

# St. Josemaría Escrivá:

## Reader of Sacred Scripture

Francisco Varo  
University of Navarre

Sacred Scripture is the ever-timely word of God. Therefore Biblical studies cannot be limited to researching questions from the past, but must seek for signs of God's ongoing dialogue with mankind.<sup>1</sup> This conversation is carried out most fully in the lives of the saints—saints in the biblical sense, not only those who have been officially canonized by the Church but all those who through grace are sustained by faith and charity. For it is they who are capable of hearing and responding most fully to God's voice, finding the Word of God in the written words that make up the text of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Thus a theological study of Sacred Scripture requires one to pay attention to the ways in which reading the Holy Bible has borne fruit in the lives of the saints.

In the life of St. Josemaría Escrivá, right from his youth we see his soul being enriched by his reading of Scripture and the word of God taking on life in his deeds.<sup>3</sup>

An exhaustive investigation of the riches that came to light when St. Josemaría read and invited others to read the Gospel, or any Biblical passage, is an immense task, since texts and phrases from Sacred Scripture ordinarily constituted the back-

1. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, no. 21.

2. We can recall here St. Anthony Abbott's decision to give up his possessions and dedicate himself to prayer in the desert after hearing the episode of the rich young man (*Mt* 16:16-242) (cf. St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, ch. 2-4; PG 26, 842-846); also or how St. Francis of Assisi, on February 24, 1209, during the reading of the Gospel at Mass (*Mt* 10:1-24) felt the call to an apostolic life of absolute poverty (cf. Tomas de Celano, *Vita B. Francisci*, I, ch. 9).

3. As a first reference for the study of the use of Sacred Scripture by St. Josemaría one might consult the studies of Gonzalo Aranda, "Gen 1-3 en la homilias de beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Scripta Theologica* 24 (1992, 3) 895-919; Santiago Ausin Olmos, "La lectura de la Biblia en las 'Homilias' del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," *Scripta Theologica*, 25 (1993, 1), 191-220; Salvatore Garofalo, "El valor perenne del Evangelio," in Cornelio Fabro – Salvatore Garofalo – María Adelaide Raschini (ed.), *Santos en el mundo: estudios sobre los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Rialp, Madrid 1993, 136-165 (This study is also found in *Scripta Theologica* 24 (1992, 1) 13-39); José María Casciaro Ramírez, "La 'lectura' de la Biblia en los escritos y en la predicación del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," *Scripta Theologica* 34 (2002, 1) 133-167; Scott Hahn, "Passionately Loving the Word: The Use of Scripture in the Writings of St. Josemaría," *Romana*, 35 (2002), 382-390; and G. Morujão, "'Lectio divina' de las Sagradas Escrituras en los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá," in Mariano Fazio (ed.), *San Josemaría Escrivá. Contexto storico, Personalità, Scritti*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, Rome 2003, 301-315. One should also consult Cornelio Fabro, "El temple de un Padre de la Iglesia," in Cornelio Fabro – Salvatore Garofalo – María Adelaide Raschini (ed.), *Santos en el mundo: estudios sobre los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Rialp, Madrid 1993, 23-135.

ground for all his preaching, for his catechesis, and often for his daily conversations, in which with human and supernatural grace he generously shared with others the treasure of the Word of God.

The present study will be limited to an initial study of his activity as a reader of Sacred Scripture, from three complementary perspectives. The first section will consider key moments in his life when, in one way or another, he “heard” the voice of God in the words of Scripture. The second investigates the passages of Scripture, meditated on once and again, that left a deeper mark on his writings. The third look at his very personal style of presenting the Gospel in his preaching.

*In dialogue with God, through Sacred Scripture*

St. Josemaría Escrivá’s biographers have recorded that he was a devoted reader of good literature, both Spanish and spiritual.<sup>4</sup> He also read and had a good knowledge of the writings of the Fathers of the Church.<sup>5</sup> But the Holy Bible, especially the Gospel, was, in his hands, not only a book filled with useful instruction, but a place to encounter Christ. Always approaches the sacred books from within the context of the Church’s faith, his commentaries were usually a part of his preaching.

