

The Personalism and Universalism of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá: their Meaning for Russia Today

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The Spirit, sent by the Son at the behest of the Father, called Blessed Josemaría Escrivá to the profound sense of divine sonship that distinguished not only his teaching, but his character and deeds as well.

The perception of God as a loving and compassionate father precludes the possibility of making God into an instrument of human passions and ambitions. It reorients the teaching of the Church away from threats and towards the bright and joyful promise of the Father of Heaven. From this derives both the boundless optimism of Escrivá and the spirituality of Opus Dei.

This explains the sincere charm of the man, his happiness (despite profound suffering), his constant good humor (“true sanctity should be joyful”), and the unusual naturalness of his actions. From this derived his rejection of all hypocrisy and prudishness. It also explains how readers of his works are invariably touched by his happiness and freedom and feel that they have taken a transforming plunge into the “rivers of living water”, of which the Gospel speaks.

The Founder of Opus Dei had the audacity to look at people with deep, divinely inspired love and compassion, and see them through the eyes of the Heavenly Father. He became the father of all who set out with Christ on the new trail to holiness he blazed on earth. It is fitting that the Founder’s spiritual children, by divine inspiration, inscribed his gravestone with a single word: Father.

Members of Opus Dei — Catholics — are not the only ones who have experienced the fatherhood of Blessed Escrivá. So have people of other faiths. Tatiana Goricheva, an Orthodox writer well known in the West, observes: “The Russian people are exhausted but they have not been crushed. For them, there remains only one authority — the *starsi* [ed., elders of the Orthodox Church]. They come to us as fathers; as fathers they save us, strengthen us, show us the way and infect us with their joy. In Josemaría Escrivá, whom I met and whose books I have read, I found the same spirit, and strength and love. He addressed his

works to those who thirst for intimate fellowship. In Josemaría Escrivá, I found a true authority that neither oppresses nor enslaves, but inspires and ignites love. In him I found Fatherhood”¹. These lines show that the personality and deeds of Blessed Josemaría can be embraced and understood by people everywhere, regardless of nationality and religious affiliation.

1. THE PERSONALISM OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

One of the great misfortunes of modern Church thinking is a distorted understanding of humility, which Blessed Escrivá characterized in one of his writings in this way: “Some people, out of a lack of lay consciousness, understand humility to mean indecisiveness, and a refusal to exercise individual rights. Humility, to which the Work of God calls its children, is the result of constant communion with the Lord and contemplation of God. It is the profound experience and awareness that He, the Father, achieves everything through us, who are imperfect instruments in His hands”². Aleksandr Zorin, the contemporary Russian poet and publicist, maintains: “Humility in our language has long since taken on a derisory tone. Escrivá restores the word to its original meaning, rooted in the Biblical story. Humility is the awareness of one’s smallness before God, but not before people and events. It has no use for vanity and helps us to find our place in life”³.

In this consists the authentic Christian worldview of the free, responsible individual in communion with a personal God and striving to fulfill His will in all the circumstances of life. The necessary (if insufficient) condition of the individual’s encounter with God is man’s encounter with himself. As Escrivá wrote: “The sound of words is not necessary; we must shed the cloak of anonymity and put ourselves in God’s presence, just as we are”⁴. If we do not, no encounter with God is possible, and we come to rely instead on all sorts of substitutes: the meaningless repetition of words, gestures and actions. God became man so that man could enter into vibrant friendship with Him, as with a father, brother, or companion.

We must recognize that the Father not only loves us without limits, but also that he values us highly. In His eyes, nothing is more precious than man. This is why he was “ransomed at a great price” (1 Corinthians 6,20), the price of the blood of Christ and His torment on the cross. This awareness awakens in the human heart deep gratitude towards, and a straightforward love of the Savior.

¹ T. GORICHEVA, *A spiritual leader for our time*, “How they saw him”, Madrid 1992, p. 106.

² *Letter*, 6.05.1931.

³ A. ZORIN, *Tri vstrechi*, “Druzba narodov”, Moscow 1996.

⁴ *Friends of God*, 64.

Such gratitude and love are the source of true piety. The word piety, *blago-chestie* in Russian, or *dobryi strakh* [trans.: a good fear], is synonymous with love. It comes not from fear of punishment, but of causing distress to a beloved Father. Such a fear gives rise to a natural striving to achieve perfection, and to efforts to understand and fulfill the will of God, so as to be worthy of His endless mercy. Indeed these things — an active love of God, “faith, acting with love” (Galatians 5,6) — are the down payment on salvation. In this way, man forms himself under the loving gaze of the Creator, in the life-giving breath of the Spirit of God. The main task of the Church, as Father Escrivá understood it, is to instill in man such a spontaneous and vibrant dialogue with God.

