

The Pedagogy of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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Josemaría Escrivá did not develop a fixed educational system. Nevertheless, he did provide valuable considerations for educators, based on his own experience taking care of souls, and based on his Christian vision of the human person. These teachings are found both in his written works and in the notes taken from his oral preaching. One finds material of great educational value in his homilies and his aphoristic works, as well as in the answers which he gave to questions relating to education in the interviews and conversations he had with large and small groups of people. These pedagogical considerations are applicable beyond their immediate context, which at times was the formation of the faithful of Opus Dei, and have a universal scope, as they relate to the education of youth.

This paper does not attempt to systematise the pedagogical thought of Escrivá. Rather, it seeks to situate it within his overall vision and to present it in the appropriate context. I have used the published works of Escrivá as well as some secondary bibliography.

1. PERSPECTIVES ON THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

In the works of Blessed Josemaría, we find the following two principal aims highlighted: “to train people in personal freedom and in personal responsibility”¹ and to help children to be saints².

¹ *Conversations*, 84.

² Cfr. *The Forge*, 692.

a) *Education in Personal Freedom and Personal Responsibility*

The first perspective sets forth an educational objective in the immediate sense of the term, and will find broad consensus among those who educate young people or who work in the field of Education. The second perspective-goal, on the other hand, is not an educational objective in the strict sense of the term, but rather a 'life' objective. It seeks the growth of each person in the Love of God, in human love and in the following of Christ³. As Escrivá says, no one can definitively attain this goal of sanctity on earth. What we can do, however, is "struggle, struggle, struggle"⁴. Only the person who lives as a Christian and wants to educate his or her children to be faithful Christians will agree with the second perspective-goal, which places education in the framework of a "pedagogy of sanctity"⁵ or as Escrivá says, of a "divine pedagogy" that is based on the imitation of the love of Jesus Christ⁶.

How are these two perspectives interrelated in the thought of Escrivá? The connection is found in his vision of man as a creature and a child of God. From there proceeds his freedom and dignity as a person on the one hand, and his vocation to sanctity on the other, in a unity of life.

The human person has, inasmuch as he or she is the *creature* and the image of God, an inalienable *dignity*⁷. For this reason, all human beings have the basic natural right to be treated with respect⁸. God has given each human being, as a unique creature, the gift of freedom, in such a way that each one is the master of his or her own actions and so that, with the grace of God, each one can determine his or her own eternal destiny⁹. God wanted human beings to be His collaborators in the world, and so "He takes a risk with our freedom"¹⁰. Freedom is a 'risk' in the sense that a human being can misuse his or her freedom and say 'no' to God's commandments and Our Lord's work of redemption. From this refusal, freedom degenerates into arbitrariness and irresponsibility¹¹. Consequently, personal freedom involves legitimate independence, but it is inseparable from responsibility towards God and respect for the

³ Cfr. *Friends of God*, 225.

⁴ *The Forge*, 692.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31-32.

⁶ *Friends of God*, 225.

⁷ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 99.

⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*, 69.

⁹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 99.

¹⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*, 113.

¹¹ Cfr. *ibidem*, 184.

freedom of others¹². Escrivá's belief that "without freedom one cannot love God", follows from this understanding of freedom¹³.

b) Helping Children to be Saints

The second perspective is that of the reality of divine filiation which is so central to Blessed Josemaría and Opus Dei¹⁴: each person is not only the creation of God, but is also loved and called by Him to participate in His intimate life as a son or daughter. The indelible seal of divine filiation is received in Baptism¹⁵. From this moment, the person can be called a 'child of God' through Jesus Christ, with Him and through Him¹⁶. In this way, our heavenly Father is 'very close' to us, He lives within us¹⁷. Awareness of one's divine filiation produces "permanent youthfulness and serenity, joy and peace"¹⁸. Its goal is *sanctity*¹⁹.

Both perspectives converge in the consideration of *unity of life*, the unity between love of God and love of neighbour, between prayer and work. The aspiration to sanctity is made reality in everyday life, which is where human beings need to shape their lives with personal responsibility, freely deciding to live in the service of God and others. "There is no clash, no opposition, between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties and our religious ones; between the commitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on our way to our heavenly homeland"²⁰.

This unity of life is a prerequisite for all those who want to sanctify themselves in their everyday work, family life and social responsibilities. Berglar summarised the vision of Escrivá as follows: "From divine filiation springs unity of life"²¹.

¹² Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 124.

¹³ S. BERNAL, *Mmgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, London 1977, p. 274.

¹⁴ Cfr. P. BERGLAR, *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder Josemaría Escrivá*, Princeton 1994, p. 75.

