

The New Russian Idea and the Teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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Since October 2, 1928, when he *saw* Opus Dei and received God's commandment to spread its message throughout the world, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá tirelessly preached that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, are called to holiness. For the great majority, this consists in the conscientious fulfillment of their daily work and ordinary duties. Father Aleksandr Men', the eminent Russian Orthodox priest and spiritual writer, told his parishioners in the spring of 1980, «Escrivá says that to be Christian does not mean to live like a Philistine, a petty bourgeois, a Pharisee, and then on Sundays go somewhere at a set time for spiritual uplift. A Christian is a Christian at all times, every day, in the most ordinary circumstances, dealing with the most ordinary things»¹. Father Men' understood the spirituality of ordinary things so well that Grigori Zobin, the Russian poet, called him the “ordinary saint”².

This central aspect of Christian spirituality — the vocation of all Christians to holiness — had been all but forgotten throughout the Christian world for centuries. As Jacques Maritain noted in his *Humanisme intégral* (1936), «The monastic state was regarded as the state of perfect people, while the lay state was considered the state of imperfect people. This meant that the duty and metaphysical function of imperfect people was precisely to be imperfect and to remain imperfect»³.

¹ Tape (spring 1980). Talk “The Creator, the Universe, Man” at Mikhail Zavalov's house.

² A. ZORIN, *Angel-chernorabochy*, Moscow 1993, p. 136.

³ J. MARITAIN, *Humanisme intégral*, Paris 1936. III-3 (Un nouveau style de sainteté).

Historically, this phenomenon, which Maritain calls *sociological prostration*, was accentuated in the Christian East by a tradition of absolute separation between God and the world, spirit and matter, giving rise to a dualism which continues to mark Russian life and society to this day.

Russia converted to Christianity in 984 under the influence and patronage of Greece. Shortly thereafter, the Russian word *spasat'sa*, meaning “to be saved,” entered into use as the verb to describe the acceptance of a monastic vocation. To enter the monastery meant to be saved. In the 17th century Russian narrative, *Gorje-Zloschastie*, one repeatedly encounters the popular notion that only in the monastery can one be saved from sin and evil. Anton Kartachov (1875-1960), one of Russian Orthodoxy's most eminent historians, once observed, «The work of a prince, service to the state and society, commerce and business, and any sort of worldly activity came to be seen as an obstacle to the salvation of the soul. Before passing away, pious Russians hastened to become monks in order to be able to present themselves to the Heavenly Judge as ‘true Christians.’ Christianity was seen as an ascetic affair involving rejection of the world and the living of a monastic life. Family life was considered much too worldly and sinful for the elevation of the soul to heaven»⁴.

In 1923, the Russian Orthodox priest and theologian, Sergei Bulgakov, wrote «The Byzantine worldview hardly takes into account the spiritual aims of the world. It seems to me that Byzantine dualism is deeply rooted in our ecclesiastical life»⁵.

In a conference he gave in 1989 Father Aleksandr Men' said «For the lay society of the early 19th century, a Christianity which is ‘not of this world’ (*neot-mirnoe khrisianstvo*) was identified with the Orthodox faith... The Church was not interested in social justice, the organization of society, etc... as if these matters were of no interest to Christians. This was the origin of a bitter schism: what went on in the monastery was one thing, what went on in the world, something else»⁶.

This religious dualism gave rise to a certain tolerance of sin: One is either a saintly monk, or a worthless sinner who can only be saved by God's mercy. «The humility preached by Christ», wrote Nikolai Berdiaev in 1918, «became synonymous with compromise... Russian Orthodoxy, the source of our people's moral education, did not set high standards for ordinary Russians to reach. In this attitude, there was enormous moral condescension. Russians were taught humility before all else, and as a reward for this humility, were allowed to behave more or

⁴ A. KARACHOV, *Tserkov', Istoria, Rossija*, Moscow 1996, pp. 157-158.

⁵ S. BULGAKOV, *U Sten Khersonisa*, «Simvol» 25 (1991).

⁶ A. MEN, *Dva ponimania khristianstva*, «Russkaja Mysl'» 3944 (25.01.1989).

less as they pleased. Humility became the main objective in the formation of the individual personality. The desire to attain holiness was taken as a manifestation of pride... A thief or a murderer can place a candle before an icon in sincere piety and continue to steal and kill. This is not hypocrisy. This is the dualism we have been taught for centuries»⁷.