St. Josemaría always gave great importance to little things as a manifestation of his love for God. This concern is reflected in his activity as a reader of Sacred Scripture. When looking at the text he paid careful attention to each detail, to each gesture and reaction of the people involved, to each word. Sacred Scripture, read and reread, and meditated on deeply, left in his heart a reservoir of “small texts,” incisive phrases, often very brief—sometimes only one or two words—which prolonged the divine dialogue of prayer, spilling over into all of his daily activity. He repeated these phrases to himself in the street or while he worked, discovering not a glorious and remote past, but present-day vistas that opened before his eyes.<sup>6</sup>

One might mention in this context his use of the expression *ut videam!*, the words with which the blind man at Jericho responded to Jesus’ question, “What

4. Cf. Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, Scepter Publishers 2001, pp. 63–64, which mentions his reading when still quite young of Gonzalo de Berceo, Alphonse X the Wise, and the poem *El Cid*; and 121–122, regarding his broad literary interests during his years at the seminary of Saragossa. In regard to his activity as a reader see Maria Thereza Oliva Pires de Mello, “A importância da leitura na obra do beato Josemaría Escrivá: cultura e comunicação,” Universidad Austral (ed.), *Un mensaje siempre actual: Actas del Congreso Universitario del Cono Sur Hacia el Centenario del nacimiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Universidad Austral, Buenos Aires 2002, 267–282.

5. Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, “El uso de los ‘loci’ patristicos en las Homilias del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 2 (1993), 17–28. Also in reference to this question see José María Casciaro Ramírez, “La ‘lectura’ de la Biblia en los escritos y en la predicación del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Scripta Theologica* 34 (2002,1) 160–161, 166–167.

6. The person best acquainted with the writings of Saint Josemaría, Alvaro del Portillo, noted that when citing a text from Scripture “he never simply brings it in for show or in a hackneyed way. Each verse has been meditated frequently and yields new aspects hidden, perhaps for centuries” (Alvaro del Portillo, Foreword to St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, paragraph 7).

would you have me do for you?” “Lord, let me see” (*Mk* 10:46–52). St. Josemaría, right from his early youth, had been impressed by the boldness of Bartimaeus in throwing aside his warm cloak to reach Jesus, and the simplicity with which he explained what he needed. He was also struck by the quick response of the Master, who was moved by the blind man’s daring and simplicity, and immediately granted him his sight (cf. *Mk* 10:46–52). When in his youth he realized that our Lord was asking something from him, and that he still did not know exactly what it was, while putting himself completely in God’s hands, he prayed insistently, asking for light: *ut videam!*<sup>7</sup> As he wrote years later, in 1947:

I can never forget how, when meditating on this passage many years back, and realizing that Jesus was expecting something of me, though I myself did not know what it was, I made up my own aspirations: ‘Lord, what is it you want? What are you asking of me?’ I had a feeling that he wanted me to take on something new and the cry *Rabboni, ut videam*, “Master, that I may see,” moved me to beseech Christ again and again, “Lord, whatever it is that you wish, let it be done.”<sup>8</sup>

On other occasions, the word of God sown in his heart by his careful reading yielded rich spiritual fruit. One event of this sort lies behind an annotation that he made in his personal journal (*Apuntes*) in October, 1931.

I felt God acting. He was making spring forth in my heart and on my lips, with the force of something imperatively necessary, the tender invocation: Abba! Pater! I was out on the street, in a streetcar...Probably I prayed out loud.

And I walked along the streets of Madrid for an hour, maybe two, I can’t say; time passed without my being aware of it. People must have thought I was crazy. I was contemplating, with lights that were not mine, that amazing truth. It was like an ember burning in my soul, never to be extinguished.<sup>9</sup>

Other experiences of this kind also opened up new and surprising perspectives in some passages from Scripture. This happened, for example, with Jesus’ words in St. John’s Gospel: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (*Jn* 12:32). The Evangelist comments: “He said this to show by what death he was to die” (*Jn* 12:33). Some days before the words just cited from his *Apuntes*, on August 7, 1931, he had noted down:<sup>10</sup>

The time for the Consecration arrived. At the very moment when I elevated the Sacred Host, without my losing the necessary recollection, without my becom-

7. Cf. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Apuntes íntimos*, n. 289, cited in A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, Scepter Publishers 2001, p 72.

8. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 197.

9. San Josemaría Escrivá, *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 60, cited in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 295.

10. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 288.

ing distracted (for I had just made mentally the Offering to the Merciful Love), there came to my mind, with extraordinary force and clarity, that passage from Scripture: *Et si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum* (Jn 12:32). Ordinarily, before the supernatural, I feel afraid. Later comes the “Do not be afraid, it is I.” And I understood that there will be men and women of God who will lift the cross, with the teachings of Christ, to the pinnacle of all human activities... And I saw our Lord triumph, attracting to himself all things.”<sup>11</sup>

We notice that the words from Scripture that struck him are always cited in Latin: *Ut videam! Abba, Pater! Et si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum. Ne timeas!* The reason seems clear. He read Sacred Scripture in the Latin Vulgate, as was usual in those years. St. Josemaría is an assiduous and attentive reader of the word of God. But he is not only a reader: he listens. And that enables him to hear the word of God and to understand the meaning that our Lord is communicating to him through words of Scripture.

Brief and incisive phrases, such as those mentioned, are frequent in his preaching and writings.<sup>12</sup> Although the words of Scripture are always the background to his discourse,<sup>13</sup> in his works he did not ordinarily concern himself with technical questions, such as the analysis of the structure of a passage. Rather, the recalling of a few words brings to mind a scene rich in meaning. This is the case, for example, in some lines in the book *Furrow*:

Do you want to be daring in a holy way, so that God may act through you? Have recourse to Mary, and she will accompany you along the path of humility, so that, when faced by what to the human mind is impossible, you may be able to answer with a *fiat!* — be it done!, which unites the earth to Heaven.<sup>14</sup>

Here the simple mention of the word *fiat* is enough to recall the complete verse: “And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me [*fiat*] according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (*Lk* 1:37). This evokes the whole passage of the Annunciation and condenses for the reader the memory of the divine action involved in our Lady’s call to a supernatural vocation, her un-

11. In regard to the use of this passage, see the studies of Pedro Rodríguez, “‘Omnia traham ad meipsum’. El sentido de Jn 12,32 en la experiencia espiritual de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Romana* 13 (1991,2) 331-352 and “La ‘exaltación’ de Cristo en la Cruz. Jn 12,32 en la experiencia espiritual del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” in Gonzalo Aranda - Claudio Basevi - Juan Chapa (ed.), *Biblia, Exégesis y Cultura. Estudios en honor del prof. D. José María Casciaro*, Eunsá, Pamplona 1994, 573-601. See also Lucas Francisco Mateo Seco, “Sapientia Crucis. El misterio de la Cruz en los escritos de Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer” in *Scripta Theologica* 24 (1992) 419-438.

12. Some of them—*Abba, Pater!* (Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6); *Fortes in fide* (1 Pet 5,9); *Omnia in bonum* (Rom 8,28)—have been studied in depth by Santiago Ausín Olmos, “La lectura de la Biblia en las ‘Homilias’ del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Scripta Theologica*, 25 (1993, 1) 209-213.

13. Cf. “Fundamentos bíblicos del lema ‘ocultarme y desaparecer’ de San Josemaría Escrivá,” in Juan Chapa, *Signum et testimonium. Estudios ofrecidos al Profesor Antonio García-Moreno en su 70 cumpleaños*, Eunsá, Pamplona 2003, 273-295.

14. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, no. 124.

conditional acceptance of God's plan, and the result that ensued: the incarnation of the Son of God.

In the next section of this study, we will consider the brief passages from Scripture that are mentioned most frequently in St. Josemaría's writings. Only then will it be possible to raise the question of his overall hermeneutical approach, seeking in his works explicit statements (although usually just passing references, such as a comment in one of his meditations) on how to read and teach others to read Sacred Scripture.

*Most frequently cited words of Sacred Scripture*

A merely numerical approach to the use of Scripture in the writings of any author has great limitations, and might have little meaning in itself. But it does provide objective data that allows one to draw some preliminary conclusion.

We do not intend to present a mere collection of numerical tables or statistical facts, but rather to focus on words and phrases that reappear with greater frequency in St. Josemaría's writings. We have limited ourselves here to his currently published works. On the one hand we have such texts as *The Way*, *Holy Rosary*, *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, and the collection of homilies entitled *Christ Is Passing By*, which are the books published during the author's lifetime. To these we have added *Friends of God*, *Furrow*, *The Forge*, *In Love with the Church*, and *The Way of the Cross*, all of which St. Josemaría had already revised for publication, but which were not actually printed until after his death. His extensive unpublished writings have not been included. We are aware, then, of the fact that this work constitutes only a first attempt to broach this topic.

Scripture is preached, heard and read. But from a phenomenological point of view, the first act is reading. A text which is not read is a dead letter.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, to raise the question of the texts that are cited most frequently in St. Josemaría's works is to highlight the passages from Scripture that resonated most forcefully for him in his own reading.

