

The World and the Human Condition in St. Josemaría Escrivá: Christian Keys to a Philosophy of the Social Sciences

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Abstract: This study explores some aspects of the teachings of St. Josemaría that, in the author's opinion, illuminate from a theological perspective topics dealt with by modern social thought: hope, worldliness, liberation, religion and culture, work, responsibility for the created world, citizenship, freedom, secularity, formation. These are keys to his preaching that allow us to articulate a vision of Christian existence in the world, as well as a life-related theory of institutions and social change that can enter into dialogue with contemporary thought.

Introduction

To what extent can the teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá be useful for the reflections of a philosopher, whether or not a Christian?

To fully grasp the context of the theological terms and concepts used by St. Josemaría to spread the message of the universal call to holiness, we may require a certain familiarity with the tradition of Christian thought in which he himself was formed. Nevertheless, the fact that people from a wide variety of human and educational backgrounds do not find any special difficulty in grasping the challenge presented by his message, suggests that the kind of familiarity needed is not necessarily achieved by a lot of study and erudition.

His preaching however is clearly relevant for new, specifically modern topics considered especially by the philosophy of the last two centuries: the world, work, time, history, vocation, culture, freedom, citizenship, unity of life... All of these concerns are closely related to what Heidegger¹ and Hannah Arendt² have called a “theory of secularity,” and in the preaching and life of St. Josemaría they are found articulated with unusual clarity and depth. This can be for us an invitation to consider how his message relates to philosophical and sociological reflections on these questions—an invitation that is especially timely today when, from a philosophical and sociological point of view, religion is again coming into the foreground.³

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper, 2009.

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

3. See Hans Joas & Klaus Wiegandt (eds), *Secularization and the World Religions*, Liverpool

I am very aware that the methodological restrictions of contemporary social philosophy (often not incorporating strong anthropological presuppositions, which are always suspected of expressing particular points of view) could act as a deterrent when it comes to recognizing in the life and work of a Catholic priest contributions relevant to philosophical discourse.

However, to the extent that religious convictions, without losing their specific nature,⁴ incorporate cognitive contents, these limitations found in contemporary social philosophy can be overcome. This is especially so when the current philosophical and social discourse itself is mainly concerned with diagnosing the social pathologies stemming from experiences of oppression and injustice by ordinary people, far from the demands of consistency and erudition of theoretical discourses often linked to elitist positions.⁵ This concern, which aims to restore ethical legitimacy to ways of speaking that are often very abstract, could lead to the recognition of the relevance of a message that is welcomed by people of very diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and that for all of them becomes an eminently positive way of confronting oppression in very different forms. That this is fundamentally a religious message should not pose a problem, as long as the content of that message is articulated in a comprehensible manner that does not involve any confusion between what is known and what is believed

But is it really legitimate to approach the texts and life of Josemaría Escrivá with the effort to identify the philosophical themes implicit in them, while ignoring the theological issues they raise? Moreover, is it even possible to do so? And what interest could this effort have? In what follows, I will directly address the first two questions. I think the best way to show the scope and limits of an endeavor of this kind is by putting it into practice. And certainly, as I pointed out earlier, unravelling the philosophical themes implicit in an author, who by no means intended to carry out philosophy, requires some familiarity with the sources and perspective from which he writes, which in this case are theological. But what sense does it make to discuss theology in order to make explicit the philosophical dimensions of a body of thought? Isn't this nonsensical? Doesn't it mean completely reversing the medieval dictum, and making

University Press, Liverpool, 2009. See Colin Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2007.

4. As Hans Joas observes, religious convictions are distinguished from purely rational arguments because they incorporate elements that deeply affect one's identity. Therefore they do not conform to the same parameters that govern purely intellectual discussions. However, that does not mean that they are exempt from all rational criticism. A clear way of talking about faith and setting out its contents is needed, in order to analyze them and make them understandable, without intellectualizing them. See Hans Joas, "Einleitung," in *Was sind religiöse Überzeugungen?* [What are Religious Convictions] Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2003, pp. 9-17.

5. See Axel Honneth, *La Sociedad del Desprecio* [The Society of Contempt], Trotta, Madrid, 2011, pp. 63-73.

theology an *ancilla philosophiae*? Worse still, doesn't it mean degrading a spiritual message, which in form and content is strongly focused on daily life, to the status of just one more theory, exposing it to the fate of any other theory?

Not in my opinion. Since, in my view, the preaching and life of St. Josemaría Escrivá entail a special way of being in the world, which does justice harmoniously to the various human dimensions, going deeper into that message, making explicit the thematic content contained there and placing it into relation with contemporary philosophical and sociological thought, can be of interest to these human sciences, and more generally to all those who seek to understand the structure and dynamism of human life in the world. Moreover, isn't it only logical to expect that preaching aimed at stressing the sanctifying value of secular realities would have something to say to the human sciences that deal with those same secular realities?

