of mothers with their children and of Mary with mankind.<sup>57</sup> And also because Mary provides the universality necessary to constitute a unifying principle in a person's life, analogously to how a mother is such in her child's human concerns, and to how Christ is such in attaining theological unity of life. Mary is a truly universal mother: she is concerned about everything and encompasses everything; she is interested in everyone and helps everyone, interceding for the salvation of all men and women.

The Word became flesh so that men could become sons of God and brothers in Him. Thus He became the unifying principal of human life. Something similar happens in regard to Mary. Precisely because she is "Mother of God and mother of mankind," Mary teaches everyone to behave as children of God and brothers and sisters of one another. This unifying function is based not only on her double maternity (in a way analogous to the hypostatic union

54. Words taken from preaching by St. Josemaría on July 11, 1937, included by Pedro Rodriguez in his critical edition of *The Way*, cited above, p. 636.

55. See Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, no. 8, on growing in one's understanding of the revealed word of God.

56. "La Virgen del Pilar," cited above; see *Friends of God*, no. 293.

57. See for example *Christ Is Passing By*, no 142.



of the two natures in Christ), but also on her assumption in body and soul into heaven (in a way analogous to Christ's resurrection).

"From the first moment of the Church all Christians who have sought the love of God—that love revealed in Jesus Christ—have encountered our Lady and experienced her motherly care.... It is not surprising then that one of the oldest witnesses to this devotion to Mary is confident prayer: 'We gather under your protection, holy Mother of God. Do not reject the prayers we say to you in our need, but save us from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.'<sup>58</sup> In a very natural way we start wanting to speak to the Mother of God, who is also our mother. We want to treat her as someone who is alive. For death has not triumphed over her; she is body and soul in the presence of God the Father, her Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>59</sup>

Devotion to our Lady fosters unity of life because she teaches and helps men and women to become sons and daughters of God and to be brothers and sisters to each other.<sup>60</sup> Her maternal role consists in bringing men and women to her divine Son, so that they can be reconciled with Him and live united to Him as adopted children of his Father and as his brothers and sisters.

First comes filiation: "Because Mary is our mother, devotion to her teaches us to be authentic sons: to love truly, without limit; to be simple, without the complications which come from selfishly thinking only about ourselves; to be happy, knowing that nothing can destroy our hope."<sup>61</sup>

Then, fraternity: "If we have this filial contact with Mary, we won't be able to think just about ourselves and our problems. Selfish personal problems will find no place in our mind. Mary brings us to Jesus, and Jesus is 'the firstborn among many brothers.'<sup>62</sup> And so, if we know Jesus, we realize that we can live only by giving ourselves to the service of others. A Christian can't be caught up in personal problems; he must be concerned about the universal Church and the salvation of all souls."<sup>63</sup>

We saw earlier that a mother can be the universal reference principle for her small child. However, a mother doesn't provide the unifying principle in the life of an adult. This objection raises a question of great importance, since it shows the

58. *Sub suum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genetrix: nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta.*

59. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 141—142.

60. Unity of life requires both a sense of filiation to God and a sense of fraternity with Christ and our fellow men and women. Unfortunately, many of those who boast of fulfilling their religious duties fail to realize that this must also be shown in their care for persons in sorrow and need (Jas 1:27). There is a kind of circularity between these two aspects: fraternity is born of knowing oneself to be children of the same Father; while the reality of fraternity (the affection between brothers and sisters, their mutual help and service) strengthens their sense of filiation and gives it a fuller and more demanding content. Cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 36.

61. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 143.

62. Rom 8:29.

63. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 145.

limits of the analogy we have used. But what cannot happen on the natural plain, does occur in supernatural life, for Christ said that only children and those who become like children will enter into the Kingdom of heaven.<sup>64</sup>

“Let’s think about this. It can help us to understand some very important things. The mystery of Mary helps us see that in order to approach God we must become little. As Christ said to his disciples ‘Believe me, unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.’<sup>65</sup> To become children we must renounce our pride and self-sufficiency, recognizing that we can do nothing by ourselves. We must realize that we need grace, and the help of God our Father to find our way and keep to it. To be little, you have to abandon yourself as children do, believe as children believe, beg as children beg. And we learn all this through contact with Mary.”<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Was the founder of Opus Dei’s Marian devotion something new?

What is the import of the founder of Opus Dei’s Marian devotion for the People of God?