A simple enumeration of the passages from Sacred Scripture that are most often cited *explicitly*<sup>16</sup> is in itself quite illustrative. The two passages that appear most frequently, fourteen times each, are Luke 1:38, and within this verse especially the words "behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word,"<sup>17</sup> and the first part of the Christological hymn of St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians (*Phil* 2:6-8), especially the phrase: "he humbled himself and became

15. Walter Ong, *Oralidad y escritura. Tecnologías de la palabra*, FCE, Mexico 1987.

16. It is good to note here that the Biblical riches of his writings cannot be reduced to the passages that are cited frequently, since Sacred Scripture is, as it were, the fertile soil in which all his words are rooted.

17. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 403, 510, 512, 763, 912; *Furrow* 33, 124; *Christ Is Passing By* 172, 173; *Friends of God* 25, 109; *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer* 112; *Holy Rosary*, first joyful mystery.

obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”<sup>18</sup> Third place in frequency, cited twelve times, are the words from Matthew 11:29-30: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”<sup>19</sup> Uniting all three of these texts is the call for a full acceptance of God’s plans and an unconditional and fearless personal dedication, following in Christ’s footsteps.

Cited ten times are the words from St. John’s Gospel referring to the scene at Calvary, words that strongly express the meaning of fidelity: “But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (*Jn* 19:25).<sup>20</sup>

Two passages from different contexts but with very similar content are each cited nine times. The first comes from Christ’s words at the Last Supper. “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (*Jn* 15:5).<sup>21</sup> The second is an exclamation of St. Paul: “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me” (*Phil* 4:13).<sup>22</sup>

Next in frequency come the Gospel words: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (*Mt* 16:24), commented on eight times in the published works of St. Josemaría.<sup>23</sup>

Among the frequent citations in his preaching and writing is Jesus’ strong appeal: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (*Jn* 13:34–35),<sup>24</sup> and an explicit confession of love for Jesus by St. Peter, which came as a response to his direct question, “Do you love me?” “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you” (*Jn* 21:17).<sup>25</sup> Both of these texts are cited on seven occasions.

Finally we find three texts that are each mentioned on six occasions. The first is the heartfelt cry: “I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already

18. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge* 1021; *Christ Is Passing By* 19, 21, 31, 62, 113, 144, 162; *Friends of God* 97, 111, 201, 236; *The Way of the Cross*, fourth station: second point for meditation; twelfth station: first point for meditation.

19. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 607, 758; *Furrow* 198, 261; *Christ Is Passing By* 176; *Friends of God* 28, 31, 97, 128, 224, 247; *The Way of the Cross*, second station: fourth point for meditation.

20. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Holy Rosary*, fifth sorrowful mystery; *The Way* 507, 508, 982; *Furrow* 248, 977; *The Forge* 758; *Christ Is Passing By* 140, 171; *Friends of God* 287.

21. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 416, 781; *Furrow* 697; *The Forge* 425, 437; *Christ Is Passing By* 16, 153; *Friends of God* 254, 305.

22. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 717; *The Forge* 337, 656; *Christ Is Passing By* 120; *Friends of God* 123, 213, 271, 305.

23. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow* 8, 249; *Christ Is Passing By* 176; *Friends of God* 114, 128, 216, 250; *The Way of the Cross*, second station.

24. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 385; *The Forge* 454, 889; *Christ Is Passing By* 21; *Friends of God* 43, 222, 224.

25. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow* 326, 964; *The Forge* 176, 497; *Christ Is Passing By* 119; *Friends of God* 17, 267.

kindled" (*Lk* 12:49).<sup>26</sup> The second is Jesus' trusting appeal: "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (*Lk* 22:42).<sup>27</sup> The third stresses the truth that all Christians are called to sanctity: "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love" (*Eph* 1:4).<sup>28</sup>

St. Josemaría's published works contain thousands of scriptural references, stressing the great themes of Christian catechesis and spirituality. Nevertheless, the recurring texts are not very many. The list that we have just presented includes all the passages that are cited more than five times, and it is not a particularly long list. Therefore its content offers valuable information about the way in which he read Scripture.

