

Priestly Fraternity in the Life of Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*

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They were remarks made as if in passing, during the familiar human and supernatural conversations in which he tried to enkindle the love of God in the souls of those of us who were at his side. Observations, short comments: ‘Your lives are just beginning’, said Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer to us one June morning in Rome. “Some are just starting out while others are bringing their lives to a close, but all of us live the same Life of Christ. There are so many things to do in the world! Let us ask Our Lord that we may always be faithful, that we continue our work and that we live this Life with a capital ‘L’, which is the only one that is worth living. The other life is not worth the effort, it passes away, it escapes us like water which we try to hold in our hands. Only the Life is life!”¹

We could not have imagined that a few days later on June 26th, 1975, the time would have arrived for the Lord to call him into His Presence, the moment of the definitive step which he had been looking forward to with increasing intensity. At that time, he had been repeating with the Psalmist: *vultum tuum, Domine, requiram!*².

So many years have passed since then. So many details of his life spontaneously surge forth into my memory so many times a day: the warmth of his words, his continual joy, and his insistent reminders that we are children of God through grace, and that we need to act as such in the midst of our work and our daily duties.

* Article published in «Palabra», 239 June 1985, pp. 274-279, and in L.F. MATEO-SECO and R. RODRÍGUEZ-OCAÑA, *Sacerdotes en el Opus Dei*, Pamplona 1994, pp. 297-311.

¹ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 7-VI-1975 (AGP, P01 1975, p. 847).

² Ps 26:8.

The years, far from having distanced Blessed Josemaría from us, have actually brought him *closer* to us. Each day there are more testimonies of people from every nation, men and women from the most varied cultures and milieus, of the most disparate social positions and from the entire gamut of professions, who recount how their *encounter* with the Founder of Opus Dei has led them to return to a close relationship with God, to quicken their step in following the Lord, to struggle with a sense of determination in their search for sanctity, passing through the three stages which he pointed out in *The Way*: “May you seek Christ: may you find Christ: may you love Christ”³.

1. PRIESTLY UNITY AND PRIESTLY FRATERNITY

“Work closely with one another, be united in your struggle, suffer, sleep and wake up all at the same time, as administrators of God, as his assistants and servants”⁴. This exhortation of St. Ignatius of Antioch serves very well to highlight a marked feature in the spiritual physiognomy of Blessed Josemaría: the continual and increasing effort which he made from the earliest years of his priesthood to live in accordance with the deepest meaning of priestly fraternity and to help others do the same. “This is our great task”, he would repeat to the priests who went to listen him. “To love our brother priests. We have to feel the satisfaction of being the servants of all souls, but first of all, of priests, who are our brothers”⁵.

His desires could not be attributed merely to sentiments or conventional attitudes. In no way could it be said that he lived by appearances; he preferred to let his deeds speak for themselves and he struggled to live in accordance with what God expected of him. For this reason, he always believed that the union among priests should be manifested in their effort to help one another to perform the duties of their ministry better, more effectively. This would be a form of assistance that would be full of human and supernatural affection, so that none of them would ever feel alone in the task which had been entrusted to him or in his struggle for sanctity.

From the beginning of his priestly vocation, he sought, as a true and loyal friend, to enkindle deep piety and a burning love for Jesus Christ in other priests, especially in those who had perhaps fallen back a little on their way. His youth was no obstacle to his efforts; or rather, his zeal for souls led him to overcome any

³ *The Way*, 382.

⁴ ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Epistola ad Polycarpum*, VI (PG 5, 724).

⁵ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 26-X-1972 (AGP, P04 1972, II p. 765).

drawbacks which his age might have supposed. The following words of the Scripture could well be applied to him: “I understand more than my elders, because I keep your precepts”⁶. And this was why even elderly priests found a father in him, and trusted him with their friendship and the direction of their souls.