The Christian faithful were presented models of holiness that embodied a spirit of absolute condemnation of the world. In the Russian Church, we find three basic types of sanctity: monastic sanctity, martyrdom and *yurodstvo* (being a “fool for Christ”). None of these models has anything to do with ordinary life lived in the middle of the world. In the Russian Church, as in the Catholic Church until the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II, models of lay sanctity were few and far between. The history of the canonization of Prince Vladimir of Kiev († 1015) illustrates the difficulty Russian ecclesiastics had with the concept of lay sanctity. Vladimir was most likely canonized in the middle of the late 13th century, some 250 years after his death, in contrast to his sons, the martyrs (*strastoterptsy*) Boris and Gleb, who died in the same year as their father and were canonized shortly thereafter. The Russian historian E.E. Golubinsky believes that the model of the good and joyful prince did not correspond to the model of holiness forged by the Orthodox Church which reserved the adjective *prepodobny* (“similar to Christ”) for canonized monks.

Such was the reality of Russian religious consciousness that Dmitri Merezhkovsky (1865-1940), writing a few years before the October Revolution came to this cruel conclusion, «*Historical* Christianity was a unilateral expression of Christian piety, for it rejected the flesh and the world⁸. [...] From now on, to the whole world must be revealed not only the ‘truth about the spirit,’ but also the ‘truth about the flesh,’ not only the ‘truth about heaven,’ but also the ‘truth about the earth’»⁹.

Not all Russian monks despised the world. Many of them resorted to the monastery not because they felt contempt for the world, but out of an acute consciousness of its sinfulness. They loved the world, at least in theory, and played important roles in the development of Russian culture and education. But their conviction that true Christianity can be realized *only* in monastic life¹⁰ (in a complete renunciation of normal human concerns) impeded their discovery of the intrinsic value and supernatural dimension of earthly realities. They looked at the

⁷ N. BERDIAEV, *Sud'ba Rossii*, Moscow 1990, pp. 69-70.

⁸ See A. ZEN'KOVSKY, *Istoria russkoj filosofii II*, Rostov na donu 1999, p. 339.

⁹ D. MEREZKOVSKY, *Griaduchchij kbram*, Saint Petersburg 1906, p. 123.

¹⁰ A. ZEN'KOVSKY, *Istoria russkoj filosofii I*, Rostov na donu 1999, p. 49.

world pessimistically, thinking that in a certain sense the grace of God does not make itself felt in the middle of society.

Even Tikhon Zadonskii (1722-1794), a saintly monk who recognized the possibility of Christian “spiritual activity” in the middle of the world, stressed the necessity to “spiritually leave the world” and to “spiritually overcome the world”¹¹. Tikhon could not understand that lay people are called to find God precisely *in* and *through* earthly things, without having to overcome or keep their distance from them. As Bishop Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, wrote in his book *Itinerarios de vida cristiana*, even when praying a Christian does not cease being in the middle of the world. «On the contrary» writes Bishop Echevarría, «prayer brings him closer to it, because in the intimacy of prayer, God moves us to discover the divine content of the world, and to love it more and more each day»¹². And as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá noted, «The world cannot be evil because it comes from God’s hands, because it is His creation, because Jahveh looked upon it and saw that it was good (see Gen. 1:7). We ourselves — mankind — make it evil and ugly through our sins and infidelities. Have no doubt: any avoidance of the honest realities of daily life is for you — men and women of the world — something opposed to the will of God»¹³.

Monastic life in the East, as well as in the West, is indisputably vital to the life and sanctity of the Church. «If you do not have the greatest reverence for the priesthood and for the monastic state», wrote Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, «you do not truly love God’s Church»¹⁴. While monasticism in itself presents no obstacle to a more comprehensive vision of Christianity, the tendency often and unjustly associated with it, which considers it as the best or the only true form of Christianity, does present a considerable problem. This tendency exists in deep contradiction to the life of the first Christians and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. «Even a Christian writer like Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) did not fully understand the true tradition of the Church»¹⁵, commented Aleksandr Men’. In his ingenious *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky tries to present Orthodoxy in all its truth and splendor, but the only models of holiness he offers are the monk-starets Zosima and his disciple Alyosha. Dostoyevsky shares the view of monasticism as the sole source of salvation that informs the ancient narrative *Gore-Zloschastie*.