2. A constitutive tension

In first place, at the heart of St. Josemaría's message on sanctifying ordinary realities we find the exhortation to "be of the world without being worldly."⁶ This phrase gives voice to a tension that any philosopher who reflects on the human condition has to confront if one doesn't want to unduly simplify the content of human experience. Throughout history, philosophers have expressed, consciously or unconsciously, this constitutive tension of human experience in quite different ways: as a compromise between contemplation and action (Aristotle); as a conflict between morality and happiness (Kant); as a discrepancy between long-term interests and short-term ones (Hume⁷), or between authentic and inauthentic existence (Heidegger). These and other tensions simply express a trait derived from our finite nature, which I like to call, metaphorically, our "constitutive wound." This has nothing to do with the original fault, but rather is related to the opening to the infinite possible by our rationality. Thanks to this, the human being is both "horizon and limit" —in the expression of Thomas Aquinas⁸— a frontier being, in the words of Simmel,⁹ irreducible to a unique function (Jaspers), but capable of transcendence.

It is precisely in this "constitutive tension" defining our condition as

6. St. Josemaría, *The Way: Critical-historical edition*, prepared by Pedro Rodríguez, Scepter, London – New York, 2009, no. 939.

7. Despite the psychological immanentism that marks his work ("We never really advance a step beyond ourselves." *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part II, Section VI), Hume reflects this tension in the practical order.

8. "*Et inde est quod anima intellectualis dicitur esse quasi quidam horizon et confinium corporeorum et incorporeorum, inquantum est substantia incorporea, corporis tamen forma.*" Thomas Aquinas, *ScG*, lib. 2 ch. 68 no. 6

9. Man is the frontier being that has no borders." See George Simmel, "Bridge and door," in *The Individual and Freedom. Essays on the critique of culture*, Península editions, Barcelona, 2001, pp. 45-53, p. 53.

rational creatures where hope takes shape:¹⁰ a hope that can take on different forms, depending on how deeply this wound is seen as being. Thus the hope fueled by utopian thinking is undoubtedly very different from that nourished by the Christian faith, just as its vision of human dignity is less elevated.¹¹ For St. Josemaría, human identity is defined by our status as children of God.¹² And the hope that stems from the realization of this filiation¹³ is a hope that, to the extent that one experiences the reality of sin, seen as a forgetfulness in daily life of God,¹⁴ is a hope of a redemption that also embraces the world.¹⁵ For as St. John says, we are already children of God, but what we will be has not yet been manifested (see *1 Jn* 3:2). And in the meantime, the world remains subject to vanity (see *Rom* 8:20).

This world that awaits the manifestation of the children of God (*Rom* 8:19)¹⁶ is subject to a vanity that is not the result of one man's action, but of

10. The tension that Aristotle perceives between complete happiness (which is purely contemplative) and "human" happiness (a mixture of contemplation and action) is reinterpreted by St. Thomas as perfect and imperfect happiness. Rationality brings with it the possibility of opening oneself to the gift of God: first of all, the gift of divine filiation. See *S. Th.*I.II.q. 5, a. 5, ad 1, where Thomas Aquinas asks: can man achieve happiness by his natural abilities? And he answers no, saying, however, that he can nevertheless turn to God to receive happiness from him. The interesting thing is that in order to argue this point, he quotes Aristotle: "What we can do for our friends is as if we could do it for ourselves" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 3, 1112b 27-28).

11. See Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, especially nos. 20-30.

12. "Do not forget: anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself. When he acts he lacks the dominion and self-mastery we find in those who love our Lord above all else." St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 26. See Ernst Burkhardt - Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de teología espiritual, vol. II*, Rialp, Madrid, 2011, p. 3.

13. On awareness of one's divine filiation in St. Josemaría, see Ernst Burkhardt - Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de teología espiritual, vol. II*, p. 3.

14. This can be related to the frequent exhortation of St. Josemaría to avoid routine in one's life of piety. Avoiding routine means seeking a personal relationship, not a formal one, with God. It is a way of preventing what Heidegger would call an "inauthentic" life where the impersonal "self" takes control of our life. Heidegger refers to this precisely in terms of a "fall" (See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, & 38).

15. "Once we recognize the insignificant and contingent nature of our earthly endeavors, the way is then open for true hope, a hope which upgrades all human work and turns it into a meeting point with God . . . But if we transform our temporal projects into ends in themselves and blot out from our horizon our eternal dwelling place and the end for which we have been created, which is to love and praise the Lord and then to possess him forever in Heaven, then our most brilliant endeavors turn traitor, and can even become a means of degrading our fellow creatures . . . Only those things that bear the imprint of God can display the indelible sign of eternity and have lasting value. Therefore, far from separating me from the things of this earth, hope draws me closer to these realities in a new way, a Christian way, which seeks to discover in everything the relation between our fallen nature and God, our Creator and Redeemer." *Friends of God*, no. 208.

16. See St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 1: "We are children of God, bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed.