A first point to be clarified is that St. Josemaría did not promote new devotions or prayers. Nor did he spread any specific devotions to our Lady or recommend any of the advocations connected to his own life or to the history of Opus Dei. Rather he encouraged and spread existing devotions that were traditional in the Church.<sup>67</sup> And he did so respecting each person’s own likes and interests.<sup>68</sup>

He himself had never wanted to be a founder of anything; he considered himself “a founder without foundation,” and desired “to hide and disappear” so that “only Jesus would shine forth.” His only concern was to carry out the mission God was asking of him: to preach holiness in the midst of the world, teaching men and women how to sanctify their work and daily duties, closely united to the Mother of God. Thereby they would contribute silently and efficaciously to making a reality of the aspiration he so often prayed: *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam*; that all may go with Peter to Jesus through Mary. Thus the founder of Opus Dei’s contribution to the growth of Marian devotion can be found precisely in his concern to place it in direct contact with each Christian’s struggle to attain unity of life.

64. Cf. *Dizionario dei concetti biblici del Nuovo Testamento*, ed. L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, H. Bietenhard, EDB, Bologna 1991 (4 ed.), terms *fanciullo, bambino, figlio*: pp. 594–603.

65. Mt 18:3.

66. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 143.

67. See Pell, G., “Blessed Josemaría Escrivá’s Christocentrism,” in *The Greatness of Ordinary Life I*, cited above., p. 143. He notes that St. Josemaría did not propose new devotions, but rather spread those that already existed in traditional Christian piety, centering them on Christ.

68. Thus, for example, during the years of religious persecution in Spain, when someone who had the devotion of reciting the Little Office of Our Lady was unable to do so because he was in prison and didn’t have a copy of this book, the founder had it delivered to him in prison. See Salvador Bernal, *Mmgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 286–287.

St. Josemaría did not limit himself to saying that Catholics should put our Lady into their lives. He also showed how this could be done in any place, in any walk of life, without the need to make use of formulas or devotions specific to any particular way of life. The universality of a devotion requires that all should be able to make it their own and practice it. This is the Marian devotion that St. Josemaría taught, which is within the grasp of all because it is nourished by the episodes of daily life of ordinary men and women.

St. Josemaría always insisted that holiness, identification with Christ, should be expressed as unity of life, as a unity of prayer, work and apostolate. This is especially true for those who live in the midst of the world facing the multiple demands of work, family and social obligations. Living in unity, united to Christ, means attaining human and supernatural perfection, and therefore holiness. And this is within the reach of everyone, whatever their gifts, family or social situation, health, etc. It requires no special abilities or talents, since everything, even the smallest incident, can be an occasion for an encounter with God, and for leading others to him.

However, many people fail to understand precisely this point. A disordered self-love, vanity, the zeal to stand out and be noticed, all the results of original sin, can mislead us into thinking that only outstanding deeds are really effective, even in the sphere of one's religious devotions. But the truth lies elsewhere, as St. Josemaría forcefully tells us:

“Do you see where God's greatness is hidden? In a manger, in swaddling clothes, in a stable. The redemptive power of our lives can only work through humility. We must stop thinking about ourselves and feel the responsibility of helping others. It can sometimes happen that even well-intentioned people create personal problems—really serious worries—which have no objective basis whatsoever. These problems arise in persons whose lack of self-knowledge leads to pride and a desire to be the center of attention, to be favored by everyone. They want to appear always in a good light, to be personally secure. They are not content simply to do good and disappear. And so, many who could enjoy a wonderful peace of soul and great happiness become, through pride and presumption, unhappy and unfruitful.”<sup>69</sup>

Pride prevents one from recognizing that everyday realities, which seem to have little importance, can have great value in God's sight. As the Psalm says: “for though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly” (Ps 138[137]:6). Apparently insignificant acts acquire great supernatural value when done for love of God and neighbor. Thus we should go to Him in everything and for everything.

The founder of Opus Dei insisted strongly on the value of little things.<sup>70</sup> And he found in our Lady's life an example here as well.

69. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 18.

70. In *The Way*, there is an entire chapter dedicated to this topic. References to it are found throughout all of St. Josemaría's preaching and teaching.

“But don’t forget: while God exalted his Mother, it is equally true that he did not spare her pain, exhaustion in her work, or trials of her faith. A village woman one day broke into praise for Jesus exclaiming: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nourished you.’ Jesus said in reply: ‘Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.’<sup>71</sup> It was a compliment to his Mother on her *fiat*,<sup>72</sup> her ‘be it done.’ She lived it sincerely, unstintingly, fulfilling its every consequence, but never amid fanfare, rather in the hidden and silent sacrifice of each day.