¹¹ A. ZEN’KOVSKY, *Istoria russkoj filosofii I*, Rostov na donu 1999, p. 69.

¹² J. ECHEVARRÍA, *Itinerarios de vida cristiana*, Barcelona 2001, p. 135.

¹³ *Conversations*, 114.

¹⁴ *The Way*, 526.

¹⁵ A. MEN, *Dva ponimania...*, cit.

But by the time Dostoyevsky composed *Karamazov* (1880), Russian religious thought was already undergoing substantial change. Since the beginning of the 18th century, Russian intellectuals had begun rejecting the monastic interpretation of the Gospel which had characterized Russia (and the whole of Europe) for almost 1,000 years — often demonstrating great courage and passion in doing so. They attempted to give the world its proper due and to impart to the Christian laity a new dignity. This new “Russian Idea” was extremely audacious, much more so than the subsequent development of Western religious thought in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The message Blessed Josemaría Escrivá began proclaiming on October 2, 1928 in Spain — and, after the Second World War, throughout the entire world — would have certainly found greater acceptance on the part of these Russian intellectuals and their later disciples than it did in Western Europe.

Among the most important exponents of the “Russian Idea” are Mikhail Speransky, Piotr Chaadaev, Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Bukharev, Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Berdiaev and the Orthodox clerics Sergei Bulgakov and Aleksandr Men’. They placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of a “new understanding of Christianity”, and in so doing, laid the foundations for a modern theology of culture. Being open to the world and independent-minded, many of them developed a strong interest in and sympathy for the Catholic Church.

«There is only one way to be a Christian — and that is to be one fully»¹⁶, said Piotr Chaadaev (1794-1856), the philosopher who had served as a Tsarist military officer. The understanding of the radicalism of the Christian vocation, the desire for personal improvement, became a point of departure for the new Russian religious thinkers. As Blessed Josemaría Escrivá wrote, «We have to become saints, as they say in my part of the world, ‘down to the last whisker’; Christians who are truly and genuinely such are the kind that could be canonized. If not, we shall have failed as disciples of the one and only Master»¹⁷. Chaadaev stressed the historicity of Christianity, which must be achieved not at the end of time, but now, in men and in society. Holiness in the middle of the world is an absolute necessity and vital to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. This faith in the vocation of man to build a Christian world would become a permanent characteristic of the Russian Idea.

Mikhail Speransky (1772-1834), an outstanding barrister in the court of Tsar Aleksandr I, and certainly one of the most gifted Russian statesman of the

¹⁶ P. CHAADAEV, *Soch. T. I*, Saint Petersburg 1913, p. 236.

¹⁷ *Friends of God*, 5.

19th century, wrote some years before Chaadaev «People are wrong when they maintain that the spirit of the Kingdom of God is incompatible with the political order... I am not aware of any problem of state administration to which an answer cannot be found in the Gospel»¹⁸.

Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), like Speransky and Chaadaev, felt a strong desire for *interior unity*, unity between the spiritual life and the fulfillment of daily responsibilities, even if his works are often characterized more by their dreamy tone than by a realistic understanding of things. In his *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy* he wrote, «Upon leaving church, having attended the divine supper of Love, a Christian looks at other people as brothers. In his ordinary occupations, in his family, in his work, wherever he is, his soul will preserve the sublime ideal of fraternal love brought to him by the Man-God»¹⁹. In this beautiful commentary on the Holy Liturgy, Gogol speaks to us of “unity of life”, an expression and theological reality developed by Blessed Josemaría who wrote «I often told the university students and workers who were with me in the 1930s that they had to learn how to materialize their spiritual lives. I wanted to warn them against the temptation, so common then and now, of living a kind of double life. On the one hand, an interior life, a life lived in relation to God; on the other hand, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life, full of small worldly realities. No, we cannot lead a double life! We cannot lead schizophrenic lives if we want to be Christians... Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or we shall never find Him»²⁰.

