

SAINT JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ AND MORAL THEOLOGY

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SUMMARY: I. *Introduction*. II. *In the City of Men, with a Heart Longing for God*. III. *The Christological Foundation*. IV. *The Affirmation of the Value of the World*. V. *A Moral Theology for Those Who Love the World*. 1. A Positive Moral Theology. 2. A Realist Moral Theology. 3. An Open Moral Theology. 4. A Moral Theology that Loves Freedom and Pluralism.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE writings and oral teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá are almost always directed toward all faithful, not just theologians. They contain frequent references to concepts used by moral theology: liberty, virtue, moral law, conscience, etc. However, it seems to me that the most important and original contribution of St. Josemaría to moral theology is not found in the use of these concepts, but above all in the overall *style* of Christian life that is proposed with strength and incisiveness. If theology is elevated to the level of reflective awareness of such a proposal, there is soon discovered a set of elements that constitute a valid orientation for the approach and development of moral theology.

With the following reflections, I shall try to express the way in which I myself have understood and elaborated on the inspiration that I have found in the teachings of St. Josemaría. I am aware that other scholars may give a different theological form to the same background of inspiration, since, what I shall explain is ultimately only one of the possible ways of theologically developing this Saint's vision of the Christian moral life.

II. IN THE CITY OF MEN, WITH A HEART LONGING FOR GOD

Upon a first reading of the writings of St. Josemaría, two poles – which may easily seem antithetical – summon theological attention.

On the one hand, there is the strong emphasis on the call to holiness which, being based in Baptism, is equally directed to all the faithful, whatever their status and condition.¹ In the writings of St. Josemaría, the Christian life appears as a totality unified by the purpose that determines its movement.² All are called

¹ Cfr. J. ESCRIVÁ, *The Way*, Scepter, Dublin 1961, n. 291.

² Although St. Josemaría does not use this type of scientific terminology, his approach to moral

– in different ways, according to one’s individual condition – to identification with Christ, for the glory of the Father, and with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit in the edification of the Church. In this context, faith, hope, and charity immediately assume the role as the supreme criterion for the existence of the Christian as a child of God.¹ It is a proposal of Christian life with a strong theocentric, Christological, and ecclesiological accent; and, in a subordinate way, Mariological as well.

On the other hand, however, one notices an emphasis that is equally strong of the theological value of secularity and the world, in the sense that it is affirmed that the laity – and therefore the vast majority of the faithful – are called not only to “to look for holiness in the middle of the world, ‘nel bel mezzo della strada’,”² but also to sanctify work and the world itself, which is seen as a new creation in Christ.³ Thus, the secular character, far from having a merely sociological connotation, acquires a positive theological value, which excludes any kind of separation from the familial, professional, cultural, social, and contemporary-political realities, and which immediately extends the theological dimension of existence to the more specific requirements of familial, professional, and social life.⁴ Along these lines, St. Josemaría even comes to speak of the legitimacy of a ‘Christian materialism’,⁵ a conception according to which one must know ‘to materialize’⁶ the highest instances of life and spirituality. This should be continuously placed in relation with the most mundane and the smallest tasks of ordinary life, – especially, of professional work – since they are the realities that the vast majority of Christians must sanctify.⁷

It may seem that, to seriously accept the two poles, – the strong accent of the theological dimension of existence and the simultaneous proclamation of ‘Christian materialism’ – a strong tension could be created. Moreover, in effect, St. Josemaría says that the Christian “is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God”;⁸ that is, that the head and the heart of the Christian should be very high, while, at the same time, “our feet should be firmly on the ground.”⁹ The personality of the Christian is presented, therefore, as an elastic cord that, when pulled strongly from above and below, may be stretched too far and run the risk of breaking. However, in my view, the most characteristic and original

life responds to the conception that today is called an ‘ethics of the first person’. On this approach, see A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética General*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2010, 55-60.

¹ The meaning of divine filiation has a fundamental importance in the teachings of St. Josemaría. Cfr. E. BURKHART, J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de teología espiritual*, II, Rialp, Madrid 2011, 19-159.