The Lord uses us as torches, to make that light shine out. Much depends on us; if we

many individuals.¹⁷ What is the content of this vanity? In the end, it is the fact that human beings live enclosed in themselves, which gives rise in society to self-referential structures, opaque to transcendence.¹⁸ How relevant, in this sense, are the words of Pope Francis, when he warns us of the need to overcome set ways of acting and think about other models of development.¹⁹ The redemption of the world involves the transformation of these self-referential structures, fostering a way of life, both individual and collective, that is animated at its root by a different principle. “We have to work a lot on this earth and we must do our work well, since it is our daily tasks that we have to sanctify. But let us never forget to do everything for his sake. If we were to do it for ourselves, out of pride, we would produce nothing but leaves, and no matter how luxuriant they were, neither God nor our fellow men would find any good in them.”²⁰

As St. Augustine said, the love of self even to contempt of God is the founding principle of the earthly city; this is opposed to a very different city founded on love for God even to contempt of self. The message of St. Josemaría doesn’t focus on either contempt of self, nor of the world, but on the possibility of fostering a different appreciation of self and the world, an appreciation that refers to the approving gaze with which God contemplated his creation,²¹ and that is again made possible for us after the redemption brought about by Christ. What St. Josemaría offers is a positive vision of the world and human realities,²² which ultimately stems from the awareness of our divine filiation. Here we find, for St. Josemaría,

respond many people will remain in darkness no longer, but will walk instead along paths that lead to eternal life.”

17. This idea finds an echo in modern reflections on the origin of culture. Specifically, we can see a connection with the observation of Kant—and earlier with that of Rousseau—according to which the “vices of culture” are especially linked to the unfolding of social life (see Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 6:27).

18. “Many things, whether they be material, technical, economic, social, political or cultural, when left to themselves, or left in the hands of those who lack the light of the faith, become formidable obstacles to the supernatural life. They form a sort of closed preserve that is hostile to the Church.

“You, as a Christian and, perhaps, as a research worker, writer, scientist, politician or laborer, have the duty to sanctify those things. Remember that the whole universe—as the Apostle says—is groaning as in the pangs of labor, awaiting the liberation of the children of God.” See St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 311.

19. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, nos. 43, 49, 191, 194.

20. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 202.

21. “I have taught this constantly using words from holy Scripture. The world is not evil, because it has come from God’s hands, because it is his creation, because ‘Yahweh looked upon it and saw that it was good’ (cf. *Gen* 1:7 ff). We ourselves, mankind, make it evil and ugly with our sins and infidelities. Have no doubt: any kind of evasion of the honest realities of daily life is for you, men and women of the world, something opposed to the will of God.” St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 114. (*Edición crítico-histórica preparada bajo la dirección de Jose Luis Illanes*, Rialp, Madrid, 2012).

22. See José Luis Illanes, *Existencia cristiana y mundo. Jalones para una reflexión teológica sobre el Opus Dei*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2003.

the key to confronting the constitutive tension of human existence.

All human realities, from the most spiritual to the most material, are free from vanity where, freed from inauthentic “routine,”²³ men and women live for God, as his sons and daughters, and not for the world, as its slaves. Then they can raise all these realities—their world—to a higher destiny, freeing them, with the freedom of the children of God: “It is understandable that the Apostle should write: ‘All things are yours, you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s’ (1 Cor 3:22-23). We have here an ascending movement which the Holy Spirit, poured into our hearts, wants to call forth from the world, upwards to the glory of God. And to make it clear that everything in daily life is included here, even what seems most commonplace, St. Paul also wrote: ‘in eating, in drinking, do everything as for God’s glory’ (see 1 Cor 10:32).”²⁴

This upward movement recapitulating all things in Christ is forcefully expressed in a sentence that appears in various places in St. Josemaría’s writings: “There are only two ways of living on earth: either one lives a supernatural life or an animal life.”²⁵

This is a radical way of speaking, which at first glance seems to overlook the theoretical possibility of an intermediate human life between animal and supernatural life. However, we see here how St. Josemaría is addressing man in his real existence, who is never just a natural man, firmly set in what has already been achieved, but always in tension towards something more. And his message is that the value of what is human and the beauty of the world is preserved only when man lives for something higher than himself, in accord with God’s gift.

Formulated in these terms, this view is not entirely out of keeping with philosophical tradition. Aristotle already exhorted us to “not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but . . . so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with what is most divine in us” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7). While Kant in turn, after setting the limits to the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, sees the need to refer to the ideals of reason, even as regulative ideals of our experience, without which everything, science included, would be

23. See note 14.

24. St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 115.

25. “Let us try to become more humble. For only a truly humble faith will allow us to see things from a supernatural point of view. We have no other alternative. There are only two possible ways of living on this earth: either we live a supernatural life, or else an animal life.” St. Josemaría, “Life of Faith,” *Friends of God*, no. 200. “Let us never forget that for all men, and therefore for each and every one of us, there are only two ways of living on this earth: either we lead a divine life, striving to please God; or we set him aside and live an animal-like existence, guided to a greater or lesser degree by human enlightenment.” St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 206.

deprived of meaning.²⁶ Hence striving to live exclusively according to human criteria drawn from our poor everyday experience, is not only human, but “too human” (not in the sense of Nietzsche, but in that of Aristotle).²⁷

As Pascal points out, human experience entails some form of self-transcendence, which means that there is a self-limitation contrary to the dynamism of human life, because this self-transcendence claims to be an expression of the possibility of something greater than what our daily life usually entails. Aristotle viewed this “more” as a contemplative life that, in its perfect expression, was always out of human reach, and was a privilege of the gods. In any case, for him, this contemplative and divine way of living would seem to shelter man from the vicissitudes of human life. Modern philosophy has not generally continued along these lines. Rather it has accepted, at most, intra-worldly forms of transcendence, accessible in art or moral concerns.