The Christian anthropology is rooted in God’s “presumptive mercy” (“mercy triumphs over judgement” (James 2,13), and the “presumption of innocence” of the children of God, and of all people of good will. It is rooted in the notion that the whole of creation is pleasing to God. “And behold, it was good” (Genesis 1,31). The Russian consciousness, by contrast, has long tended to presume the sinfulness of all natural, human actions, as well as of the world as a whole: “The whole world is in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5,19).

The presumption of substantial evil in creation and in people makes men ruthless in their dealings with the world around them. Father Escrivá addresses this in his sermon “Christian Respect for the Human Person and His Freedom”: “It seems some people wear glasses that distort their vision. They reject the very possibility of a virtuous life, or, at least, of a desire to struggle for it. Everything they take in is colored by their own previous deformation”. Saint Augustine offers this piece of advice: “Try to acquire those qualities, which, in your opinion, are lacking in your brothers, and then you will no longer see them, because you yourself will have them”⁵.

Mistrust of people and hatred of the world turn into mistrust and hatred not only of what is alien, but also of what is properly yours, not only of those you scarcely know, but also of those who are close to you, and indeed of you yourself. V. V. Rozanov, the eminent thinker and writer of the “silver age” of Russian culture, observed that the Russian condemns himself to hell. By way of illustrating this thought, I would like to refer to a letter from a Muscovite friend of mine. The special value of the letter lies in the fact that it was written by someone recently of the provinces, someone with a fresh, sincere and simple view of things like the hero of Voltaire’s *Candide*. Here is a slightly abridged version of his cry from the heart: “In the West, Christian values are at least to some extent embodied in the social system, but what’s it like here? The icon and the axe?. How is it that Lyudmilla [ed., the wife of the letter’s author] could not cross Nagornii Street because of the flood of traffic after waiting 10 minutes (!!!) at the pedestrian crossing?

⁵ *Christ is Passing By*, 67-68.

Every third car (if not more) had the Orthodox prayer “Spare us from accidents!” on the dashboard. Could it be that there are no Orthodox drivers? What has become of our Orthodox spirituality? In daily life, I hardly ever see it (only now and then, or I just read about it)”. These lines express an abstracted, dreamy Orthodoxy derived from books; the deep, organic vice of traditional ecclesiastical consciousness. The antithesis of this perception can be found in the definition of Orthodoxy offered by N. Glubovskii, the outstanding Russian exegete, for whom Orthodoxy is *life according to the Gospel*: indeed it is life, life lived according to the Gospel, and not, as a great many Christians uncomprehendingly believe, a heart-felt sentimentality and devotion to an imaginary “orthodoxy,” that constitutes true Orthodoxy. It is nothing other than the sanctification of every moment of existence.

Our priority must be an interior striving to do the work of God on earth, rather than the perpetuation of a clerical establishment. This can, however, only be done in an atmosphere of respect for the dignity of the human person. Unfortunately for us in Russia, a “personal nihilism” that belittles the individual often prevails. But if the individual is suppressed, who will answer the Savior’s call to sanctification and divinization?

Being reconciled in Christ with the world, people must free themselves of the constant “pretensions of liars” (1 Timothy 4,2) and their distorted view of the world, and begin to look at creation with unbiased eyes: “When your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light” (Luke 11, 34). Nothing is impure in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Romans 14, 14). It is hard to imagine a more radical shift in emphasis from forced anonymity to a worldview based on the freedom of the individual.

2. THE UNIVERSALISM OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

The Christian’s calling to freedom and responsibility in all human endeavours that are worthy in the eyes of God was of critical importance to Blessed Escrivá. As Gustave Thibon, the contemporary French philosopher, writes about the Work of God: “The Christian’s active participation in secular life manifests itself in the first instance in the sanctification of professional work, eliminating the contradiction between work and prayer, the mundane and the sacred. The border between these two worlds is not an objective fact that can be felt and seen, but rather passes through the soul. Ordinary things can be sanctified if one relates to them in a loving way. Holy things, unfortunately, can also be profaned when they become entangled with our baseness and hypocrisy, as happens when people practice a piety that is cut off from the world and exists for its own sake: for the pure — purity, for the impure — impurity. It is appalling that the things that occupy one-third of a person’s life are often condemned by those who call us to be ‘perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect’. We have no right to turn our

professional work, the sure path to our perfection, into a blind alley. In working in the proper spirit, we fill the void between the eternal and the mundane. A woman once complained to Saint Catherine of Siena that she was so busy with her daily chores that she did not have time to attend to the things of God. Saint Catherine replied: 'We all have daily chores to do in as much as everything in our lives proceeds from the will of God'. All of this is summarized in the words of Saint Paul: *Make the most of time*. (Ephesians 5, 16). There is no such thing as time for work and time for prayer. Father Escrivá, the apostle of unity of life, calls us not to 'dissolve' God into the world, but rather to 'imprint' the world in God"⁶.