² J. ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, Ecclesia Press, Dublin 1972, n. 62.

³ Cfr. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15.

⁴ Cfr. J.L. ILLANES, *La secularidad como actitud existencial*, «Anuario Filosófico» 35 (2002) 553-579.

⁵ Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 115.

⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, n. 114.

⁷ Cfr. for example J. ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, Scepter, London 1981, nn. 57-72; *Conversations*, nn. 22, 34, 60, 114.

⁸ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing by*, Scepter, New York 1974, n. 99.

⁹ ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, n. 75.

point of St. Josemaría is that his spiritual proposal makes it so that Christian existence, conceived in this way, not only does not break, but on the contrary, it harmonizes with great simplicity and naturalness the two poles of which we are speaking, to the point that it can be stated that they feed off of and strengthen each other. The concept of a ‘unity of life’, frequently used by St. Josemaría, expresses this peace and beautiful harmony.¹

III. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

How and why is it possible that this proposal of Christian life works so well? The answer to this question can be expressed through the words of an important scholar: in St. Josemaría there is found, “a singularly rich and coherent understanding of the mystery of Christ, perfect God and perfect man,” which allows one to find, in the incarnation of the Word, “the perennially present and operative foundation of the Christian transformation of man, and through the work of man, of all created realities.”² The harmony that exists between the divine and human fullness in Christ becomes the vital and practical paradigm of the joining, in the soul of all believers, of the theological dimension and what St. Josemaría calls ‘Christian materialism’. Thus, human, social, and professional realities are not considered as something corrupt from which the Christian should avoid in order to not be contaminated by sin, but as realities that Christ has redeemed and made His own; and the Christian should love and sanctify them. It is worthwhile to include a page of St. Josemaría:

Nothing can be foreign to Christ’s care. If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things – good, noble or indifferent – which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death.³

In summary, the harmony – full of simplicity, naturalness, and good sense – between the divine and human dimensions of Christianity are born of an intense and profound comprehension of the logic of the Incarnation, which proves very fruitful for moral-theological reflection.

The effectiveness of this approach is manifested in the way in which faith and reason are articulated in the moral theologian’s reflections. We previously said that faith assumes the role of a supreme criterion for the existence of the Christian as a child of God, because it is faith that offers a complete answer to the question concerning the type of person that a baptized person should be and the type of life that a person of faith should live. This answer is a fundamental refe-

¹ On the unity of life in St. Josemaría, see: E. BURKHART, J. LÓPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de teología espiritual*, III Rialp, Madrid 2013, 617-637.

² C. FABRO, *La tempranza di un padre della Chiesa*, in C. FABRO, S. GAROFALO, M.A. RASCHINI, *Santi nel mondo. Studi sugli scritti del beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Ares, Milano 1992, 115.

³ ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing by*, n. 112.

rence point of all the activity of practical reason, which goes well beyond the dilemmas of casuistry and the problems of normative ethics; it is configured to the specific requirements of the sanctification of man and of the world, helping one to understand the value and meaning of the goods and activities that man faces each day: work, family, health and sickness, pleasure and pain, life and death, wealth and poverty, freedom, marriage and celibacy. Thus, the appropriate attitude toward the goods and human activities arises consistently from the evaluations of goods and human activities in the light of faith.

These considerations make it easy to understand that a morality set up in this way will be a morality of virtues. This argument would require a careful examination that is not possible to carry out here. I would only like to point out the great importance that St. Josemaría gives to human virtues for the moral formation of the person:

“[The Christian] will realize that the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) and all the other virtues which God’s grace brings with it are an encouragement never to neglect the good qualities he shares with so many of his fellow men. The human virtues are, I insist, the foundation for the supernatural ones. These in turn provide us with constant encouragement to behave as good human beings.”¹