In contrast, in a radically religious message such as that of St. Josemaría, the exhortation to lead a contemplative life and, in this sense, to live “above the human,” including those intra-worldly forms of transcendence, becomes surprisingly radical—not as any simply natural “self-transcendence,” nor according to any kind of simply human ideal of “contemplation,” but as an invitation to receive the gift of God. Thus “being a Christian means rising above petty objectives of personal prestige and ambition and even possibly nobler aims, like philanthropy and compassion for the misfortunes of others. It means setting our mind and heart on reaching the fullness of love which Jesus Christ showed by dying for us.”²⁸

Implicit here is a special, strictly Christian way of conceiving the temporal dimension of existence. St. Josemaría refers frequently to the text of St. Paul: “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (2 Cor 5:14), to illuminate the deep meaning that, for the Christian, the “good use of time involves. “A whole lifetime would be little, to expand the frontiers of your charity.”²⁹

26. “The final goal to which the speculation of reason ultimately points in its transcendental use refers to three objects: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God.” (See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 797/B825; A 798/B826).

27. Indeed, for Nietzsche the “too human” refers to the need for another as reference for the will, while for Aristotle it would be “too human” —merely human—to give up cultivating the most divine element in us. Thus he says: “It is unworthy of man not to seek out the science offered to him” (*Metaphysics I*, 982 b30) —although it be a science as divine as metaphysics. And in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as already mentioned, while recognizing that the contemplative life exceeds human strength, he argues that “we must not have, as some advise us, human thoughts since we are men, nor mortal thoughts because we are mortal, but to the extent possible we should strive to immortalize ourselves and do all in our power to live according to the most excellent that there is in us” (*Nicomachean Ethics X*, 7, 1177 b 32-35).

28. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 98.

29. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 43.

This conception of temporality, imbued with the urgency of charity, brings with it important and specific consequences for one's daily life.³⁰ It means viewing one's ordinary life as above all correspondence to God's love manifested in Christ, and therefore striving for an active detachment from oneself, helping to free creation from the vanity to which it has been subjected by sin. "Being contemplatives" and "sanctifying earthly realities" are activities proper to the children of God that are open to all men and women without exception, because they are not grounded simply on the possibilities of human nature, but on the supernatural gift of God.³¹

Therefore the exhortation to live a supernatural life does not mean advocating philosophical contemplation only for a privileged few; nor is it an expression of heroic virtue produced by purely human effort. Rather it aims to live in the world as children of God, in Christ, with the hopeful conviction that by living this way, accepting humbly the gift of God, and corresponding to him with all one's strength, redemption, the liberation of the world, is brought about.

3. The radical unity of worship and culture

Implicit in the above is a specifically Christian way of understanding culture, or rather, the original connection —today often forgotten— between worship and culture. It is true that St. Josemaría's explicit use of the term "culture" is closer to the classical and modern meaning (culture as something cultivated, as a civilization³²) than the more contemporary one (culture as an expression of subjectivity, as a way of life of a people, expressed in shared norms and symbols).³³ Nevertheless, both senses are deeply intertwined in his message. For at the core of every culture there is cult, in the sense of worship. However, while in non-Christian religions that cult revolved around sacrificial

30. For example, Christians have to be diligent; he or she should not have "preoccupations" but only "occupations," which is also a way to abandon oneself to divine Providence. They need to organize their time so that they can calmly and serenely carry out their duties (including to rest), and assist their brothers and sisters, which involves having a schedule.

31. See Pedro Rodríguez, *Vocación, trabajo, contemplación*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1986.

32. St. Josemaría speaks clearly of the fact that culture is a means and not an end (see *The Way*, no. 345). But he also speaks of "making the day into a Mass" (Notes taken from his preaching, March 19, 1968, cited in Javier Echevarría, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Madrid 2010, p. 17). Thus we can see the relationship between worship (cult) and culture. He also comments on one occasion on the text from *Rom* 12 where St. Paul speaks of "rational worship." Culture is thus a means and symbol, but detached from the cult that gives it meaning, it ends up fragmenting into a thousand pieces. To highlight the continuity with modern themes, I will point out that the explicit use that Kant makes of the term "culture" is above all that of a "perfection," and, more generally, that of mediation, in which its symbolic element can be intuited (see Ana Marta González, *Culture as mediation. Kant on nature, culture, and morality*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlag, 2011, p. 361).

33. See Ana Marta González, "Cultura y civilización," in Ángel Luis González (ed.), *Diccionario de Filosofía*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2010, pp. 265-268.

rites, through which men showed their dependence on the divinity, in Christianity it is God himself who offers himself in sacrifice for men, to rescue them from evil and make them sharers in his own Life. And it is precisely this sacrifice that is called to become the center and root of a new culture, in which there is no room for more victims, and in which therefore a properly political space can emerge, not hijacked by “victimist” discourses.³⁴

More radically, that sacrificial act, revealing at the same time God’s love for man and the value of man in God’s eyes, makes Christians a single people, with a specific mission in the world, because it is the source of that other worship “in spirit and in truth” (*Jn* 4:23), whose protagonists are all Christians who, moved by the sacrifice of God in Christ, aspire to infuse the same spirit of Christ into all human activities. This is directly linked to St. Josemaría’s exhortation to sanctify all earthly realities, cultivating them according to their own logic and in conformity with and in prolongation of Eucharistic worship.³⁵ All this entails the great importance of striving to acquire the virtues required by our place in the world, as well as professional rigor and competence.