¹⁵ Cfr. *The Forge*, 264.

¹⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 265.

¹⁷ Cfr. *ibidem*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 423.

¹⁹ Cfr. *Friends of God*, 294.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 165.

²¹ P. BERGLAR, *Opus Dei...*, cit., p. 75.

2. SPECIFIC PEDAGOGICAL ATTITUDES AND CONDUCT

Parents have a fundamental responsibility as the primary educators of their children. Escrivá therefore addresses them with incisive words. However, his educational considerations — above all with respect to fundamental issues — are relevant for all people who work with young people with a view to both perspectives of education.

a) Suggestions for Educators

Personal conduct, especially that of parents, is decisive for their credibility as educators. Escrivá knew that children and young people expect much more from their parents than just information or occasional pieces of advice. They seek “primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time”²². For this reason, children have to see that their parents (and their teachers) make the effort to live in accordance with their words and beliefs, that they want to be loyal and sincere, and that they love their children. This is especially important with respect to religious education.

Escrivá often repeated that the afore-mentioned is required if one wants to be effective; teaching first by example and only afterwards by word²³. What goes for young children who do not yet understand many words, is equally valid for young people who often close themselves more to words than to example. The pedagogical value of example is currently being re-discovered after the failure of the methods which make exclusive use of lecture and discussion.

Blessed Josemaría does not claim that example alone matters, but rather that example must be put in the *first* place. Afterwards, words, clear and intelligible words that really reach the listener, must also be used. This requires the capability of adapting oneself to one’s hearers, the *gift of tongues*²⁴. For parents, this means putting themselves at the level of understanding of their children when it comes to correcting them or explaining something to them. Escrivá also asks teachers for an authentic self-giving for love of their students: “Teacher: may you be eager to make your pupils understand quickly what has cost you hours of study to see clearly”²⁵.

²² Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 28.

²³ *Conversations*, 102.

²⁴ Cfr. *The Forge*, 634, 895.

²⁵ *Furrow*, 229.

In addition to speaking intelligibly, educators need the *capacity to understand*, a disposition to understand young people and to recognise what is valid in their arguments before correcting or giving commands²⁶. Being understanding and demanding, as Bernal says, are two aspects of the same spirit of charity shown by Blessed Josemaría²⁷. Both aspects converge and are united in his pedagogy.

Word and example, understanding and exigency are pillars of the *haven of peace* that every Christian home should be, in which “in spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice”²⁸. According to Escrivá, this atmosphere of peace is “a necessary condition for a deep and effective education”²⁹. After seeing the ravages caused by divorce and the effects of family disunity on the lives of children, we can perhaps now recognise the depth of the truth of this statement. Unfortunately, it is no longer the case that the united family is ‘the normal thing’ as Escrivá said in 1968³⁰. His urgent warnings are therefore even more relevant today than they were then.

Only an educator and teacher who is well-educated and who seeks to continue his or her education can live in the manner advocated by Escrivá³¹. He sees ignorance as a great enemy because it involves a risk of defending and spreading ideas which are very far from being consistent with the truth³². Acquiring and guaranteeing this education is not easy in the age of mass media. It requires first of all the capacity of distinguishing between good and bad advisors, and then of seeking advice from the former. Escrivá never doubted that *the* good advisor is the Church.

To accomplish this, parents must dedicate a lot of time and effort. Escrivá establishes clear priorities: children are more important than business, work and rest³³.

²⁶ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 27.

²⁷ S. BERNAL, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá...*, cit., p. 281.

²⁸ *Christ is passing by*, 22.

²⁹ *Conversations*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 101.

³¹ Cfr. *Furrow*, 272, 538.

³² *Ibidem*, 346.

³³ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 27.

b) The Potential of Personal Freedom and Responsibility

In the framework of the first perspective of education, we will consider the pedagogical affirmations of Blessed Josemaría which in principle are applicable to all educators, Christian or non-Christian. In this we are conscious that, for Christians, there can be no separation between these two perspectives of education in the pedagogical thought of Escrivá.

Respect for the dignity of the whole person signifies respect for the dignity of the child and the adolescent. This means trusting each one personally, because each one is a unique creature of God. In this way Escrivá prescribes a *special recipe* for each child and not one for all of them together³⁴. From this respect for the personality of the young person, Escrivá advises *trusting* children and believing what they say even though they may at times mislead the educator³⁵. It seems to him to be better to run the risk of an abuse of confidence rather than to deprive someone of the credit that he or she deserves as a child of God³⁶. Teenagers respond to such confidence with sincerity³⁷. Parents and teachers should therefore not be frightened “when they are told the whole truth”³⁸.