One can observe, first of all, that it is not a matter of complete passages from Scripture. At the same time, one finds in them a high density of content, which is shown especially in two aspects. The first is the presentation of Jesus, both in his actions and in his words, as a model for Christians. The second is the spur to respond faithfully to God. Here the figure of Mary is the paradigm with her yes to the divine plans revealed to her at the Annunciation, a yes that remained immutable, as shown by her fidelity at the foot of the Cross.<sup>29</sup>

If we look at his commentaries on these texts, we are struck by the vigorous force he found in the word of God, effective today and now, at each moment. We could cite, for example, some words that St. Josemaría preached on obedience:

Our Lord does not disguise the fact that his wholehearted obedience to God's will calls for renunciation and self-sacrifice. Love does not claim rights, it seeks to serve. Jesus has led the way. How did he obey? "*Usque ad mortem, mortem autem cruces*, unto death, death on a cross."<sup>30</sup> You have to get out of yourself; you have to complicate your life, losing it for love of God and souls. "So you wanted to live a quiet life. But God wanted otherwise. Two wills exist: your will should be corrected to become identified with God's will: you must not bend God's will to suit yours."<sup>31</sup>

It has made me very happy to see so many souls spend their lives—like you, Lord, "even unto death"—fulfilling what God was asking of them. They have

26. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* 801; *Furrow* 211; *The Forge* 31, 52, 947; *Christ Is Passing By* 120, 170.

27. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow* 352, 793; *The Forge* 236, 771; *Christ Is Passing By* 168; *Friends of God* 240.

28. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge* 10, 18, 280; *Christ Is Passing By* 1, 160; *Friends of God* 2.

29. Lucas F. Mateo Seco shows the central role of love for the Humanity of our Lord, particularly in regard to the mystery of the Cross, in the writings of St. Josemaría (Lucas F. Mateo Seco, "Sapientia Crucis: El misterio de la Cruz en los escritos de Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," *Scripta Theologica* 24 (1992) 422).

30. *Phil* 2:8.

31. St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, Ps 31:2, 26 (PL 36, 274).

dedicated all their yearnings and their professional work to the service of the Church, for the good of all men.

Let us learn to obey, let us learn to serve. There is no better leadership than wanting to give yourself freely, to be useful to others. When we feel pride swell up within us, making us think we are supermen, the time has come to say “no.” Our only triumph will be the triumph of humility. In this way we will identify ourselves with Christ on the cross—not unwillingly or restlessly or sullenly, but joyfully. For the joy which comes from forgetting ourselves is the best proof of love.<sup>32</sup>

The author stirs the soul of the reader through the use of a brief and direct style.<sup>33</sup> The words from Scripture (*Phil* 2:8–9) appear as a response to a question directed to Jesus—How did you obey? We find ourselves reading within a communicative process, carried out in prayer. Our contemplation of the example of Jesus does not remain as merely grateful admiration for what he has done, but spurs us to a vital identification with Him. The author brings in his own personal testimony as to the effectiveness of God’s word: “It has made me very happy to see so many souls spend their lives—like you, Lord, ‘even unto death’— fulfilling what God was asking of them,” thus helping us to formulate a specific response of generous self-giving.

St. Josemaría commentary does not seek to offer an academic exposition or a theological reflection on Christ’s kenosis, or to present a theological discussion of the virtue of obedience. What interests him here, as in most cases, is the actual life of the Christian, the disciple of Christ who must imitate the Master to the point of identifying himself with Him and making Him present in the midst of the world.<sup>34</sup>

The text from Philippians highlights the contrast between Jesus and Adam. The latter, being man, wanted to be like God (cf. *Gen* 3:5), while Jesus, being God, “emptied himself” (*Phil* 2:7). Christ’s obedience even to the cross (*Phil* 2:8) repaired the disobedience of the first man. St. Josemaría, in contemplating the example of Jesus, had before his eyes the Christian of our times. In the face of the temptation to make himself into a “superman,” to “be like God” and to disobey, he presented us with the path to be a true man and “lord,” in the image of God, which consists in imitating Jesus Christ and thus discovering the “lordship of serving.”

Another example illustrates the same hermeneutical attitude in a very different context. It is taken from an interview,<sup>35</sup> in which he is asked: “In conclusion, could you give us your opinion as to how the role of women in the life of the Church can best be promoted?” His lengthy answer ended with the words:

32. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 19.

33. In regard to St. Josemaría’s method of preaching, see María José Alonso Seoane, “Homilias y escritos breves. Algunos aspectos de retórica literaria,” in Miguel Ángel Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 157.

34. See Santiago Ausín Olmos, “La lectura de la Biblia en las ‘Homilias’ del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Scripta Theologica*, 25 (1993, 1) 220.