The message of the sanctification of earthly realities invites us to deepen in the fact that the connection between worship and culture (already pointed to in the words of Genesis where it is said that man was created *ut operaretur*, to work,³⁶) finds effective realization in ordinary life, when moral practice and the whole of social life are nourished by the experience of the Eucharistic mystery. Of course, that connection also takes place where the rigor of the intellectual work of each field of knowledge remains open to a sapiential horizon, which finds its final meaning in the search for God. It seems significant to me, however, that while recognizing the unique role of intellectuals in the configuration of culture, when it comes to focusing on the specific question of the sanctification of these tasks, St. Josemaría refers to them indiscriminately also as “work,” pointing out that the unity between faith and science, which the Christian recognizes as possible as a matter of principle, is not often easily achieved, without “hard work.”³⁷

34. See Ana Marta González, “La víctima del destino. Ensayo sobre un tipo de nuestro tiempo,” in Lourdes Flamarique and Madalena D’Oliveira-Martins (eds.), *Emociones y estilos de vida. Radiografía de nuestro tiempo*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2013, pp. 157-177.

35. See Cruz González-Ayesta, “Work as ‘a Mass’: Reflections on the Laity’s Participation in the *Munus Sacerdotale* in the Writings of the Founder of Opus Dei,” in *Romana*, no. 50. (2010), pages 192-206.

36. “As I have been preaching since 1928, work is not a curse; nor is it a punishment for sin. Genesis had already spoken about the fact of work before ever Adam rebelled against God (see *Gen* 2:15). According to Our Lord’s plans work was to be a permanent feature of man who, through work, would cooperate in the immense task of creation.” St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 81.

37. “If the world has come from God, if he has created man in his image and likeness and given him a spark of divine light, the task of our intellect should be to uncover the divine meaning imbedded in all things by their nature, even if this can be attained only by dint of hard work. And with the light of faith, we also can perceive their supernatural purpose, resulting from the

Human work is thus the fundamental category St. Josemaría makes use of to channel the worship that the Christian is called to pay to God in the midst of the world, precisely at the same time that he or she is creating culture. In fact, that rational worship, pleasing to God, contains implicitly the search for truth, theoretical and practical, as an intrinsic requirement of a job well done: “*Veritatem facientes in caritate*” (Eph 4:15). And thus the worship by which the Christian pays tribute to God grounds his or her “unity of life,”³⁸ and also ultimately the unity of culture.³⁹

4. The extraordinary in the ordinary

Thus the awareness that our deepest identity is our identity as children of God, was for St. Josemaría a source of hope that does not nullify the ordinary process—natural and historical, cultural and social—by which any person, in their specific “place” in life, acquires their own personality, with its characteristic features and loyalties. But, at the same time, the awareness of one’s divine filiation can guide this process in a higher direction, which leads to a deep feeling of solidarity with all men and women and responsibility for all creation: “What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfillment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God. While still on earth he has glimpses of God’s love and comes to recognize it as the goal to which all men on earth are called.”⁴⁰

That such considerations are only possible from the viewpoint of faith does not make them totally alien or irrelevant to philosophical reflection. For

elevation of the natural order to the higher order of grace. We can never be afraid of developing human knowledge, because all intellectual effort, if it is serious, is aimed at truth. And Christ has said, ‘I am the truth.’

“The Christian must have a hunger to know. Everything, from the most abstract knowledge to manual techniques, can and should lead to God. For there is no human undertaking which cannot be sanctified, which cannot be an opportunity to sanctify ourselves and to cooperate with God in the sanctification of the people with whom we work . . . To work in this way is to pray. To study thus is likewise prayer. Research done with this spirit is prayer too . . . Any honorable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul develops a unity of life, which is both simple and strong.” St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 10.

38. Ibid.

39. It has sometimes been pointed out that this concept—unity of life—is one of St. Josemaría’s most original contributions to the ascetic vocabulary. However, I would like to stress that this contribution far transcends the ascetic plane, from the moment we see it projected on the horizon of culture. For a panoramic view of this concept, see Ignacio Celaya, subject heading “Unity of life,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.) *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo-Historical Institute San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, Burgos-Rome, 2015 (3rd ed) pp.1217-1223.

40. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.

philosophy the possibility of a life built on these convictions is enough to affirm that another world is possible and achievable, a world that, with the strength of the spirit, is willing to fight without rest the banality of a mediocre existence, redeeming time and challenging the “reification” of the structures that are the enemy of our person and freedom,⁴¹ from the very interior of those structures.