Only a deeply-rooted faith could move one to undertake such daring feats. The force of the Founder of Opus Dei’s complete gift of self nourished this supernatural virtue in his soul. With the eyes of faith, he was able to see his beloved Saviour in his brother priests and he understood that each one of them was entitled to the same generosity from him. “What is the identity of the priest?”, he was asked many times in the talks that he gave. And the following response would quickly spring forth, accompanied by the firm conviction of his faith, “That of Christ. All of us Christians can and should be not just other Christs, *alter Chritus*, but Christ himself: *ipse Christus!* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament”⁷.

Priests are united to one another in Christ, through their common ordination. It is in this way that each of them is configured with Jesus Christ, the High Priest, and can thus act *in persona Christi Capitis*⁸. Rooted in this common ontological character, they are also united by their common mission, which they have received in order to build up the Body of Christ⁹. For this reason, as II Vatican Council teaches, “all priests are united together by bonds of intimate brotherhood. This should manifest itself in mutual help, spiritual or temporal, pastoral or personal, spontaneously and freely given in reunions and togetherness in life, work and charity”¹⁰. This unity among priests, as John Paul II affirms, “is not a unity or fraternity that is an end in itself. It exists *for love of the Gospel*, in order to symbolize, through the behaviour of the priest, the essential path to which everyone is called by the Gospel: union of love with Him and with others”¹¹.

Blessed Josemaría immersed himself in intense activity with the same faith and ideals as at the beginning of his priesthood, and with the conviction that he was carrying out the Will of God. While Opus Dei was growing and beginning its expansion throughout the world in the 1940s, he found time — despite periods of tiredness and illness — to preach innumerable series of retreats to the clergy. Invited by the bishops of many Spanish dioceses, he went here and there, without accepting any remuneration, and overcoming any doubts raised by his humility

⁶ Ps 118:100.

⁷ *In Love with the Church*, 38.

⁸ Cfr. II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

⁹ Cfr. *Ef* 4:12.

¹⁰ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily*, Philadelphia, 4-X-1979, 4; «Insegnamenti» II (1979) 604.

about preaching to his brother priests, which he used to describe as *selling honey to the beekeepers*.

He had a great love for those with a religious vocation, and he gladly remembered how he had also had the opportunity to preach many retreats to religious communities throughout Spain. Nevertheless, he felt to be especially inclined towards the service of the secular clergy: “I have the same vocation as you. I have never had any other. And so, I do not offend the religious — whom I love so much — because I love you in a very special way. It is a special duty of fraternity”¹².

Many of the thousands of priests who heard him over the years remember particularly the vibrancy of the Love with which he confirmed his brother priests in their vocations, and how he infused them with renewed zeal for souls and spurred them on to make the firm decision to fulfil the Will of God at all times.

In order to clearly express what motivated him to struggle to rekindle priestly fraternity, he once recounted what he had heard from a priest during a retreat, regarding a serious calumny that this priest was suffering. “And our brothers who are close to you, don’t they keep you company?”, he asked. The response filled him with sorrow: “I am together by myself”. Remembering this episode, he would insist: “Do not allow anyone to mistreat one of our brother priests!”¹³.

Having himself experienced the bitter taste of calumny as part of the path which the Lord had prepared for him, the Founder of Opus Dei knew the antidote to loneliness very well: “It is not true that priests do not have love in their lives; we are in love with Love Himself. Those who say that we priests are alone are lying: we have more company than anyone else, because we have the continuous company of the Lord, with whom we are in constant contact”¹⁴.

Jesus Christ is the Love of the priest; it is He who has entered into his soul and made him hear His call: “I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine”¹⁵. The complete gift of oneself to the love of Christ, which is made especially manifest in celibacy, enables the priest to have his heart more affectively and effectively open to all souls¹⁶. And it is due to this love that the priest knows that he is accompanied by Jesus Christ, even in moments of adversity, when life seems harder, when following his path can become more difficult.

¹² J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 3-VI-1974 (AGP, P04 1974, I, p. 201).

¹³ *Ibidem*, 17-VI-1974 (AGP, P04 1974, I, p. 619).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 15-III-1969 (AGP, P04 1969, I, p. 318).

¹⁵ *Is* 43:1.

¹⁶ Cfr. PAUL VI, Enc. *Sacerdotalibus coelibatus*, 32.