The approach of virtue ethics entails a particular moral pedagogy. Theoretically, it would be possible to deduce the specific operative consequences from the vision of the good or the mission of the Christian in the world. However, experience shows that it must, at the same time, come from the bottom up: only from practical – and sometimes unreflected – learning of the concrete ways of regulating one’s behavior in the face of the goods and activities that integrate our life, is it possible to fully understand and carry out the sanctification of the world and ourselves. In other words, it is not difficult to grasp the theory that the ordering of our existence for the glory of the Father in Christ within the bosom of the Church involves a specific lifestyle amidst the world, but in practice one can only understand the sanctification of the world and in the world gradually, understanding and assuming, one by one, the specific manifestations of this lifestyle.² To this proposal, St. Josemaría speaks of ‘convictions’ and of ‘life’, “because it is not a matter of accepting a simple theoretical proposition, but rather of putting it into practice day after day, in ordinary life.”³ Certain concepts that are very frequent in the writings of St. Josemaría – ‘life plan’, ‘presence of God’, ‘little things’, ‘contemplatives in the world’, etc. – respond to this particular spiritual and moral pedagogy.

¹ ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, n. 91. The volume records some homilies on the theological and human virtues. On the latter, see especially nn. 73-93.

² These considerations respond to what is characteristic of practical knowledge. An example may clarify this a little more. In the same way that it is not enough to explain to a child the laws of physics that make it possible to ride a bike without falling – because the child still must ‘learn’ to ride it – one also has to learn practically to live for Christ in the midst of the world. On this point, cfr. M. POLANYI, *Personal Knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1962.

³ ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 62.

IV. THE AFFIRMATION OF THE VALUE OF THE WORLD

To avoid the risk of completely misinterpreting what has been said about the guiding role of the faith in moral theology, it is necessary to note that this guiding role is not only compatible, but even presupposes a full affirmation of the value of the world created by God, considered also in the form that the contemporary world assumes on the scientific, cultural, social, and political planes.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has provided evidence that the affirmation of the value of daily life has its origin in Judeo-Christian spirituality, and that this affirmation has garnered importance starting from the Protestant Reformation, above all in the ambit of the more puritanical sects of Calvinism.¹ Here, we are not able to analyze the context that belongs to Calvinist Puritanism and its differences from the Catholic conception. I shall merely point out that Calvinist preachers – and, in general, the Reformers – indicate two errors that have to be avoided: the renouncement, characteristic of monks, of the things of this world (monasticism is meaningless to the Calvinists), and the error of becoming absorbed by such things, as if they were our final end.²

These preachers stress, however, that man should apply himself with effort to his work, to any work, because any honest work, if done with effort and for the love of God, is an instrument for man's redemption.³ However, through a complex evolution, only an instrumental vision will be reached, whereby the *ethos* of the work is only a means for transcending the world through a religious attitude whose foundation is fragile, because an internal relationship between work and redemption is not established: the effort in the world can be an occasion for the redemption of the individual who remains in some way separated from the world, because the world and the work in themselves are not redeemed. New creation in Christ, the affirmation of the value of the redeemed world, is not arrived at.⁴

One of these Protestant preachers, Richard Sibbes, says "Yet wee must know it is not the *World* simply that draws our heart from God and goodnesse, but the *love* of the world."⁵ However, St. Josemaría has given to one of his best known homilies a title that explicitly states the contrary: "Passionately loving the world."⁶ It could be that Sibbes understands by "love of the world" a disordered love that also for St. Josemaría could be a distancing of ourselves from God, but

¹ Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma 1989, 216-217. See pp. 211-247. ² Cfr. *ibidem*, 222.

³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 223-226. In these pages, some texts may be read which illustrate very well the doctrinal position.

⁴ Cfr. M. RHONHEIMER, *Changing the World: The Timeliness of Opus Dei*, Scepter Publishers, New York 2009, 30-60.

⁵ R. SIBBES, *The Saints Cordials* (1637), cited in C.H. GEORGE, K. GEORGE, *The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1961, 124-125.

⁶ ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, nn. 113-123.

the fact remains that St. Josemaría never affirmed that love of the world distances ourselves from God because, while admitting that love of the world may also have its own ailments, he retains that love of the world is another thing entirely from such ailments, and affirms decisively that the Christian must love the world passionately, as he sustains in the aforementioned homily.