Moreover “sharing with all one’s strength in the vicissitudes and problems of human history,” as St. Josemaría points out, means going beyond an accurate diagnosis of the problems that we find in our world; it means feeling personally challenged by these problems, and seeing, with new depth, the enormous transforming potential of human work, when animated by an authentically Christian spirit, a spirit of service that, as Pope Francis insists, is deployed for the benefit of others, especially the most needy.⁴² The key to this challenge is offered by the much-cited point 301 of *The Way*: “A secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of men ‘of his own’ in every human activity. Then... ‘*pax Christi in regno Christi*’—the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.”⁴³ This point expresses St. Josemaría’s confidence in the transforming force of freedom in history, when it opens itself to the action of God in one’s life. It also reflects, as Pedro Rodríguez observes in his commentary on this point, a vision of holiness and interior life “in strict and internal relationship with ‘human activity,’ with the problems of human society.” This invites us to reflect explicitly on what St. Josemaría once referred to as “Christian materialism” and which, in his own words, “is boldly opposed to that materialism which is blind to the spirit,⁴⁴ as well as to disembodied spiritualisms. Thus “Christian materialism” is, for St. Josemaría, a direct consequence of faith in the Incarnation of the Word. For this mystery contains the message that the world and history are not impervious to the manifestation of God, nor opaque to his presence. On the contrary, we can speak of a solidarity of destiny between the world and man, which does not endanger man’s reference to God. But the commensurability between the subject and the world is not perfect; the world is not correlative to human consciousness; it is also space for the manifestation and revelation of God, as well as space for human acts that have God, and not the world, as their ultimate goal.

Here we find another crucial aspect of the message of St. Josemaría: the appreciation for contingency as the privileged place for the manifestation of

41. The concept of “reification,” initially introduced by Luckacs as a tool for the critical analysis of culture, has recently been revived by Axel Honneth. See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A Study in the Theory of Recognition*, Katz, Buenos Aires, 2007, pp.136-137.

42. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 187 and 193.

43. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 301. See the explanation offered by Pedro Rodríguez in his critical edition, where the close connection with *Jn* 12:32 is noted along with the proper way to interpret the reference to the “Kingdom of Christ.”

44. St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 115.

God, precisely because it is there, in that space of contingency, where man exercises his freedom. Both things are contained in St. Josemaría's invitation to find the *quid divinum*⁴⁵ in daily life. This is not just a pious recommendation, but an indication of the *kairós*, the opportunity and the value of the present moment, in which the presence of God becomes material and in some way visible. Doing well the things that we have in our hands is not only an ethical requirement, stemming from our position in human society, but a specific opportunity that is offered to us to correspond to the gift of God and to “materialize” his presence in the world, making clear the transforming power of ordinary life.

Recognizing the transcendent horizon that the exercise of our freedom opens up in carrying out the most varied tasks, is part of the perfection of human life. Precisely because human affairs are subject to many contingencies, their perfection cannot be attained through rigid and pre-fixed channels, but rather it has to be entrusted to the responsible discernment of those involved. Thus trust in the responsibility of individuals, which leads them to seek in each case for the answers that they consider best in conscience, is an inseparable aspect of the appreciation of secular realities, which St. Josemaría had especially present in his priestly work: “I have always seen my work as a priest and shepherd of souls as being aimed at helping each person to face up to all the 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. This way of acting and this spirit are based on respect for the transcendence of revealed truth and on love for the freedom of the human person. I might add that they are also based on a realization that history is undetermined and open to a variety of human options—all of which God respects.”⁴⁶

5. A “vital” theory of institutions and social change

That same certainty of the indeterminacy of history explains another aspect that I see implicit in his way of facing secular realities and that, in the absence of a better expression, I would describe as a “vital” theory of institutions and social change.

Without a doubt, the very fact that he focuses the response to global crises on holiness, speaks to us first of all about the priority of the life of the spirit.⁴⁷

45. “Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.” St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 114.

46. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.

47. See Leonardo Polo, “*El concepto de vida en Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*,” *Anuario*

But, as we pointed out above, this should not be understood in a “spiritualist” sense. The spiritual life, as he understands it, leads to involvement in secular realities in order to redeem them, which brings with it the endeavor to foster a more human world. Undoubtedly, this involves a negative moment, that of identifying inhuman situations. Normally St. Josemaría invites us to face these situations in the first person, with personal responsibility and “trying to drown evil in an abundance of good.” He urges us to cover over deficiencies and multiply the initiatives that reorient the possibilities implicit in the situation in need of improvement.

The key to all growth and development is found in “formation”: a formation that helps each person to take advantage of the talents received, and to become protagonists of their own progress and that of the world around them. Central here is work that is well done. The criteria with which he has encouraged innumerable health care and educational initiatives around the world reveal a professional way of fostering the practical development of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, as well as a keen perception of the way in which work and a sense of human dignity are related.

However, the priority given to personal formation, and hence in some way to culture, does not mean that the structural aspects in society are ignored. St. Josemaría is aware that, in the social order, the development of the human realm to a large extent depends on the quality of institutions and the organization of work. He is far from advocating a static vision of the social order; quite the opposite, he warns in many ways that life precedes the norm, that the norm is at the service of the spirit, and that, on the level of action, one needs prudent foresight, but without trusting exclusively to organization.