“Let priests remember”, we read in the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. “That in carrying out their task they are never alone but are supported by the almighty power of God. Believing in Christ who has called them to share in His priesthood, let them devote themselves to their office with all trust, knowing that God is powerful to increase charity in them”¹⁷.

“Let them remember too”, adds the Decree. “That they have their brothers in the priesthood and indeed the entire world’s believers, as allies”¹⁸. Blessed Josemaría knew that the priest, like any other man on earth, needs the support and affection of others. “Help one another; love one another. No one of you should ever feel alone”, he kept insisting. “Keep one another company, also humanly speaking. Have a heart of flesh, as the heart with which we love Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit is made of flesh. If you see that one of your brothers is having a hard time, go and help him, and don’t wait for him to call you!”¹⁹ This also demonstrates that the words and the prayer of the priest form “an eloquent testimony of our God, who is rich in mercy”²⁰.

2. PERSONAL SANCTITY: THE FOUNDATION AND GOAL OF FRATERNAL SERVICE

The grace of God worked through the words of Blessed Josemaría to provoke desires for interior struggle among his listeners. They felt moved, spurred on, carried — and with what momentum — along the path of fidelity and Love. He set before each person specific demands that could be summarized in one concept: personal sanctity.

He wanted to avoid the state that one could easily develop — of lukewarmness and lack of love for God — when one settles for merely accomplishing one’s duties in a routine and external fashion. One cannot just give in like that; the same Christian vocation calls each person to live a truly holy life. The last Council taught that priests like all Christians “have already received in the consecration of Baptism the sign and gift of their great calling and grace. So they are enabled and obliged even in the midst of human weakness to seek perfection, according to the Lord’s word: ‘You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mt 5:48)”²¹.

¹⁷ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 22.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 26-X-1972 (AGP, P04 1972, II, p. 767).

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Discourse*, Tokyo, 23-II-1981, «Insegnamenti» IV (1981) 492.

²¹ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

The Founder of Opus Dei never slackened in his determination to spread this doctrine. “As a requirement of their common Christian vocation, as a consequence of the same baptism they have received”, he wrote in 1945, “the priest and the lay person should equally aspire to holiness, which is a sharing in the life of God (cf. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 21:2). This holiness to which we are called is no greater in the priest,s case than in the layman,s; for the layman is not a second-class Christian. Holiness, for layman as for priest, is nothing other than the perfection of Christian life, the fullness of divine sonship”.²²

Furthermore, priests have additional motives as they “are consecrated to God in a new way by their ordination and are made living instruments of Christ the eternal priest, and thus are enabled to accomplish throughout all time that wonderful work of his which with supernatural efficacy restored the whole human race”²³. Blessed Josemaría ceaselessly insisted on this fact: “The priesthood requires — due to its sacred functions — something more than just an honest life: it demands a holy life in those who exercise it, constituted — as they are — as mediators between God and men”²⁴.

Freedom, this magnificent natural gift which the Lord has granted to the created spirit, far from constituting a safeguard for one’s personal comfort, demands a mature sense of responsibility from each person. As the Founder of Opus Dei said, every priest “is free in his spiritual and ascetic life and in his acts of piety to follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and to choose, from among the many means which the Church counsels or permits, those which are most suited to his own particular circumstances”²⁵. In effect, God asks each of us to seek sanctity with all of our strength, through the proper exercise of our personal autonomy, during the time in which He gives us His grace.

II Vatican Council also “issues the strongest appeal to all priests to strive always by the use of all suitable means commended by the Church towards that greater holiness that will make them daily more effective instruments for the service of all God’s people”²⁶. The faithful correspondence of the priest to the calling of Jesus Christ has importance above and beyond the priest himself, since on it also depends the very efficacy of his priestly ministry for the good of the souls who have been entrusted to him.

²² Cited by A. DEL PORTILLO, *On Priesthood*, Chicago 1974, p. 67.

²³ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

²⁴ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter 2-II-1945*, 4.

²⁵ *Conversations*, 8.