Aleksandr Bukharev (1824-1871), an Orthodox monk and theologian of Holy Trinity monastery, expressed his deep sense of the presence of God in the middle of the world and in everyday situations in his book *Orthodoxy: How It Relates to the Contemporary World* (1860). Bukharev observes, «It is necessary to defend all aspects of humanity, because they belong properly to Christ... To reject what is truly human is to impede the grace of God»²¹. Vasilii Zen'kovzky said of Bukharev, «He very much disliked the tendency to separate human and civil affairs from Christian life... He criticized what he called a 'contemporary Aryanism, that does not want to see in Christ the true God... Christ who is present in all the spheres of science, art, social and private life.' Bukharev fought against this 'fear of the divine', which prevents us from understanding that 'creative forces and ideas are nothing other than the reflection of the Word of God in

¹⁸ In A. ZEN'KOVSKY, *Istoria... I*, cit., p. 139.

¹⁹ N. GOGOL, *Meditations sur la Divine Liturgie*, Paris 1952, p. 117.

²⁰ *Conversations*, 114.

²¹ A. BUKHAREV, *O Pravoslavii v otnochenii k sovremennosti*. Saint Petersburg 1860, p. 20.

the world...'. Bukharev felt very deeply the 'hidden warmth' of the Church of Christ precisely in things which outwardly appear to have nothing to do with Christ. He saw his task as the reestablishment of a sense of the 'belonging to Christ' of even apparently non-Christian realities»²². In his famous homily to students at the University of Navarra (1967), Blessed Josemaría expressed a very similar thought, «There is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it... We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things»²³.

Gogol, Chaadaev and Bukharev were misunderstood by their contemporaries — Gogol and Chaadaev were officially declared insane; Bukharev felt pressured to leave the monastery and died several years later in extreme poverty. It is a recurring pattern in history: Those who, out of a spirit of self-sacrifice, preach true Christianity, invariably provoke the jealousy and ridicule of the Pharisees. Blessed Josemaría experienced this personally, «When I saw in 1928 what our Lord wanted of me, I immediately set to work. At the time (thank you, my Lord, for there was much to suffer and much to love), I was taken for a madman. Some people indeed called me a dreamer, but a dreamer of impossible dreams»²⁴. Later, Father Escrivá was accused of heresy, of seeking political influence, of being a Jew and a Mason, of a lack of patriotism and many other things.

Although Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910) rejected both Church and State, he had a deep affection for the Orthodox and conservative Gogol. Why? Because he recognized in him the precursor of one of his deepest concerns — the permeation of Russian life and society with Christianity. Tolstoy wrote, «I try with all my strength to express as something new that which Gogol has already said»²⁵. Although in the end Tolstoy «withdrew from the world even more than he withdrew from the Church»²⁶, it would be wrong to underestimate his contribution to making Russian intellectuals aware of the deleterious consequences of religious dualism.

In his novel *Resurrection*, Tolstoy tells us that, in Russia, professional and social life are often seen as foreign to the Christian spirit, «All these people who are good, are in fact bad, because they are working»²⁷. Tolstoy condemned the tendency to erect barriers between God and society and consequently to come to

²² A. ZEN'KOVSKY, *Istoria russoj filosofii I*, cit., p. 367.

²³ *Conversations*, 114.

²⁴ *Friends of God*, 59.

²⁵ In I. TKHORZEVSKY, *Russkaja literatura*, Paris 1950, p. 189.

²⁶ V. MAKLAKOV, *O L. Tolstom*, Paris 1929, p. 27.

²⁷ L. TOLSTOY, *Voskresenie*, Moscow 1959, p. 371.

think that mediocrity, wickedness and even cruelty were the natural result of professional work and the building of civil society.

Merab Mamardachvili (1930-1990), the eminent Georgian philosopher, once observed that in Russia there is frequently a distorted relationship between people and what they do, «The thing is not me; I am something else; I do this but it is not me; I am not responsible for it»²⁸. This distortion between “what I am” and “what I do” is a natural byproduct of Russia’s traditional dualism. Communism only amplified it (on a gigantic scale). In a dualistic conception of life, there is no room for a subjective, personalist dimension in work.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá frequently reminded Christians that before sin entered the world — and, with it, sorrow and death — man worked (Genesis 2:15)²⁹. Work is not a form of punishment, but a vocation. The punishment for sin is sorrow and death — not work (Genesis 2:17, 3:17, 19). Work is man’s vocation from the moment of his creation, the means of his sanctification, and his personal betterment. The gulf between “being” and “doing” can easily be bridged by a spirituality of work. Blessed Josemaría writes, «Don’t you see? A complete range of virtues is called into play when we set about our work with the purpose of sanctifying it: fortitude, to persevere in our work despite the difficulties that naturally arise and to ensure that we never let ourselves be overwhelmed by anxiety; temperance, in order to give ourselves unsparingly and to overcome our love of comfort and selfishness; justice, so as to fulfill our duties towards God, society, our family and our fellow workers; prudence, to know in each case what course to take, and then to set about it without hesitation... And all this, I emphasize, is for the sake of Love, with a keen and immediate sense of responsibility for the results of our work and its apostolic impact»³⁰. In short, «Be convinced that our professional vocation is an essential and inseparable part of our condition as Christians»³¹.