V. A MORAL THEOLOGY FOR THOSE WHO LOVE THE WORLD

So many indications arise for the development of Moral Theology from the conception of divine filiation and from the logic of the Incarnation, which have already been discussed,¹ that it causes great fatigue to present an organic exhibition of it. If I had to express them in summary fashion, I would say that the resulting moral theology is one that is positive, realistic, open, and loving of freedom and pluralism.

1. *A Positive Moral Theology*

I understand by positive moral theology a theology that concerns itself with the development of the lives of the children of God, received in Baptism as a small seed. Therefore, one deals here with an approach that seeks to trace a concrete path for personal identification with Christ, in the sanctification of work and in the Christianization of the familial and social atmosphere in which we live. Thus, the reflection is not centered on the real danger represented by concupiscence and sin, nor does it demonstrate a particular interest in casuistic rules or minimalist solutions. Instead, it seeks to elaborate and teach the practice of the theological, moral, and human virtues, in order to sanctify man and transform the world.

2. *A Realist Moral Theology*

It is much more difficult to explain here what I mean by 'realism'. The realism of which I speak arises from St. Josemaría's conviction that the world created by God is good, although we humans can make it ugly with our sins. We should love and sanctify this world without losing sight of the fact that "any kind of evasion of the honest realities of daily life is [...] opposed to the will of God."² To love and sanctify the world it is necessary, first of all, to know and understand it, for ignorance is the main kind of evasion of human realities. This gives rise to an attitude of trusting openness toward human and social reality, without prejudice or distrust, and, therefore, an attitude of availability for learning from human and Christian experience and from the certain conclusions of the sciences that study the various sectors of human and social reality.³

¹ Cfr. above, section 3.

² ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 114.

³ "Since you want to acquire a Catholic or universal mentality, here are some characteristics you should aim at: – a breadth of vision and a vigorous endeavour to study more deeply the things that

Openness to experience does not in any way oppose the guiding role of faith. It opposes, however, the rationalist principle that presupposes an intelligence, located somewhere beyond the reality to be studied, that would be capable of offering perfect and comprehensive information on the basis of a few clear and distinct ideas. From these it would then be considered possible to trace a complete and centralized program of social and pastoral engineering.¹ St. Josemaría, on the contrary, trusts in the spontaneity and pluralism of the People of God,² that is, in the apostolic creativity of men and women who, enlightened by faith and filled with desire for bringing Christ to the world, will be capable of discovering a thousand ways – some of them not yet precedented – of ordering their own lives and activities.

While he considered the definitions of the Church concerning faith and morals an indisputable criterion,³ St. Josemaría recognized that “[o]ur intellect is limited. We can only by effort and dedication reach the point of being able to grasp a small parcel of reality. But there are many things that escape us.”⁴ If

are permanently alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy; – a proper and healthy desire, which should never be frivolous, to present anew the standard teachings of traditional thought in philosophy and the interpretation of history...; – a careful attention to trends in science and contemporary thought; – and a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living.” (ESCRIVÁ, *Furrow*, Scepter, London-New York 1987, n. 428).

¹ The document of the INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A new look at the Natural Law*, published in 2009, has justly criticized the rationalist model of natural moral law. Just read what is stated in n. 33: “The modern rationalist model of natural law is characterized: 1) by the essentialist belief in an immutable and a historical human nature, of which reason can perfectly grasp the definition and essential properties; 2) by putting into parentheses the concrete situation of human persons in the history of salvation, marked by sin and grace, which however have a decisive influence on the knowledge and practice of the natural law; 3) by the idea that it is possible for reason to deduce a priori the precepts of the natural law, beginning from the definition of the essence of the human being; 4) by the maximal extension thus given to those deduced precepts, so that natural law appears as a code of pre-made laws regulating almost the entire range of behaviour. This tendency to extend the field of the determinations of natural law was at the origin of a grave crisis when, particularly with the rapid development of the human sciences, Western thought became more aware of the historicity of human institutions and of the cultural relativity of many ways of acting that at times had been justified by appeal to the evidence of natural law. The gap between an abstract maximalist theory and the complexity of the empirical data explains in part the disaffection for the very idea of natural law. In order that the notion of natural law can be of use in the elaboration of a universal ethic in a secularized and pluralistic society such as our own, it is therefore necessary to avoid presenting it in the rigid form that it assumed, particularly in modern rationalism.”