²⁶ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

“And for their sake I consecrate myself”²⁷, said the Lord. These words do not indicate a process of growth in sanctity in Christ, but rather the offering of Himself in sacrifice for all men²⁸. However, they do invite each priest — *alter Christus, ipse Christus* — to a self-giving which is a sacrifice made for others, and which could not have any other root but personal sanctity: the increasing effort to identify oneself with He who is the High Priest²⁹.

For this reason, Blessed Josemaría utterly rejected the deformed vision which viewed ministerial priesthood as if in opposition to spiritual life: “I do not believe a priest can carry out an effective ministry unless he is a man of prayer”³⁰. By taking his own vocation very seriously and struggling to let Jesus take possession of his soul, he became convinced that the priestly ministry is only truly effective when it is nourished by a continually renewed relationship with God. He came to the conclusion that it is the very spiritual life that both drives and stimulates ministerial action³¹. This has always been borne out in the lives of holy priests. And it has certainly been made manifest by the life of Blessed Josemaría.

3. THE PRIESTLY SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CROSS

It is impossible in a few pages even to begin to consider the heroism with which the Founder of Opus Dei lived his priestly fraternity. There was nevertheless one moment in his time upon this earth which was particularly significant and which I consequently did not want to omit.

Blessed Josemaría possessed a refinement of spirit which allowed him to discover the will of God in every moment, and to act upon it without hesitation, despite the sacrifices entailed by the divine designs. Seeing that the Lord needed him to work with priests, and that Opus Dei had already reached a certain degree of development and proximity to its definitive approval, he decided to leave Opus Dei in order to dedicate all of his energy to found an Association dedicated to these brothers. He did this for “love of you”, as he explained on one occasion to a group of priests, “which is love of Jesus Christ”³². After having received the approval of the Holy See, he communicated this decision to those who worked most closely with him in the governance of Opus Dei.

²⁷ Jn 17:19.

²⁸ Cfr. ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Iohann.*, 17:19 (PG 59, 443).

²⁹ Cfr. *Heb* 7:26.

³⁰ *Conversations*, 3.

³¹ Cfr. II VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decr. Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13.

³² J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 14-XI-1972 (AGP, P04 1972, II, p. 475).

I can imagine the profound sorrow that they must have felt, even though they could understand why this new foundation was necessary for the apostolate. But, above all, one must be impressed by the heroism with which Blessed Josemaría was always disposed to respond to what the Lord asked of him, even if it meant abandoning that which he himself had brought into the world with so much prayer and sacrifice, in faithful fulfillment of the Divine Will.

However, at that point, the Lord allowed him to see the canonical solution that he needed. And with the pontifical approval of *Opus Dei* in 1950, diocesan priests were able to join the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association indissolubly united to *Opus Dei*, without making any change in their legal or canonical status.

It is an essential characteristic of the spirituality of the Prelature of *Opus Dei* that each person, without leaving his place in society and within his own state, seeks his own sanctification by sanctifying his professional work, in accordance with his mission in the Church and in the world. It was evident that this spirit was also suited to diocesan priests. And in effect, by joining the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, the priest “neither modifies nor abandons any part of his diocesan vocation. His dedication to the service of the local Church in which he is incardinated, his full dependence on his own Ordinary, his secular spirituality, his solidarity with other priests etc., are not changed. On the contrary, he undertakes to live his vocation to the full, because he knows that he must seek perfection precisely in fulfilling his obligations as a diocesan priest”³³.

Blessed Josemaría considered the ministerial priesthood as professional work, a professional task of incomparable dignity. He saw it as work which is service, because service — *diaconía* — is the *sacra potestas*, the ministerial participation in the *exousía* of Christ³⁴. This service, which requires an unconditional gift of self for the benefit of all souls, should take up all of the energy and all of the dreams of the priest. And the deeds, born of this spirit of service, should enable him to address the following words of the Lord to all: “I am among you as one who serves”³⁵. “We priests do not have any rights: I like to feel that I am the servant of all, and I am proud of this title. We only have duties, and therein lies our joy: the duty of administering the sacraments, of visiting the sick and the healthy; the duty of bringing Christ to the rich and to the poor, that of not allowing the Most Blessed Sacrament to be abandoned, since it is really Christ present beneath the appearances of bread; the duty of being the good shepherd for souls,

³³ *Conversations*, 16.