Closely related to Blessed Josemaría’s spirit and teaching are the concepts of “all-unity” (*vse-edinstvo*), “God-manhood” (*bogochelovechestvo*) and *Sophia* developed by the great Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900).

The incarnation of the God-Man is for Soloviev the central event of the cosmic process: Godmanhood — i.e. the union of human nature with the divine nature realized in Jesus Christ — can and must be achieved in the whole of

²⁸ M. MAMARDACHVILI, *La pensée empêchée*, Paris 1991.

²⁹ *Friends of God*, 57.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 72.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 60.

humanity and the whole of nature. Because man is the natural mediator between God and the material world, through the God-Man the divinity unites with the material world, the cosmos. Soloviev says that previous ways of understanding Christianity attributed too little importance to the human and material foundations of life. For Soloviev, Christianity is never indifferent to anything: The Christian ideal encompasses everything. In this regard, Soloviev is an intellectual descendant of Bukharev.

Soloviev's doctrine of the Sophia affirms the presence of the Divine Wisdom in the created world, in the cosmos and in the whole of humanity. The Sophia is the most material, and at the same time the most spiritual ground of the world. It is «the body of God, the matter of the divinity penetrated by the principle of divine unity»³². Soloviev states «Under the common, material cover of the world, I felt the texture of eternity and discovered the splendor of the divine»³³.

Bukharev's "hidden warmth" of the Church of Christ, which he felt even in things that outwardly appeared to have nothing to do with Christ; Soloviev's discovery of the "the splendor of the divine" under the guise of common worldly realities; Escrivá's insistence that "something holy" is to be discovered in the most ordinary daily circumstances — these intuitions are the fruit of contemplative lives lived in the middle of the world, and are the authentic expression of "mystical realism."

If the divine is hidden in matter, then matter itself is worthy of love. Soloviev makes this typically Russian observation, «True materialism means faith in divine matter»³⁴. Kartachov asserts that it is characteristic of the Russian soul to feel the presence of God in matter³⁵.

The intuitions of Bukharev, Soloviev, and, later, of Florensky and Bulgakov, indicate the degree to which a dualistic separation of spirit and matter contradicts the aspirations of the Russian soul. Russians are extremely receptive to supernatural realities precisely in the midst of the world, in the most ordinary circumstances, indeed in the very street. If a disincarnated spiritualism were to come to inform Russian moral and practical education, it would prove no less fatal to Russian society than did atheistic materialism in its day. (And this applies not only to Russia.)

Soloviev's optimistic embrace of the created world led him to an appreciation of the high value of ordinary life lived in the middle of the world. T. Kazant-

³² V. SOLOVIEV, *Chtenia o Bogochelovechestve*, Chtenie 7.

³³ IDEM, *Tri svidania*, Saint Petersburg 1994, p. 404.

³⁴ IDEM, *Soch* (SPb, 1909). Vol. 3, p. 196.

³⁵ A. KARACHOV, *Tserkov', Istorija, Rossiija*, Moscow 1996, p. 163.

seva, the contemporary Russian writer, said of Soloviev, «This man, who had impressive mystical gifts, lived in permanent contact with the other world. But, at the same time, he loved this world and its people. He did not want to withdraw from this world, but rather sought reconciliation with it through the transfiguration of the human into the divine»³⁶. Sergei Bulgakov adds, «Soloviev searched for an integral vision of the world that could unite the depths of being with everyday work and give meaning to personal existence»³⁷.