² “Spontaneity and pluralism in the People of God” is the title of one of the interviews recorded in *Conversations* (cfr. nn. 1-23). Here, as throughout the book, St. Josemaría returns to these ideas. So, for example, he states: “we give primary and fundamental importance to the spontaneity of the individual, to free and responsible initiative guided by the action of the Spirit, and not to organisational structures and tactics imposed from above, from the seat of government. [. . .] Each one does his apostolate on his own initiative, working with complete personal freedom. Autonomously forming his own conscience before the concrete decisions he has to take, he endeavours to seek Christian perfection and to give Christian witness in his own environment, sanctifying his own work whether it be professional, intellectual or manual.” (ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 19).

³ Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Furrow*, n. 275.

⁴ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter, 24-10-1965*, n. 17; cited in A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Forming One’s Conscience in Social and Political Matters as Seen in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, «Romana. Bulletin of the

we transferred this conception to the ambit of moral theology, it would follow that, in order to study specific moral problems, the theologian should not assume that he already knows all possible solutions, having only to limit himself to choosing the most appropriate, and he will be ready to admit that the well-formed faithful and Christian communities can possess certain knowledge and propose particular solutions that could hardly be possessed and discovered by a single person, no matter how skilled and intelligent that person may be. Therefore, the theologian will have to show willingness to learn from experience and the experiences of others, whose correction the pastors of the Church certainly will have the last word.

The opening up of moral theology to scientific and professional culture does not mean that an ethical-normative guiding role is attributed to the natural or sociological sciences, let alone that the latest or most fashionable hypothesis should be uncritically accepted. It means, rather, recognizing the autonomy and value of temporal realities. This recognition entails the imperative of knowing and respecting their internal dynamics: the fruit of rationality that the wisdom of the Creator has imprinted in His works. Therefore, it requires, as an essential presupposition of any apostolic project that seeks the sanctification of the world from within, an adequate technical and professional competency. In a graphic way, St. Josemaría says: “When he does his work, a Christian is obliged not to side-step or play down the values that earthly things have in themselves. If the expression ‘bless all human activities’ meant abusing or neglecting their intrinsic qualities I would never use such a phrase. Personally I have never been convinced that the ordinary activities of men should carry a placard or confessional label. Although I respect the opposite opinion, I feel that using such a label involves a risk of using the holy name of our faith in vain. And there is evidence of the label ‘catholic’ being used to justify activities and behaviour which sometimes are not even decently human.”¹

In a special way in the ambit of applied ethics, – that is, the ambit of social, economic, and political ethics – the opening up that we have been speaking of leads to the discernment of the distinct epistemological status of the sort of knowledge implied in theological reasoning.² Applied ethics is not a simple statement of perennial principles. In effect, it aims at the regulation of the performance of human and social goods in a historical, geographical, and determined cultural context, which is characterized by an at least partially insurmountable contingency – that belongs, on the other hand, to all that is practical.

Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei» 24 (1997) 174. On the nature, composition, and dating of the letters of St. Josemaría, cfr. J.L. ILLANES, *Obra escrita y predicación de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, «Studia et Documenta» 3 (2009) 203-276.

¹ ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing by*, n. 184.

² I discuss the teachings of St. Josemaría in social and political material in A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, “*Cittadini degni del Vangelo*” (*Fil* 1, 27). *Saggi di etica politica*, Edusc, Roma 2005, 35-60. Additionally, there is an English translation of the part dedicated to the teachings of St. Josemaría: *Forming One’s Conscience*, 162-181.