³⁴ Cfr. *Mt* 28:18; II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

³⁵ *Lk* 22:27.

he who heals the sick sheep and who seeks the one who strayed without taking account of the hours that he had to spend in the confessional”³⁶.

With the possibility of admitting diocesan priests into the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, the Founder of Opus Dei saw the institutionalization of the work which he had carried out from the beginning of his vocation: that of helping priests to be completely faithful to their vocation and ministry. Brotherly help and ascetical help offered with a secular and diocesan spirituality; this is what would be found in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross from that point on, by the priests who exercised their rights and their freedom by joining this Priestly Association. They would receive “personal spiritual guidance which continues no matter where they are, and which complements the common guidance imparted by the bishop, while always, as a grave duty, giving it full respect”³⁷.

“To serve the Church as the Church wants to be served”³⁸: this was the only ambition of Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. And this was why he was overjoyed by the following words of II Vatican Council: “Associations of priests are also to be highly esteemed and diligently promoted, when by means of rules recognized by the competent authority they foster priestly holiness in the exercise of the ministry through a suitable and properly approved rule of life and through brotherly help, and so aim at serving the whole order of priests”³⁹.

His life on earth was consumed by this desire of his soul, by this love for the Church. Barely two hours before he died, the Founder of Opus Dei said to his daughters in Castelgandolfo: ‘I will tell you as I do whenever I come here that you, by the simple fact of being Christians, have priestly souls. With your priestly soul and with God’s grace, you can and should help the priestly ministry which we priests carry out. Together, we shall work effectively.

“In everything you do, find a motive to talk to God and to his Blessed Mother, who is our Mother, and to St. Joseph, our Father and Lord, and to our Guardian Angels, so as to help this Holy Church, our Mother, which is in such great need, and which is having such a difficult time in the world these days. We should love the Church and the Pope very much. Ask Our Lord that our service on behalf of the Church and the Pope be effective”⁴⁰.

³⁶ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in conversation*, 15-III-1969 (AGP, P02 1969, pp. 319-320).

³⁷ *Conversations*, 16.

³⁸ Cfr. POSTULACIÓN DE LA CAUSA DE BEATIFICACIÓN Y CANONIZACIÓN DEL SIERVO DE DIOS JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER, FUNDADOR DEL OPUS DEI, *Artículos del Postulador*, Rome 1979, n. 294.

³⁹ II VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decr. Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

⁴⁰ S. BERNAL, *Mmgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, London 1977, p. 93.

On November 28th, 1982, by means of the Apostolic Constitution *Ut sit*, John Paul II erected Opus Dei as a personal prelature, to which the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross is intrinsically united as an Association of clergy. During the numerous years which I spent at the side of the Founder of Opus Dei, I witnessed the intensity of the prayer and mortification with which he ‘pestered’ and got others to ‘pester’ the Lord, so that He would grant us our definitive canonical solution.

This canonical figure, so perfectly suited to the spirit of Opus Dei, confirms and seals its secular character, and at the same time, clearly manifests that which Blessed Josemaría had always maintained, even with recourse to extraordinary measures: that the diocesan priests who are members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross do not have any ecclesiastical Superior other than their own Bishop. Their dependence on the Association is not a dependence of government or jurisdiction, “but rather a voluntary relationship of spiritual assistance”⁴¹, which is exclusively restricted to the private sphere of the personal life of the priest, about which each one can and should make his own free decisions.

This blessed duty of priestly fraternity forms part of the inheritance that the Founder of Opus Dei has left to his children. It is a legacy which places the responsibility on our shoulders to follow in his footsteps on the divine path which he opened with his heroic correspondence to the inspirations of God. While this is no easy matter, we rely on the help that we receive from heaven.

⁴¹ *Conversations*, 16.