To illustrate the importance he attaches to sound institutions for social life, we can refer to *Conversations*. Responding to a question about the politicization of the university, the founder of Opus Dei notes that, where institutional channels for the exercise of political freedom are lacking, legitimate human aspirations are channeled in other ways and the risk exists of denaturing the university.⁴⁸ From this answer, I think, we can deduce the need to have a

Filosofico, 1985, vol. XVIII, 2, pp. 9-32.

48. “If in a country there was not the slightest political freedom, there might be a distortion of the university that, ceasing to be a common home, would become a battlefield of opposing factions. I think, however, that it would be preferable to dedicate those years to a serious preparation, to form a social mentality, so that those who then are in charge—those who are now studying—do not fall into that aversion to personal freedom, which is truly pathological. If the university becomes a place where concrete political problems are debated and decided, it is easy to miss the academic serenity and have students formed in a spirit of partisanship; in that way, the University and the country will always be dragged into that chronic evil of totalitarianism, of whatever kind it may be.” St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, nos. 77a and b.

specifically political sphere, a sphere where citizens can speak out and participate in proposing solutions for the problems that refer to the common good. Something similar could be said about the economy. While recognizing the legitimate autonomy of economic activity,⁴⁹ St. Josemaría points to its instrumental character,⁵⁰ stressing that “apostolic works never fail to go forward because of lack of means; they fail to go forward because of a lack of spirit.”⁵¹

In any case, recognizing the role of institutions in the configuration of the social order is far removed from a hyper-institutionalization⁵² that would drown out spontaneity in life and in initiatives fostering freedom. In the end, institutions are born as a requirement of man’s social nature, to shape the inclinations we experience towards certain goods, and to shape also the socializing impulse itself. But this assumes that life takes the lead in opening up the path, as Simmel says,⁵³ seeking to provide a framework for the development of safe social bonds.⁵⁴

In this regard (the formation of safe bonds that foster trust and a climate of freedom), St. Josemaría offers valuable suggestions. His preaching and life make it abundantly clear how institutional norms and guidelines make sense to the extent that they further the expression and development of the spirit.⁵⁵

In any case, the need we experience to organize our life socially, explains

49. See Meeting with Business People at IESE, Barcelona November 27, 1972. Some quotes from this encounter are included in Javier Echevarría, “Directing companies with a Christian meaning,” in *IESE Alumni Review*, no. 87, September 2002, pp. 12-13.

50. In guiding these works, he stressed the need to combine responsibility (seeking economic help, etc.) and poverty (caring for the instruments) with magnanimity and trust in Providence: “Spend what you need to, although what you spend is owed.” [A play on words in Spanish “*Se gasta lo que se deba, aunque se deba lo que se gasta.*”]

51. Notes taken at a family gathering, May 16, 1960, cited in Javier Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, February 1, 2006.

52. I take this term from Axel Honneth, *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010.

53. See Georg Simmel, *Intuición de la vida. Cuatro capítulos de metafísica*, Altamira, Buenos Aires, 2001.

54. For a theory about the distinction between safe and insecure social links see Thomas J. Scheff, *Emotions, the Social Bond, and Human Reality, Part/Whole Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

55. I think this is shown in a striking way in how he focuses the relationship between sexuality, maturity in love, and personality development. When speaking about sexuality, St. Josemaría often says that this question usually doesn’t occupy first place in a person’s concerns. And when it is presented, it should be seen in relation with attaining maturity in a person’s love. What at the beginning is only an impulse, a feeling, has to become a freely chosen love and pass the test of time to become true love for another person. This vision, which is in no way exclusively Christian (cf. Karl Jaspers, *Ambiente espiritual de nuestro tiempo*, Labor, Barcelona, 1933, p. 186), forms the moral core of the institution of marriage. With its requirement of reciprocal fidelity, it expresses the specific quality of mature human love, enabling it to grow in human depth until reaching the totality of the person.

how institutional crises can often give rise to disorder in the goods they protect, as well as to a loss of meaning in the corresponding human relationships.⁵⁶ This situation can easily result in conservative reactions, in which the risk exists of confusing the moral order and the social conventions that have long helped to preserve it. These crises can also be a sign of cultural sclerosis; the institution has crystallized in a set cultural form that does not do justice to the dynamism and ever new demands of life. Although here the opposite danger also exists: seeing the need for change can lead to an eagerness to adapt social forms to the times, without careful discernment of important human goods.

That is why the theory of institutions has to be complemented with a theory of social and cultural change, which takes into account the ambiguous quality of the liminal periods,⁵⁷ of cultural transition, and remains alert to identify in each case the goods that are at stake and the best way to preserve them. In this sense, it is possible to argue that human nature itself has a “liminal” character,⁵⁸ of which rites of passage and periods of cultural transition are a reflection. Precisely because the Christian message is addressed to all men and women, without “respect of persons,”⁵⁹ this message is particularly relevant in moments when the security of convention seems to be breaking down and people are questioning themselves in their uncertainty. The Gospel is addressed to all mankind, without discrimination,⁶⁰ and it asks of everyone conversion; a conversion that asks each person to freely set aside false securities, which are ordinarily associated with life in this world. For as St. Paul writes to the Corinthians. The appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those

56. This is clear in the case of political and economic institutions. When confidence in institutions decays, individuals close in on themselves and renounce far-reaching projects. Something similar also happens in other fields. Thus the deregulation of affective-sexual life, not only harms the development of the personality, hindering the maturing of personal love, but indirectly introduces into social life a factor of uncertainty that distorts the development of normal human relationships of friendship, trust, etc., with the consequent impoverishment of social and professional life.