35. The interview took place on February 1, 1968.



God is urging the Church to fulfill this task, the task of making the entire world Christian from within, showing that Christ has redeemed all mankind. Women will participate in this task in the ways that are proper to them, both in the home and in other occupations which they carry out, developing their special characteristics to the full.

The main thing is that like Mary, who was a woman, a virgin and a mother, they live with their eyes on God, repeating her words *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*—‘be it done unto me according to Thy word’ (Luke 1:38). On these words depends the faithfulness to one’s personal vocation—which is always unique and non-transferable in each case—which will make us all cooperators in the work of salvation which God carries out in us and in the entire world.<sup>36</sup>

Mary’s response to the message of the angel is presented as though spoken into the ear of a woman today, so that, whether in the home or in any other professional occupation, she may give her unconditional adherence to God’s call, cooperating very directly “in the work of salvation which God carries out in us and in the entire world.” Here one sees the Christian anthropology of “the new man”—or more precisely of “the new woman” in this case—called to make the Gospel present not only in the ideal sphere in the act of reading, but in real life every day.

*“Another character in the scene”*

Reading does not consist in the mere line-by-line decoding of written symbols. In the act of reading several instruments are activated to unfold the potential of the text. As one advances in the text one recalls something read a few pages earlier, and new expectations are opened up which await a reply. Vacancies in the text are being filled in for the reader about which the text itself is silent.<sup>37</sup> In short, through signs a world of references is built up; there is brought into being the “world of the text,”<sup>38</sup> about which the text is speaking.

When the text in question is Sacred Scripture, this reading takes place in the Church with the guidance that is provided not only by the text but also by the Holy Spirit. These make up the “world of the text” for the Christian reader, who when reading has present the content and the unity of the entire Scriptures, the living Tradition of the whole Church and the analogy of faith.<sup>39</sup>

The text is a universe of truths that is open to the questions that are addressed to it. For example, the Gospel of St. Mark not only says what the evangelist wanted to transmit to his readers when he wrote it, but much more. The evangelist certainly

36. *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, 112.

37. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *El acto de leer. Teoría del efecto estético*, Taurus, Madrid 1987.

38. In regard to the concept “world of the text,” see Vicente Balaguer, *La interpretación de la narración: la teoría de Paul Ricoeur*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002.

39. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum*, n. 13.

wanted to point out the need to discover who Jesus was, and to profess one's faith in him, and to make the Gospel reach the ends of the earth. But through the world of the text that he constructed it is also possible to know a great many other things, such as the way in which Jesus, Peter and other persons who appear in the Gospel acted. It also informs us about the value placed on ancient traditions, and many other specific aspects of the customs of the times.

If the text is a universe of truths open to the questions that are put to it, clearly the depth of the responses offered to the reader depends on the value of the questions raised. Therefore, we will turn now to looking at the way St. Josemaría questioned the text of Sacred Scriptures.

*The Forge* contains a brief but incisive counsel regarding what God is saying to us in the very act of reading Scripture:

Do you want to learn from Christ and follow the example of his life? Open the Holy Gospels and listen to God dialoguing with men—with you.<sup>40</sup>

The Gospel is a book that enables us to look at past events that continue to be active in the present. The person reading is called to take an active part, listening attentively to the words addressed to him there:

As usual, let us turn to the New Testament, this time to St. Matthew, chapter eleven: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (*Mt* 11:29). Don't you see? We have to learn from him, from Jesus who is our only model. If you want to go forward without stumbling or wandering off the path, then all you have to do is walk the road he walked, placing your feet in his footprints and entering into his humble and patient Heart, there to drink from the well-springs of his commandments and of his love. In a word, you must identify yourself with Jesus Christ and try to become really and truly another Christ among your fellow men.<sup>41</sup>

The author involves the reader in his own response to the text. “One can go even further: the intention of Blessed Josemaría,” wrote a literary critic some years ago, “is that the receiver should take the initiative and become the creator, the co-author, the principal author in the conversation.”<sup>42</sup> Thus St. Josemaría invites us to read Sacred Scripture “from within”:

If you wish to get close to our Lord through the pages of the Gospels, I always recommend that you try to enter in on the scene taking part as just one more character there. In this way (and I know many perfectly ordinary people who live

40. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, 322.

41. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 128.