“As we meditate on these truths, we come to understand better the logic of God. We come to realize that the supernatural value of our life does not depend on the great undertakings suggested to us by our overactive imagination. Rather it’s to be found in the faithful acceptance of God’s will, in welcoming generously the opportunities for small, daily sacrifices.

To become God-like, to be divinized, we must begin by being very human, accepting from God our condition as ordinary men and sanctifying its apparent littleness. This is how Mary lived. She who is full of grace, the object of God’s pleasure, exalted above all the angels and the saints, lived an ordinary life. Mary is as much a creature as we are, with a heart like ours, made for joy and mirth as well as suffering and tears.<sup>73</sup>

Although St. Josemaría did not promote new devotions or prayers, he always gave great importance to traditional Marian devotions. A principal part of the message he spread—the universal call to holiness—was the need to draw close to our Lady in order to attain holiness, identification with Christ, and therefore unity of life. “There are many Marian devotions in addition to the Rosary, just as there are many ways of expressing affection for our earthly mother. Some children show it with a kiss, others with a gift of flowers, others with a silent glance that expresses the intensity of their affection. Something analogous occurs with our love for our heavenly Mother. There are many devotions, and not all of them have to be incorporated into each person’s piety. But we can also be certain that a person who does not express in some way his love for Mary does not possess the fullness of the faith.”<sup>74</sup>

#### 4. Concluding reflections on the Christian depth of St. Josemaría’s Marian devotion

Spiritual authors, besides noting the danger of doctrinally ambiguous devotions, have also warned against the possible lack of authenticity in religious practice when it is disconnected from the theological virtues, moral rectitude, and the revealed truth taught by the Church. They also put us on guard against

71. Luke 11:27–28.

72. Luke 1:38.

73. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 172. See *ibid.*, no. 148.

74. “La Virgen del Pilar,” *op. cit.* This idea also appears in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 142, cited above.

doctrinal inconsistency and routine, which deprive these practices of their true meaning, expressed by the very word “devotion” itself.<sup>75</sup>

In this final section we will see that the Marian devotions lived and taught by St. Josemaría not only present the characteristics of authentic Catholic devotion, but that, by their Christian depth, they efficaciously guard against possible deviations, including routine. We have already seen that his Marian piety was nourished above all by contemplation of Mary in the light of Scripture and the teachings of the Church, thus ensuring its solidity and doctrinal richness. Grounded in a unity of life lived alongside Christ, this devotion skirts the dangers of routine, sentimentalism, curiosity and hypocrisy.

*a) Authenticity in devotions and unity of life*

Devotions are authentic when they are an external manifestation of interior dedication, self-giving, faith, hope and love. They are not such when they are limited to external acts that are not enlivened by interior life, and therefore that fail to produce fruits of conversion, spiritual growth and service to others.

Another criterion of authenticity can be seen in the consistency of a specific devotion with the rest of one’s spiritual life. Indeed, it is impossible, for various reasons, for a true devotion not to influence the life of a person and be reflected in his conduct. Unity of life serves as a measure and guarantee of authentic devotion: a tie to charity can be added to the connection with faith as an indispensable condition of the Christian authenticity of specific manifestations of piety.

St. Josemaría’s Marian devotion left a deep imprint on his personal life and conduct. He wrote: “Your love for our Lady should be more lively, more supernatural. —Don’t just go to the Virgin Mary to ask her for things. You should also go to give: give her your affection; give her your love for her divine Son; and show her your affection with deeds of service to others, who are also her children.”<sup>76</sup> His sincere and genuine Marian piety was expressed in deeds of dedication to God and to his fellow men and women:

“Devotion to our Lady of Pilar has always accompanied me: my parents, with their Aragonese piety, instilled it in me from childhood. Now, in thinking of Holy Mary, there come to mind so many periods of prayer and so many events, small in appearance, but great if seen with eyes of love. During the time I spent in Saragossa for my priestly studies, while also attending classes at the law school, my visits to the church of Pilar were at least daily.... I continue going to her with filial love. With the same faith with which I invoked her back

75. Almost all the spiritual authors who have dealt with the subject warn against these dangers. See, for example, St. John of the Cross (*The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, III, c. 42); St. Francis de Sales (*Introduction to the Devout Life*); St. John Eudes (*La Vie et le Royaume de Jésus*), St. Louis de Montfort (*Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*), etc. St. Josemaría does so as well; see, for example, *The Way*, nos. 551, 552 and 574.