The theologian should not forget that oftentimes his or her reasoning, although starting from doctrinal principles of perennial value, must use as a minor premise social, economic, or political conceptions that are open for debate (and are sometimes even very controversial). In these cases, the conclusion will follow the weaker part, and will be as debatable or controversial as the minor premise. Thus, St. Josemaría wrote with total clarity: “No one has a right to impose non-existent dogmas in temporal matters. Given a concrete problem, whatever it may be, the solution is to study it well and then to act conscientiously, with personal freedom and with personal responsibility as well.”¹ As was previously said, the definitions of the Church are indisputable; however, whoever makes quasi-dogmatic claims about debatable issues that are left by God to the free discussion of people demonstrates (primarily) insufficient knowledge of social, economic, and political matters, – which are moreover very complex – and also perhaps an unconscious attitude of a lack of respect for the work of the Creator.²

3. *An Open Moral Theology*

What has just been said does not mean that the theologian should refrain from entering into complex issues of applied ethics. For St. Josemaría secularity means feeling responsible for the world, and assuming the work of participating in human activities to give them a just and right configuration.³ Moreover, it is up to the theologian to illuminate with his reflections the task that the lay-faithful must carry out, illustrating both the meaning and foundation of the doctrinal principles defined by the Church, and offering to the laity one’s own personal contribution for the understanding and right solution of the human and social problems, a contribution that, if it must be concrete, will make use of social, economic, and political conceptions that the theologian, who also retains them as true, cannot present as binding on Christian conscience.

¹ ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 77. The distinction between perennial principals and contingent applications has been precisely illustrated by Benedict XVI in the Discourse to the Roman Curia of 22-12-2005. In regard to the Social Doctrine of the Church in particular, see C. CAFFARRA, *Introduzione alla Dottrina Sociale della Chiesa*, 14-10-1996, in <http://www.caffarra.it/allcat96.php> (consulted 26-6-2013).

² “A true Christian never thinks that unity in the Faith, fidelity to the teaching authority and tradition of the Church, and concern for the spreading of the saving message of Christ, run counter to the existence of variety in the attitudes of people as regards the things which God has left, as the phrase goes, to the free discussion of men. In fact, he is fully aware that this variety forms part of God’s plan. It is something desired by God, who distributes His gifts and His lights as He wishes. The Christian should love other people and therefore respect opinions contrary to his own, and live in harmony and full brotherhood with people who do not think as he does.” (ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 67).

³ “We children of God, who are citizens with the same standing as any others, have to take part fearlessly in all honest human activities and organizations, so that Christ may be present in them. Our Lord will ask a strict account of each one of us if through neglect or love of comfort we do not freely strive to play a part in the human developments and decisions on which the present and future of society depend” (J. ESCRIVÁ, *The Forge*, Scepter, London-New York 1987, n. 715).

In short, the formation that theology can offer – above all in the complex problems of applied ethics – will not be the transmission of prefabricated and immutable solutions, closed to a constructive dialogue. Indeed, it would be a well-founded attempt to promote a sensibility for the requirements of the human and common good, and of stimulating a reflection that, in the light of faith, allows for advancement in the understanding of realities and of social changes. This is precisely what I mean by an open and respectful theology of the legitimate freedom of the faithful, as helping them, on the one hand, to feel free and personally responsible for all that is debatable, and, on the other, to discern and to reject what is contrary to Church teachings.¹

4. A Moral Theology that Loves Freedom and Pluralism

In a moral theology inspired by St. Josemaría, freedom has to occupy a central place for many reasons. In the first place, freedom is a great gift from God, which gives us the ability to choose the type of life that we want to live and the type of person we want to be.² Without freedom it is impossible to cooperate with divine grace, and thus it is impossible to come to communion with the Lord in a human way.³