Until the beginning of the 20th century in Russia, monasticism was seen as the only way to salvation. Monasticism arose out of the deep conviction of human impotence and imperfection. It arose from a proper awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling God's commandments in living by the laws of "this world", but proved deaf to the call of Christ that we be "in the world", but "not of the world". Here is what the prominent church historian A. Kartashev wrote in his *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*: "Monasticism is a formal establishment. In itself, there is nothing transcendently Christian about it; it is nothing more than a means of personal salvation... The monastic way of salvation begins with the notion that man's condition is helpless, and holds out against the temptations inherent in life. It is literally a way of fleeing from the world into the desert"⁷.

Undoubtedly, monks played a positive role in the development of ecclesiastical asceticism, apologetics and education. But as Vladimir Soloviev wrote, "The time has come not to flee the world, but to go into the world so as to transfigure it"⁸. These words remain relevant in a world marked by the uncontrolled development of high technology and revolutionary advances in the field of genetics. These trends pose fundamentally new problems, and seem to lend credence to the prediction, often advanced by materialists, that traditional forms of religion are dying out.

Now, at the outset of the third millennium, believers must rally to the banner of Christian materialism and contemplation in the middle of the world, raised so prophetically by Blessed Escrivá. It is time to recall the eternally relevant words of Saint Paul: "The ancient has passed; now all is new" (2 Corinthians 1, 17). Completing a turn in the historical cycle, Christianity is again returning to its historical roots.

⁶ G. THIBON, *A Christian in the middle of the world*, "How they saw him", Madrid 1992, p. 207-208.

⁷ A. KARTASHEV, *Essays on the History of the Russian Church*, Vol. 1, Paris 1959, p. 226.

⁸ V. SOLOVIEV, *Letters*, III, p. 89.

The genuine good news consists in emerging, like the Savior, from the heavenly realm into the earthly, carrying His light to the entire world. We must love this task, which, as Blessed Escrivá maintained, “only seems to us to be earthly”, with the love of Christ. We must learn to see God not only under the dome of a church, but also under the vault of a heaven not made by human hands. We must see him in all the new strivings of man — in modern technology, and in social and cultural problems. Indeed, Escrivá spoke of these things when he met with students of the University of Navarra in 1968: “Your sincere encouragement, your prayers, sacrifices and contributions are not offered on the basis of Catholic confessionism. Your cooperation is a clear testimony of a mature civic consciousness, which is concerned with the common temporal good”⁹. We must actively experience and constantly fulfill the living will of God, rather than succumb to the false pride of the Pharisees, under the appearance of humility.

Russian history and culture give many examples of effective lay spirituality. Sal'tykov-Schedrin, the merciless Russian satirist, provides this brilliant and revealing example: “The most important thing I got out of the Gospel is that it sowed in my heart a human conscience and called forth from the depths of my being something stable, some new, interior ‘thing,’ thanks to which my prevailing way of life no longer enslaved me. This ‘thing’ that suddenly stirred within me kept reminding me that others possess its equivalent. And, with the awakening of this thought, I found myself transported to certain new realities against my will, to places where violated and tortured human beings were suffocating.” In stark contrast to such an authentic understanding of Christian vocation is “a prudish asceticism, that places one’s own soul at the center of everything, seeks to save it, and fences it off from the world in a private realm created by spiritual egocentrism”¹⁰.

The universalism of Blessed Escrivá can be defined in a single word — secularity. “If secularism”, observed Garegin I, Catholicos of All Armenia, “appreciates the value of all aspects of earthly human activity as well as the essential sacred things, then one of its forerunners was Jesus Christ. In His teaching, we find no opposition of the sacred to the worldly in as much as all manifestations of human life were for Him of equal importance”¹¹. Although Garegin I uses the word “secularism,” it seems to us that in the current circumstances it would be more to the point to speak of “secularity.”

Inherent in the founding of the Work of God is the idea that Christian perfection is achieved through lay mentality, avoiding the clericalism Escrivá so strongly opposed. Secularity is authentic lay self-awareness. God does not call us to become what we are not. On the contrary, we can encounter God only by first

⁹ *Conversations*, 120.

¹⁰ MOTHER MARIA, *Varieties of religious life*, “Vestnik PKhD”, Moscow, June 1998, p. 43.

¹¹ D. GUAYTA, *The life of a man: A Meeting between Heaven and Earth*, Moscow 1999, p. 194.

finding ourselves. Rather than do exceptionally “Christian” things, believers should do the most ordinary things for the glory of God, for in Christ Himself are unified, inseparably and organically, the divine and the human.