76. *The Forge*, no. 137.

in the 20's, when our Lord was giving me premonitions of what he wanted of me, with that same faith I invoke her now. If on occasion we confront unjust or unpleasant events—splatters of mud that a Christian doesn't want to remove—they are converted into beautiful flowers, which I place with my heart before that sacred Pillar, as we Aragonese sing, and I say: My Lady, I offer you this too. Under your protection, I am always happy and safe. This is why God wants us to approach our Lady of Pilar: so that, in feeling ourselves comforted by the understanding, affection and power of our Mother, our faith will increase, our hope will be strengthened, our eagerness to lovingly serve all souls will grow. And thus with joy and renewed strength we will be enabled to dedicate ourselves to the service of others, to sanctify our work and our life: in a word, to make all the paths of the earth divine."<sup>77</sup>

His Marian devotion was nourished by the Church's doctrinal riches. It was especially ordained towards interior growth, towards the development of the unity of life that he saw as intrinsic to Christian perfection: "Devotion to our Lady is not something soft and sentimental. It fills the soul with consolation and joy to precisely the extent that it means a deep act of faith making us go outside ourselves and put our hope in the Lord."<sup>78</sup>

Thus we are encouraged to confront the hard battle to attain true maturity, the battle against the self-love that encloses a person in himself and cuts him off from the "you" of others and from the "You" who saves us: "We have to open our eyes; we have to look around us and recognize how God is calling us through the people at our side. We cannot turn our backs on others, ignoring them, caught up in our own little world. That wasn't how Jesus lived. The Gospel often speaks of his mercy, his ability to feel the sorrow and share the needs of others. He consoled the widow of Naim;<sup>79</sup> he wept at the death of Lazarus;<sup>80</sup> he felt compassion for the crowds that followed him with nothing to eat;<sup>81</sup> he also had pity on sinners, on those who go through life without knowing light or truth. 'And when he landed, Jesus saw a large crowd, and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.'<sup>82</sup> When we are truly sons of Mary, we understand this attitude of our Lord, and our heart expands and becomes tender. We feel the sufferings, doubts, loneliness and sorrow of all other men, our brothers. And we urgently want to help them and speak to them about God, so that they can treat him as their Father and understand the motherly care which Mary is offering them."<sup>83</sup>

Thus drawing close to our Lady strengthens us at the same time as it helps us not to feel alone, not to feel abandoned nor to abandon others, to overcome

77. "Recuerdos del Pilar," cit.

78. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 143.

79. Cf. Luke 7:11-17.

80. Cf. John 11:33.

81. Cf. Matt 15:32.

82. Mark 6:34.

83. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 146.

discouragement, to prevail over rancor and apathy, to live a generous self-giving to our neighbor in spite of possible negative experiences, to break free of tepidity, to lead a life of union with God.

Contemplation of Mary, in the thought and teachings of St. Josemaría, is not a cold theoretical exercise. Without losing its intellectual content, it is ordered towards life. It leads one to live alongside Mary, to bring her into one's own life. "The Mother of God is also truly the mother of men. Our Lord wanted it to be this way. So that future generations might know it, the Holy Spirit inspired St John to write: 'When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother "Woman, behold your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.'<sup>84</sup> John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, brought Mary into his home, into his life. Spiritual writers have seen these words of the Gospel as an invitation to all Christians to bring Mary into their lives. Mary certainly wants us to invoke her, to approach her confidently, to appeal to her as our mother, asking her to 'show that you are our mother' (Hymn *Ave Maris Stella*)."<sup>85</sup>

#### b) *An authentic Christocentric piety*

The Christian authenticity of a devotion is shown in an evident way when it leads one to get to know and love Christ better, to draw closer to him with trust. This is how the founder of Opus Dei always understood and practiced Marian piety.

Protestant reformers tended to look askance at Catholic devotion to Mary because they feared that it obscured the central role of Christ in Christian life.

This fear might seem to have a certain rational basis. Since God alone is the principle of an authentic unity of life and he alone can fill the human heart, how could this also be the role of a creature? Wouldn't seeking the unifying presence offered by a creature more likely result in people going astray, cut off from the true source of unity? If this objection is reasonable, it is also true that there are creatures who help people to give unity and meaning to their life without separating them from God. This is the case of Mary, of the saints, and of many good, upright people.