Thus, freedom appears as a substantially Christian value. It is not only a formal or methodological value, nor the expression of a libertine conception, since it is inextricably linked to responsibility before God and humans: to participation and solidarity. The relationship between these values is intrinsic to freedom, and so we must reject all forms of rational reflection and aid that damage or suppress the ‘free subjectivity’ of people and social formations, that is, which bring freedom out of play or which, in one way or another, generate irresponsibility. In effect, freedom is intimately linked to charity, because charity leads us to love the legitimate freedom of others in a peaceful and respectful coexistence.⁴ Social cooperation is based in freedom and in respect, so it is always a free cooperation, in the same way that the transmission of faith and apostolic activity are free. St. Josemaría held and communicated: “A Christian should always be concerned to dissipate any form of intolerance, coercion, or violence in human relationships. In apostolic activity as well – or better, principally in apostolic activity – we can never allow the slightest trace of coercion. God wants

¹ “You should, therefore, feel free in everything that is a matter of opinion. *This freedom will give rise to a holy sense of personal responsibility*, which will make you serene, upright, and a friend of truth, and prevent you from falling into error: because you will sincerely respect the legitimate opinions of others [...] Nevertheless, we will always reject whatever is contrary to all that the Church teaches. For it is precisely our love for the truth and rectitude of intention that leads us to want to be *fortes in fide* (1 Pet 5:9), strong in the faith, with a joyful and firm fidelity.” (J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter 9-1-1951*, n. 23-25); cited in RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Forming One’s Conscience*, 171.

² Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, nn. 24-25. See nn. 23-38, dedicated entirely to freedom.

³ Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing by*, n. 184.

⁴ “Let us really love all men; let us love Christ above all; and then we cannot avoid loving the rightful freedom of others, living in harmony with them”, *ibidem*, n. 184.

to be served in freedom, and therefore an apostolate that failed to respect the *freedom of consciences* would be mistaken.”¹ Moreover, referring in particular to the social ambit, he wrote that the monitoring function that the State should justly carry out is not “to obstruct, nor to impede or restrict freedom.”²

There is a second reason why freedom has to occupy a central place, which specifically refers to social, economic, and political morality. While it is true that St. Josemaría took every opportunity to encourage the lay faithful in their effort in the social field, he never lost sight of the ecclesial character of theology and the supernatural mission of the Church. Thus, the faith that inspires the activity of Christians transcends all political and cultural synthesis. This conviction prevented him from conceiving of Christianity as “a political-religious movement. That would be madness, even if it were motivated by a desire to spread the spirit of Christ in all the activities of men.”³ Respect for the freedom of those who have different proposals from one’s own rests on the fact that, in these ambits, the Catholic doctrine generally does not impose specific solutions or techniques to temporal problems, and thus there exists among the Christian goods a legitimate social, economic, and political pluralism. In a text renowned for its clarity, St. Josemaría stated to the well-meaning Christian citizen, “But it would never occur to such a Christian to think or to say that he was stepping down from the temple into the world to represent the Church, or that his solutions are the ‘Catholic solutions’ to problems. [...] That would be clericalism, ‘official Catholicism’, or whatever you want to call it. In any case, it means doing violence to the very nature of things. You must foster everywhere a genuine ‘lay outlook’, which will lead to three conclusions: be sufficiently honest, so as to shoulder one’s own personal responsibility; be sufficiently Christian, so as to respect those brothers in the Faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from those which each one of us maintains; and be sufficiently Catholic so as not to use our Mother the Church, involving her in human factions.”⁴

I am aware that this form of explaining the way in which the teachings of St. Josemaría can inspire the work of the moral theologian would require further elaboration. Yet, I think that I have drawn in a clear way, within the limits of time, the most relevant features.

ABSTRACT

The spiritual proposal of Saint Josemaría Escrivá is characterized by the simplicity and naturalness with which he harmonizes the universal call to holiness rooted in baptism with the positive value of secularity. Such a harmony, based on an original and profound understanding of the logic of the Incarnation, when it comes to be elevated to the level of reflective theological knowledge, enables the elaboration of a moral theology that is positive, realist, open, and loving of freedom and pluralism.

¹ J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter 1-9-1932*, n. 66; cited in RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Forming One’s*, 179.

² ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 79.

³ ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing by*, n. 183.

⁴ ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 117.