We know from the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles that Christianity took root much more easily in secular soil than in a milieu that could be described as traditional and marked by Hebraic religious concepts and practices. The frequent criticisms of Jews we often come across in the Gospel of Saint John are expressions of anti-clericalism rather than anti-Semitism. The efforts of the early Christians to expose the defects of the scribes and Pharisees took place amidst a general conviction that these religious institutions were divinely established.

The roots of clericalism are to be found not in the doings of God, but in the thoughts of men. Nevertheless, very often the priest remains, in the expression of Blessed Escrivá, “the salt in every dish”. Blessed Escrivá sharply protested any manifestation of clericalism, maintaining that, according to Cardinal Albino Luciani, the future Pope John Paul I, “there is theological justification for a necessary ‘anti-clericalism’”. The founder of Opus Dei was convinced that laymen should not take on the role and appearance of priests, and, by the same token, priests should not concern themselves with things that relate exclusively to the competence of laymen”¹².

3. THE ECUMENICAL POTENTIAL OF THE TEACHING OF BLESSED ESCRIVÁ

Not only is the teaching of Blessed Escrivá relevant for Russia today, but it also provides a sound basis for the letter and spirit of authentic Orthodoxy. It instills hope for the unity of the Church of Christ.

The sincere desire for Christian unity finds a firm basis and takes on clear contours in the various works of Blessed Escrivá and the exponents of the Russian religious renaissance of the early 20th century. We must have the courage to assert that the Russian religious philosophers’ development of a concept of “Christian culture” based on the legacy of the Fathers of the Church, and the understanding of the Work of God proposed by Blessed Escrivá, are to a great extent synonymous.

Father Pavel Florenskii considered reluctance to create a Christian culture to be a rejection of Christianity itself: “Humanity today needs a Christian culture, not a sham version of it, but a serious, sincere one, truly Christian and truly culture. In any case, we are all required to sincerely determine for ourselves if we

¹² W. KEENAN, *The Nature and spirit of Opus Dei*, Moscow 1995.

want this and consider it possible. If not, then there is no point in speaking of Christianity and getting lost and causing others to go astray in a fog of unrealizable hopes... It is not a question of renouncing the things that make the various Churches unique; Christians must, above all, raise the banner of Christianity, and appeal to the self-awareness of the Christian world and the building of a Christian culture, and the flock of Christ will gather around it”¹³.

We find ideas in harmony with this notion in the works of V. Soloviev, C. Bulgakov, N. Berdiaev and a host of other Russian philosophers and theologians. It was perhaps A. I. Il'in, the outstanding 20th century Russian thinker, who came closer than any of his compatriots to anticipating the most essential ideas of Opus Dei. The thoughts he expresses in his *Foundations of Christian Culture* are strikingly similar to those expressed by the founder of Opus Dei: “The spirit of Christianity leads men to turn to God in heaven and to carry out His work on earth. This work of God on earth becomes the Substance of man’s life of service. His very life and work thus become materialized. Christianity carries within it this spirit of Christian materiality in its approach to human culture — in family life, in education, in military service, in society, in economic activity, in politics, in art and in science. And the sham Christian, who, according to the Russian proverb, ‘looks to heaven, but fumbles about on earth’, is worthy neither of his faith nor his calling... Living and working in the spirit of Christian materialism is a gift to and a legacy for human culture... Whoever is faithful to this spirit, lives it, and creates in accordance with it, is already Christ, even if he does not know it or does not acknowledge it. For ‘everyone who does right is born of Him’ (1 John 2, 29). To create Christian culture means to open one’s heart fully to the Spirit of Christ, to take a contemplative approach to God and God’s world, and to carry out, freely, responsibly and with great determination, His work on earth. The contemplative man of action is called to instill the Christian spirit in all that he undertakes to do: in science, in art, in family life, in education, in politics, in military service, in work, in social and economic life. Such a man will create Christian culture. But for this to happen, he must, of course, embrace God’s world, live *in* it, and breathe its spirit”¹⁴. For Il'in, this dynamic worldview is part and parcel of true Orthodoxy.

If the views expressed by the authors cited above coincide, it is not because they shared in the same church tradition, but because they all “walked in the light” of Christ, and placed themselves in the presence of the “living God” who alone enables an authentic, Christian “fellowship with one another” (1 John 1,7). Only those who live such a spiritual unity can confess “with one voice and one heart” the unerring, Orthodox truth of Christ.

¹³ P. FLORENSKIJ, *Christianity and culture*, Moscow 1983, p. 53-57.

¹⁴ A. I. IL'IN, *The Foundations of Christian culture*, Munich 1990, p. 25-26.