This fear also has a practical basis. There are, unfortunately, some persons whose Marian devotion fails to respect the elementary demands of the theological order, who fail to direct themselves to her in accord with the truth of the Catholic faith, and therefore who are not really praying to the Mother of God. But when confronted with these errors, it is always possible to redirect the Marian devotion of these people and give it Christian authenticity.

84. John 19:25-27.

85. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 140.

In its ecumenical dialogue with Protestants, the Second Vatican Council emphasized, in chapter eight of the constitution *Lumen Gentium*, that the importance given to Mary by Catholics in no way signifies any kind of Mariocentrism. The Catholic faith recognizes that our Lady's role is dependent on Christ and ordained to his redemptive mission, to his salvific action.<sup>86</sup>

For St. Josemaría, Mary is the model and principle of unity of life precisely because of her relationship with Christ, not aside from Him. Thus recourse to our Lady, when authentic, does not and cannot detract from her Son.

Contemplating Mary teaches us that her specific role in the plan of salvation is to engender Christ, to care for and accompany him during his whole life. Completely docile to the Christifying action of the Holy Spirit, Mary carries out her maternal role (as mother of the Incarnate Word, and of men in the order of grace). Our Lady's whole life is a participation in the Paraclete's Christifying action. Here we find the source of the special unity of life given by Mary: engendering Christ and caring for him, and engendering the Mystical Body of Christ and caring for it. Mary is always the mother of Christ and of men in him, the mother of Christ and of the Church. As the founder of Opus Dei wrote: "For me, the first Marian devotion (for thus I like to see it) is the Holy Mass.... Each day when Christ comes down into the priest's hands, his real presence among us is renewed, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity: the same Body and Blood that he took from Mary's flesh. In the sacrifice of the Altar, our Lady's participation evokes for us the silent reserve with which she accompanied her Son's life when he traveled through the land of Palestine. The Holy Mass is the action of the entire Trinity: by the will of the Father, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself in a redemptive oblation. In this unfathomable mystery one can make out, as though veiled, Mary's most pure face: Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, Spouse of God the Holy Spirit."<sup>87</sup>

St. Josemaría's experience taught him that Mary, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, is able to unify men's thoughts, words and deeds in the love of God revealed in Christ. When we realize that Mary's role as model and principle of unity of life depends on her relationship with Christ as his mother, we avoid any danger that devotion to her could be an obstacle to recognizing the uniqueness of the Mediator and the sovereignty of God. The unifying action of Marian piety consists precisely in uniting men and women with Christ, not in uniting them with herself, apart from Him. The love of the mother cannot be understood as an alternative to the love of the Son, nor as something that could cast a shadow on it.

In summary, Mary's role is to draw men to her Son, placing them before Christ so that they can be reconciled with Him, learning to love Him and

86. See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 58–63. John Paul II also speaks of "the Marian light projected upon ecumenism." cf. Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, cit., no. 50.

87. "La Virgen del Pilar," op. cit.



follow Him. St. Josemaría said in one of his homilies: “Without ceasing to be a mother, our Lady is able to get each of her children to face his own responsibilities. Mary always does the immense favor of bringing to the cross, of placing face to face with the example of the Son of God, those who come close to her and contemplate her life. It is in this confrontation that Christian life is decided. And here Mary intercedes for us so that our behavior may lead to a reconciliation of the younger brother—you and me—with the firstborn Son of the Father.”<sup>88</sup>

Thus “the beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary.”<sup>89</sup> I wrote that many years ago, in the introduction to a short book on the Rosary, and since then I have often experienced the truth of those words. I am not going to complete that thought here with all sorts of reasons. I invite you to discover it for yourself, showing your love for Mary, opening your heart to her, confiding to her your joys and sorrows, asking her to help you recognize and follow Jesus.”<sup>90</sup>

True Marian devotion leads always to a greater love for God the Father, for the Word, and for the Holy Spirit. “Most Sweet Heart of Mary, prepare a safe way. Guide our steps on earth with strength and security. Become for us the path we are to follow, since you in your love know the way, a sure short-cut, to the love of Jesus Christ.”<sup>91</sup>

88. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 149. The idea is already present in *The Way*: “The Virgin of Sorrows. When you contemplate her, look into her Heart; she is a Mother with two sons, face to face: He ... and you” (no. 506).

89. *Holy Rosary*, Chicago 1972, p.12.

90. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 143.

91. *Ibid.*, no. 178.