Soloviev is without a doubt one of the most important heralds of Christian secular thought. His *religious materialism*, as Sergei Bulgakov characterized Soloviev's philosophy, bears a clear relationship to the teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá who developed the idea of a «*Christian materialism* that boldly resists a materialism that denies the spirit»³⁸. Expounding on this Blessed Josemaría writes, «That is why I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning³⁹... I assure you, my sons, that when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God. That is why I have told you repeatedly [...] that the Christian vocation consists in making heroic verse out of the prose of each day. Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives»⁴⁰.

In affirming the supernatural nature of everyday life, Soloviev came naturally to stress the necessity of applying Christian ideals to social life and civil society. Soloviev tells us that «it is time to stop running away from the world, and to start living in the world and transforming it»⁴¹. Christ is King; as such, He must reign in the world⁴². «Soloviev», said Berdiaev, «fought against a dualist conception of life in which the way of Christ would be for individuals and the way of Satan would be for society»⁴³. The “Kingdom of God” became a central concept in Soloviev's social doctrine. For Soloviev, the building of the Kingdom of God on earth was not a pious wish but man's central task in life.

³⁶ T. KAZANTSEVA, *Dve very V.S. Soloviiova*, «Vozrozhdenie Russkoi religiozno-filosofskoi mysli: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii, 22.03-24.03.93». Saint Petersburg 1993, p. 21.

³⁷ S. BULGAKOV, *Chto daiot sovremennomu soznaniu filosofia Vladimira Soloviiova?*, Kniga o Vladimire Soloviev, Moscow 1991, p. 389.

³⁸ *Conversations*, 115.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 114.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 116.

⁴¹ In S. SOLOVIEV, *Jizn i tvortcheskaja evoliutsia V. Solovieva*, Bruxelles 1980, p. 227.

⁴² V. SOLOVIEV, *La Russie et l'Eglise Universelle*, Paris 1889, introduction.

⁴³ N. BERDIAEV, *Russkaja ideja*, Paris 1971, p. 128.

Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948) was convinced, like Soloviev, that «Russia traditionally gave too little importance to the human foundation of life»⁴⁴. As Berdiaev asked in the chapter “Holiness and Honesty” of his book *The Destiny of Russia* (1918), «Where is man? The human ideals of perfection, nobility, honor, purity and light seem to have little value for Russians; they seem to them too secular... Konstantin Leontiev says that a Russian can be a saint, but he cannot be honest... Honesty is a Western ideal»⁴⁵. Berdiaev noticed with anguish that this dualism of the Russian religious consciousness leads not to holiness but to absolute paganism, «According to the principle of ‘all or nothing’, in Russia, ‘nothing’ usually wins out»⁴⁶. Berdiaev goes on, «This dualism must be overcome and done away with... Russians must quit believing that they can become saints without having to be honest... They must understand that there is something divine in human honesty and integrity»⁴⁷.

Berdiaev would certainly have approved of these words of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, «There is a type of secularist outlook that one comes across, and also another approach which might be called ‘pietistic’, both of which share the view that Christians somehow are not fully and entirely human. According to the former, the demands of the Gospel are such as to stifle our human qualities, whereas for the latter, human nature is so fallen that it threatens and endangers the purity of the faith. The result, either way, is the same. They both fail to grasp the full significance of Christ’s Incarnation; they do not see that the ‘Word was made flesh,’ became man, and ‘dwelt among us’... In this world of ours there are many people who neglect God. It may be that they have not had an opportunity to listen to His words, or that they have forgotten them. Yet their human dispositions are honest, loyal, compassionate and sincere. I would go so far as to say that anyone possessing such qualities is ready to be generous with God, because human virtues constitute the foundation of the supernatural virtues. It is true that in themselves such qualities are not enough, for no one is saved without the grace of Christ. But if a man fosters and cultivates the seeds of virtue within him, God will smooth out his path, and such a person will be able to become holy because he has known how to live as a man of good will... The price of living as Christians is not that of ceasing to be human or of abandoning the effort to acquire those virtues, which some possess even without knowing Christ... God wants us to be

⁴⁴ N. BERDIAEV, *Sud’ba Rossii*, Moscow 1990, pp. 72-74.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

both very human and very divine, struggling each day to imitate Him who is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*»⁴⁸.