Escrivá was aware that young people need to learn how to use their gift of personal *freedom* responsibly. In order to do this they need both good guidance and personal space in which to exercise their freedom³⁹.

Educators should respect the freedom of children; they should not impose any way of acting, since — as Escrivá says — there is no real education without personal responsibility, nor responsibility without freedom. “Imposing things by force, in an authoritarian manner, is not the right way to teach”⁴⁰. As Blessed Josemaría says, “if they have no freedom, if they see that no one trusts them, they will always be inclined to deceive their parents”⁴¹. In other words, they seek a hidden *space of freedom* which could be dangerous and involve lying.

Parents do not need to renounce their legitimate authority in order to allow their children to be free. On the contrary, they need to make clear demands on their children, open new perspectives to them with their personal advice, encourage them to reflect and to judge based on objective considerations, and to

³⁴ Cfr. S. BERNAL, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá...*, cit., p. 275.

³⁵ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 29.

³⁶ Cfr. *Friends of God*, 159.

³⁷ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 29.

³⁸ *Furrow*, 336.

³⁹ Cfr. *Conversations*, 100.

⁴⁰ *Christ is passing by*, 27.

⁴¹ *Conversations*, 100.

ask other people for advice when appropriate. “Advice does not take away freedom. It gives elements on which to judge and thus enlarges the possibilities of choice and ensures that decisions are not taken on the basis of irrational factors. After hearing the opinions of others and taking everything into consideration, there comes a moment in which a choice has to be made and then no one has the right to force a young person’s freedom”⁴². According to Escrivá, coercion is never appropriate, even when the young person has made a decision that the parents have good reason to believe is mistaken or unfortunate. Parents should rather delicately pull back so that the great good of freedom is not compromised, and should “stand by their child so as to help him overcome the difficulties and, if necessary, draw all the benefit possible from an unfortunate situation”⁴³.

The considerations of Escrivá regarding to the *rebellion* of children highlight the fact that he applied his pedagogical considerations not only to the major decisions in life but also to *little* everyday situations. What advice does Escrivá give to educators? He advises them first of all not to be afraid, and then to remember that they were also rebellious at that age: “Go to meet them half-way and pray for them”⁴⁴. It is up to parents to make things easier for them by being able to adapt with ‘joyful serenity’, to understand, and to avoid possible conflicts with ‘intelligent love’. Escrivá knew that it was natural that young people and adults tended to look at things differently. “We all felt a tendency to rebel against our elders when we began to form our own judgement autonomously”⁴⁵. “You should respect those who are capable of saying No to you. And you should also ask them to give you reasons for their refusal, so that you can learn — or put them right”⁴⁶.

The concept of education in freedom and responsibility reaches its high point in the advice of Escrivá to parents to become friends of their children; that is to say, friends to whom they can confide their concerns, to whom they can go with their problems and from whom they can expect help⁴⁷. This means that parents have to be able to remain ‘young at heart’ and in this way more easily understand the concerns and even the extravagance of youth. It is not worth worrying about something that is merely a question of a different way of living. “On more than one occasion conflicts may arise because importance is attached to petty differences which could be overcome with a little common sense and good humour”⁴⁸.

⁴² *Conversations*, 104.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 104.

⁴⁴ *Christ is passing by*, 29.

⁴⁵ *Conversations*, 100.

⁴⁶ *Furrow*, 425.

⁴⁷ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 29.

⁴⁸ *Conversations*, 100.

Up until now it has been above all a matter of *understanding* and *advising*. One who wants to learn how to be responsible for oneself also needs *demands* that serve as challenges. Children should — according to their age — have some responsibilities in the family as well as fulfilling their duties at school. They should learn how to work, to do things in the best possible way, to fill their time with useful occupations, to find time to serve others, and to be punctual, orderly and joyful in little things. They need to be able to count on the example of their parents in all of these things⁴⁹.

One must accept that there will inevitably be mistakes⁵⁰. But what happens when one does not fulfil one's duties or when they are not properly completed, when behaviour is objectively reprehensible? One must certainly be understanding, appeal to reason, offer guidance and to ask oneself if what was asked was reasonable⁵¹. In any case, avoiding problems is no solution since problems do not go away by ignoring them or by violence⁵². It is preferable for parents and educators to get annoyed with things that are objectively wrong. But, as Escrivá says, it should only last for a short time and there should always be charity and affection⁵³. It is necessary, at times, for educators to correct clearly and energetically, but never in a bad temper. They should help the person being corrected to see where and how he or she can improve⁵⁴.