42. Antonio Vilarnovo, “Santo Rosario: escena y contemplación en el discurso,” in Miguel Ángel Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 90.

this way) you will be captivated like Mary was, who hung on every word that Jesus uttered or, like Martha, you will boldly make your worries known to him, opening your heart sincerely about them all no matter how little they may be.<sup>43</sup>

But, and here is the key to understanding his way of reading Scripture, he is not inviting the reader to travel in his imagination to recreate a story in the distant past. Rather we are asked to contemplate today's world, the world lying before each of us, and to go to the Sacred Text as a point of reference to evaluate our own experience in its true supernatural dimensions:

Make it a habit to mingle with the characters who appear in the New Testament. Capture the flavor of those moving scenes where the Master performs works that are both divine and human, and tells us, with human and divine touches, the wonderful story of his pardon for us and his enduring Love for his children. Those foretastes of Heaven are renewed today, for the Gospel is always true: we can feel, we can sense, we can even say we touch God's protection with our own hands; a protection that grows stronger as long as we keep advancing despite our stumbles, as long as we begin again and again, for this is what interior life is about, living with our hope placed in God.<sup>44</sup>

St. Josemaría insists that Christ continues being very close to each Christian even today:

Live your life close to Christ. You should be another character in the Gospel, side by side with Peter, and John, and Andrew. For Christ is also living now: *Iesus Christus, heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula!*—Jesus Christ lives! Today, as yesterday, he is the same, for ever and ever.<sup>45</sup>

The risen Jesus is living now, and seeks in our own time disciples who will live close to Him and work at his side. He needs men and women who, identified with Him, will make Him present in the world.<sup>46</sup>

In one of his homilies he recommends:

My advice is that, in your prayer, you actually take part in the different scenes of the Gospel, as one more among the people present. First of all, imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Mas-

43. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 222.

44. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 216.

45. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, 8.

46. Cf. Antonio Aranda, "El cristiano '*alter Christus ipse Christus*' en el pensamiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," *Scripta Theologica* 26 (1994) 513-570. In regard to the identification of the Christian with Christ, which is at the heart of his thought and the basis of many of his expressions, see C. Cardona, "La clave de Forja," in M. A. Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 139-150.

ter's life you are considering—his merciful Heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfills his Father's Will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because he may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands.<sup>47</sup>

St. Josemaría urges us to contemplate the Gospel scenes by living them personally, “as one more character in the scene.”<sup>48</sup> He “develops his ministry of the Word by teaching us how to listen to the voice of God, who calls each one to sanctify himself in his own setting, in the place Providence has assigned to him.”<sup>49</sup> In *The Forge* he gives us the fundamental norm for reading and living the Gospel:

When you open the Holy Gospel, think that what is written there—the words and deeds of Christ—is something that you should not only know, but live. Everything, every point that is told there, has been gathered, detail by detail, for you to make it come alive in the individual circumstances of your life.

God has called us Catholics to follow him closely. In that Holy Text you will find the Life of Jesus, but you should also find your own life there.

You too, like the Apostle, will learn to ask, full of love, “Lord, what would you have me do?” And in your soul you will hear the conclusive answer, “The Will of God!”

Take up the Gospel every day, then, and read it and live it as a definite rule. This is what the saints have done.<sup>50</sup>

St. Josemaría “enters’ and ‘asks others to enter’ into the Gospel, which thus acquires its necessary and convincing formative dimension, leading one to the knowledge of the mystery of Christ and to communion with Him.”<sup>51</sup> We see him doing so with special force in his reading of the Passion:

Do you want to accompany Jesus closely, very closely?... Open the Holy Gospel and read the Passion of our Lord. But don't just read it: live it. There is a big difference. To read is to recall something that happened in the past; to live is to find oneself present at an event that is happening here and now, to be

47. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 253.

48. “If we seek for a method in the founder of Opus Dei's ‘reading’ of the Bible, we can find it in his own expression: “as one more character in the scene” (José María Casciaro Ramírez, “La ‘lectura’ de la Biblia en los escritos y en la predicación del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Scripta Theologica* 34 (2002,1) 140).

49. Antonio Livi, “Es Cristo que pasa: la santificación del tiempo,” en Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 195. In regard to this aspect see Miguel Ángel Tábet, “La santificación en la propia situación de vida. Comentario exegético a 1 Cor 7:17-24,” *Romana* 6 (1988,1) 169-176.

50. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, 754.