Berdiaev rejected the erroneous understanding of the virtue of humility that was prevalent in Russia in his time. Humility was understood as social abasement, something to be borne with resignation. In Berdiaev's view, this understanding merely inculcated in the Russian people a spirit of mediocrity and social injustice, resulting less in humility than in humiliation. For Berdiaev, true humility elevates man, stimulates his creativity and renders him able to hear the voice of God and respond to the needs of men. A correct understanding of humility is vital to cultivating a desire to serve God in the middle of the world. «There are some», we read in a letter Blessed Josemaría addressed to members of Opus Dei, «who do not have a particularly lay approach and understand humility to mean a lack of aplomb, an indecisiveness which inhibits action, a surrendering of rights. The humility which the Work requires (which it encourages, offering a positive form of teaching) is something very interior, something which derives directly from the contemplative conversation we hold with our Lord *sine intermissione* (I Thess 5:17). It is a deep conviction that God our Father is the one who does everything, using us as the poor instruments we all are»⁴⁹.

According to Sergei Bulgakov, Russian priest and theologian (1871-1944), the secularization of the world came about as a consequence of both a secularism that embraces the world but rejects God and a religious dualism which leads to a disembodied spiritualism. In response to this state of affairs, Bulgakov developed the theological concepts of God-manhood and Sophia first set forth by Soloviev.

Bulgakov came very early to a new understanding of the dignity and place of the laity in the life of the Church. In 1923 he wrote, «Why do we cultivate spiritual fruits only in the monastery? In the world, as in the monastery, people are called to be saints... Unfortunately, we priests, when we preach and hear confession, we teach the faithful that we expect nothing more from them than a minimal righteousness»⁵⁰. In 1927, in a celebrated speech he gave in Lausanne, Bulgakov said, «Lay people have their place and value in the Church, just as the clergy does. The lay state cannot be defined negatively, as the absence of ecclesiastical orders. It is rather a special order, which is given in the sacrament of unction»⁵¹. Bulgakov insists that laymen share in the royal priesthood of Christ as a

⁴⁸ *Friends of God*, 74 and 75.

⁴⁹ Letter, 6 May 1945, no. 31.

⁵⁰ S. BULGAKOV, *U Sten Khersonisa*, «Simvol» 25 (1991).

⁵¹ In C. JOURNET, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, T. 1, Paris 1951 p. 101 nt 2. It seems that by "sacrament of unction" Bulgakov means both baptism and confirmation.

result of God-manhood, enabling them to conform to Christ. «According to Bulgakov», wrote Father Miguel de Salis, «royal priesthood belongs to the whole Church as to the body of Christ. This priesthood is not ‘instituted,’ but given to the Church by virtue of God-manhood. It is a supreme reality, a *substantial* reality, even if Bulgakov does not use this term»⁵². Bulgakov’s intuitions are extremely prescient when one considers the spirit of the age in which he expressed them.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá repeatedly called all members of Opus Dei to the awareness that they possess *priestly souls* even while insisting that they preserve *their lay mentality*. In the concepts of *priestly soul* and *lay mentality* we find the most radical consequences of the reality of God-manhood in the life of Christians. God-manhood implies the elevation and supernaturalization of human realities while retaining absolute respect for the nature of these realities. In God-manhood, God does not destroy what he has created, he does not engage in violence against the nature of things. God-manhood is an *ascending movement* from *nature* to *grace*. This phenomenon renders impossible both secular and clerical visions of life.

«As you can see», wrote Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, «the pastoral phenomenon of Opus Dei is something born from below, from the everyday lives of Christians, who live and work alongside the rest of humanity. Thus, it does not form part of the process of secularization and the desacralization of monastic and ecclesiastical life. It is not a link in the chain drawing religious life and consciousness into an ever more subordinate role *vis à vis* the secular order. When a person receives a vocation to Opus Dei, he or she acquires a new vision of life and the world. Members of Opus Dei see their social relationships and work, their joys and sorrows in a new light. But not for one moment do they cease living in the midst of them. Thus, one cannot speak of adapting oneself to the world or to modern society. One cannot adapt oneself to what is already innate. With respect to what is proper to oneself, one simply *is*. Our vocation is the same as the one received by the fishermen, shepherds, soldiers and merchants in their hearts when they encountered Christ in Galilee and heard Him say, ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’»⁵³. One cannot properly assess the role of the laity and the nature of the lay state using clerical concepts without distorting and short-changing the lay vocation.