In this way, understanding, exigency and correction form a unity in Escrivá's concept of education in responsible freedom.

c) Help to Progress Towards Sanctity

For a Christian, education is both a human and a Christian task. Consequently, all that has been said from the first perspective about education also applies to the second. Nevertheless, education here acquires a broader and deeper scope: in the responsibility before God and in the responsibility of introducing the child or the youth into the life of faith, helping him or her to recognise sanctity as the meaning of life. This religious education begins when the young child learns to pray in the family, following the example of his or her parents, in morning and evening prayers, grace at meals and the family Rosary. And all of this with-

⁴⁹ Cfr. *Conversations*, 104.

⁵⁰ Cfr. *Furrow*, 402.

⁵¹ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 17.

⁵² Cfr. *Furrow*, 157.

⁵³ Cfr. *ibidem*, 821.

⁵⁴ Cfr. *ibidem*, 822.

out being *sanctimonious*. When the family practices its faith with naturalness, the children understand that God is not a stranger that they visit once a week at Church, but rather that He can be found within the family⁵⁵. This clearly reflects the thought of Escrivá about unity of life. Blessed Josemaría understood that the family is the appropriate place for children to start to learn about liturgical feast days, the holy sacraments and the lives of the saints, through word and example and through religious images and books for children. This important apostolic task can only be accomplished by the parents when they “can communicate their love of God to their children, which is something more than just teaching them”⁵⁶.

The life of faith of convinced parents and educators is what can give the most encouragement to young people and what can keep them firm in their faith and able to overcome possible crises. While this has always been the case, it is even more so now in our secular-pluralistic society, in which it is not easy for a young person to admit to being a Christian and to really live as such. The ones who have the support of their parents and teachers will surely be more capable of living their entire lives for the love of God and all humanity: work, rest, friendship, hobbies. All will be done with a new outlook⁵⁷.

Escrivá’s insistence on avoiding coercion is especially important in the field of education in the faith and Christian life. Even though it may be painful for believing parents to see their maturing child growing farther away from God, prayer and the Church, it is advisable for them to seek dialogue with their children, to try to understand them, to offer guidance, and to help them to deal with their issues, while respecting their freedom. Each individual has to carry out the task of his or her own development, in which the faith of a child practised naturally comes to reveal itself in a consciously taken decision to follow Christ in His Church. This task is often difficult. And even with the young person who chooses to live his or her life in a way that is contrary to the faith, coercion is still never a legitimate option.

Parents and educators are not alone. The most important thing for them is that they *pray* for their children: “You Christian mothers and fathers are a great spiritual motor, sending the strength of God to your own ones, strength for that struggle, strength to win, strength to be saints. Don’t let them down!”⁵⁸.

Drawing on his experience as a priest and a shepherd of souls, Blessed Josemaría says that this task consisted in “helping each person to face up to all the

⁵⁵ Cfr. *Conversations*, 102.

⁵⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 103.

⁵⁷ Cfr. *ibidem*, 100.

⁵⁸ *The Forge*, 692.

demands of his life and to discover what God wants from him in particular — without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience”⁵⁹. This is especially true for parents in the ‘shepherding’ of the souls of their own children. We also find unity between understanding, demanding, correcting and praying in religious education.

Escrivá saw clearly that what parents do for the education of their children should not be limited only to their own families. Rather, they should act in the public sphere: above all in the school, so that the education given there is truly complete, and also Christian if they are Christians⁶⁰. They should also try to make the kingdom of God present in politics and in the media — although this is not easy — above all when it comes to issues relating to education, culture and the family⁶¹.

In conclusion, I would like to recall something which Escrivá strongly advised to all, and therefore also to those who have responsibilities in the field of education: that they be flexible: “We should indeed respect things that are old, and be grateful for them. Learn from them by all means, and bear in mind those past experiences, too. But let us not exaggerate; everything has its own time and place. Do we now dress in doublet and hose or wear powdered wigs on our heads?”⁶².

Here the circle is completed with the idea of continual formation, of understanding young people in their context and of having the gift of tongues in the broad meaning of the expression. In a period where time moves quickly, what is essential is to always find new ways to ‘say’ what has always been true, in ways that will be intelligible to young people. This is true for spoken language, for the way of relating with others, for customs that are always changing, and for ways of reaching young people. Escrivá is certainly not referring here to a pragmatic adaptation — which is clear from the context — but rather of not placing obstacles in the path of the young person on his or her way towards responsible freedom and towards sanctity: one has to put away the ‘powdered wig’. This seems to me to be wise advice.

⁵⁹ *Christ is passing by*, 99.

⁶⁰ Cfr. *Conversations*, 81.

⁶¹ Cfr. *Furrow*, 310.

⁶² Cfr. *ibidem*, 950.