51. Salvatore Garofalo, “El valor perenne del Evangelio,” in Cornelio Fabro – Salvatore Garofalo - María Adelaide Raschini (ed.), *Santos en el mundo: estudios sobre los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Rialp, Madrid 1993, 142.

someone taking part in those scenes.

Then, allow your heart to open wide; let it place itself next to our Lord. And when you notice it trying to slip away—when you see that you are a coward, like the others—ask forgiveness for your cowardice and mine.<sup>52</sup>

The discourse of St. Josemaría moves in the ambit of *logos pragmatikós*, of the word that seeks to lead the reader to an encounter with God. As has been noted incisively of his literary work, “the writer through his discourse is seeking several different ends: the first of these is to contemplate; the last, to make the hearer or reader contemplate...there is the deliberate intention of moving the reader and immersing him in contemplation.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus the reader is led to discover the Gospel’s perennial timeliness. “The exegesis of the Founder of Opus Dei could be described as one ‘of total involvement,’ which floods the soul with light.”<sup>54</sup>

*In Dialogue with the Word of God*

“The Bible always served as St. Josemaría’s primary referential language.”<sup>55</sup> Each of his pages was saturated with the words and content of Sacred Scripture, which by being meditated on once and again, enabled him to establish a dialogue with the Word of God.<sup>56</sup> St. Josemaría would intersperse brief fragments or phrases from the Bible into the thread of his narration, accompanied by comments that were also brief (and at times without commentary), allowing that condensed citation to work on the reader in the act of reading.

He does not provide us, then, with a theory of exegesis or hermeneutics. Rather, he is an excellent guide for the authentic way to read Sacred Scripture, which goes beyond externals and establishes a personal communication with the Word of God speaking in the Biblical text. St. Josemaría was not unaware of existing textual analyses of Scripture that tried to weave together all the various threads found in the Bible. But he opted for presenting isolated threads, seeking to liberate Scripture

52. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way of the Cross*, ninth station: third point for meditation. Also see Cornelio Fabro, “Via Crucis: la ‘contemporaneidad’ del cristiano con Cristo,” in Miguel Angel Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 175-187.

53. Antonio Vilarnovo, “Santo Rosario: escena y contemplación en el discurso,” in Garrido Gallardo, *La obra literaria de Josemaría Escrivá*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, 88-89.

54. Salvatore Garofalo, “El valor perenne del Evangelio,” in Cornelio Fabro – Salvatore Garofalo - María Adelaide Raschini (ed.), *Santos en el mundo: estudios sobre los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Rialp, Madrid 1993, 144.

55. Scott Hahn, “Passionately Loving the Word: The Use of Scripture in the Writings of St. Josemaría,” *Romana*, 35 (2002), 382.

56. “He did not cite Biblical passages as references in support of what he was saying, as “an argument from Scripture.” On the contrary, the sacred texts are the point of departure for his reflection. He only cites them after meditating on them repeatedly, and incorporating them into his life” (José María Casciaro Ramírez, “La ‘lectura’ de la Biblia en los escritos y en la predicación del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” *Scripta Theologica* 34 (2002,1) 134).

from methodological bonds that were tightly binding it and that could render it sterile by distracting the reader's attention from the essential content in the communicative process.

St. Josemaría did not approach the Bible like someone searching in an antique store. His reading of the text was never an archeological reconstruction of past events. On the contrary, he brought the texts to life and inserted them into the cultural and religious concerns of today's world. Although St. Josemaría was acquainted with contemporary exegetical techniques that employed a critical, structural, sociological and even psychoanalytical method in reading the Biblical texts, his commentaries moved on another level. He always sought to free the reading of the Bible from bonds which, although in part necessary, could suffocate its timeliness and impact.

In contrast to the great literary epics of the ancient world and the great religious books produced by human ingenuity in various times and cultures, in the Biblical text we find a message that has not been thought up by man, and that can ground one's life precisely because it precedes and sustains it, totally transcending human thought. In that text we can hear God's Word and enter into dialogue with it.

What was always foremost in St. Josemaría's reading of the Biblical text was his eager desire to know God and to discover his will through the words of Scripture. He did not get lost in the myriad of literary and historical questions that make up the "textual world" of the Bible, and that can be of great interest, but he went directly to what was most important, a personal encounter with the Word of God.

Thus he brought to the Church new paths for putting into practice the Second Vatican Council's exhortation that all preaching be nourished and guided by Sacred Scripture. As we read in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*:

In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.<sup>57</sup>

57. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum*, 21.