In January 1989, a year before he was assassinated, Father Aleksandr Men’ (1935-1990) delivered a seminal lecture in Moscow entitled, “Two Understandings of Christianity” According to Father Aleksandr, Christians are divided not

⁵² M. DE SALIS, *Bulgakov y Florovsky. Dos eclesiologías ortodoxas de la diáspora rusa*, Pamplona 2000, p. 132.

⁵³ *Conversations*, 62.

so much by their doctrinal differences as by their conflicting attitudes *vis à vis* the world, «The confrontation between these two understandings of Christianity remains strong even now. Believers and non-believers alike must understand this because today we are discovering our lost culture, and with it, values forged over centuries by the Russian Orthodox Church, and, in general, by the whole Christian world. Many people think that Christians constitute a homogenous entity... We often make such distinctions as: 'He is one of us, he is not one of us'; 'he is Christian, he is not Christian'. This is too simplistic. It can happen that a Christian has more spiritual affinity with someone who is far from the Church than with someone who shares the same religion»⁵⁴.

According to Escrivá, a spiritualist or clerical interpretation of Christianity is a deformation of the Good News, «Think for a moment about what I have just said. We are celebrating the Holy Eucharist, the sacramental sacrifice of the Body and Blood of our Lord, that mystery of faith which links all the mysteries of Christianity. We are celebrating, therefore, the most sacred and transcendent act, which man, with the grace of God, can carry out in his life. To communicate with the Body and Blood of our Lord is, in a certain sense, like loosing the bonds of earth and time, in order to be already with God in heaven, where Christ himself will wipe the tears from our eyes and where there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor cries of distress, because the old world will have passed away. This profound and consoling truth, which theologians call the eschatological significance of the Eucharist, could, however, be misunderstood. And indeed it has been whenever men have tried to present the Christian way of life as something exclusively *spiritual*, proper to *pure*, extraordinary people, who remain aloof from the contemptible things of this world, or, at most, tolerate them as something necessarily attached to the spirit, while we live on this earth. When things are seen in this way, churches become the setting *par excellence* of the Christian life. And being a Christian means going to church, taking part in sacred ceremonies, being taken up with ecclesiastical matters, in a kind of segregated *world*, which is considered to be the ante-chamber of heaven, while the ordinary world follows its own separate path. The doctrine of Christianity and the life of grace would, in this case, brush past the turbulent march of human history, without ever really meeting it. On this October morning, as we prepare to enter upon the memorial of Our Lord's Passover, we flatly reject this deformed vision of Christianity...⁵⁵ I am a secular priest, a priest of Jesus Christ who is passionately in love with the world»⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ A. MEN, *Dva ponimania...*, cit.

⁵⁵ *Conversations*, 113.

⁵⁶ *Conversations*, 118.

Aleksandr Men' concluded the lecture he gave on the eve of his assassination with the following words, which vividly call to mind the preaching of Blessed Josemaría, «If we ask ourselves what is the essence of Christianity, we must answer: It is the Divinity who became Man, the union of the limited human spirit with the infinite divinity. It is the sanctification of the flesh. Since the moment when the Son of Man assumed our joys and our sorrows, our love, our work, the world in which the God-Man lived could no longer be denied or abased but raised to new heights and sanctified. Christianity means the sanctification of the world, and victory over evil, darkness and sin. It is God's victory, which commenced on the night of the Resurrection and continues as long as the world exists»⁵⁷.

The clichés and stereotypes about Russia's "monastic way", so prevalent in Western Europe, no longer correspond to the religious consciousness and spiritual demands of the great majority of Russians. Love of the world, faith in the capacity of grace to overcome sin and sanctify all that is genuinely human, the striving for personal holiness in the fulfillment of one's ordinary responsibilities, the desire to realize the Kingdom of God in social life and civil society — these are the fundamental aspects of the "Russian Idea" as it has developed since the beginning of the 19th century. These are the same fundamental themes that informed the teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá from his mystical vision of Opus Dei on October 2, 1928 until God called him to heaven on June 26, 1975. Perhaps for this reason, the spirit and teaching of the Founder of Opus Dei has already found fruitful soil in a new Russia, which, according to Blessed Josemaría, «is destined in the future to yield enormous crops of wheat»⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ A. MEN, Conference 8.09.1990 at the Moskovskiy Dom Tekhniki.

⁵⁸ *Furrow*, 617.