57. See Victor Turner, “*Entre lo uno y lo otro: el periodo liminar en los rites de passage*,” in *La selva de los símbolos, Siglo XXI*, Madrid, 1980, pp. 103-123.

58. In this regard, see Karl Jaspers, *Ambiente espiritual de nuestro tiempo*, p. 175.

59. “A son of God cannot entertain class prejudice, for he is interested in the problems of all men. And he tries to help solve them with the justice and charity of our Redeemer. The Apostle already pointed it out when he wrote that the Lord is no respecter of persons. I have not hesitated to translate his words thus: there is only one race of men, the race of the children of God.” St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 303.

60. See *Gal 3:27-29*, *1 Cor 12:13*, *Rom 10:12*. “The Apostle wrote that ‘there is no more Gentile and Jew, no more circumcised and uncircumcised; no one is barbarian or Scythian, no one is a slave or a free man; there is nothing but Christ in any of us.’ Those words are as valid today as they were then. Before the Lord there is no difference of nation, race, class, state... Each one of us has been born in Christ to be a new creature, a son of God. We are all brothers, and we have to behave fraternally towards one another.” St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 317.

who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away (*1 Cor 7:29-31*).

I think these words describe a specific way of being in the world that coincides exactly with the radical demand of which St. Josemaría is a spokesman when he exhorts us “to live in the world without being worldly,” that is, without allowing the events of the world, regardless of how sad or joyful they may be, to determine the fundamental orientation of our life.⁶¹ Certainly, St. Josemaría has not provided us with theoretical reflections on the specific way to conduct ourselves in periods of transition; but he has left us something more eloquent, his way of behaving during the civil war he experienced in his own life.⁶² We see him living in a provisional situation as if it were not provisional: holding to a self-imposed plan, taking advantage of time, preparing for a humanly uncertain future, attentive to seeking God’s will at all times.⁶³ For him nothing is provisional; in the present moment we have at stake everything that is truly important in life.

From this emerges a unique way of facing the temporal dimension of life, with an urgency that is born of charity, and that leads in practice to the virtue of diligence.⁶⁴ “Taking good advantage of time” is implicitly a constructive way of focusing the question of social change, precisely through work, with which a person builds up both his or her own life and the world.

St. Josemaría’s conception of work —of sanctified work— as a source of progress and social cohesion makes his vision of society and institutions deeply dynamic: a dynamism that is linked to man’s action in the world, in the course of which he not only discovers new paths, but first of all, he forges himself. Hence St. Josemaría can be said to have a “vital” theory of institutions — one that is related to real life. Institutions find their starting

61. I don’t want to fail to point out the relationship between this conviction and the importance that St. Josemaría gives to a seemingly minor topic such as fashion. Far from reducing this issue to simply a moral question (as was frequent among some Fathers of the Church), I think he was very aware that right discernment in this area is closely related to ways of correctly understanding secularity: how to be of the world without being worldly.

62. War is characteristically one of the periods that can be designated as “liminal.” See Victor Turner, “*Entre lo uno y lo otro: el periodo liminar en los rites de passage*,” in *La selva de los símbolos*, p. 105.

63. See Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei, vol. II*, Rialp, Madrid, 2002, pp. 62-124. See St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 697.

64. Diligence leads to using one’s time well and calmly fulfilling the duties of one’s own state in life, and helping those who are overburdened in their work. See St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, nos. 41 and 44

point in life, and have to be measured in reference to the demands of life — in ultimate terms, the life of the spirit— and not simply in reference to any human conventions, customs, or traditions. For the spiritual life of human beings in the world is expressed in work.

It is true there is nothing new in seeing work as a source of social progress and change. To a large extent, modern philosophy and social theory have noticed the connection between the division of labor and social progress. St. Josemaría's special contribution, however, resides in rescuing a theological vision of work, rooted in the Bible, that does not reduce human work to its active dimension in transforming the world.⁶⁵ Rather work is closely tied to contemplation: "Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love."⁶⁶ Love for God and neighbor is the source from which the dignifying power of work flows, and therefore any theory of social change open to the action of the Spirit in history, in often surprising ways, must start there.

St. Josemaría is not a social revolutionary. His message can be related to the classical authors in social theory who, in different ways, have recognized professional work as the privileged ethical enclave of modern societies.⁶⁷ However, a spiritual message like his will certainly have practical repercussions regarding the shaping of lifestyles.

While finding the dignity of human work in the love with which it is carried out, St. Josemaría does not say anything specific about the social recognition received by different kinds of work. Once love is viewed as the key to the dignity of work, social forms of valuation are relativized, and the advance towards social recognition of every kind of honest human work becomes unstoppable. I am thinking, for example, of the specific case —dear to St. Josemaría's heart— of the recognition of the dignity of domestic work. As Axel Honneth points out from the viewpoint of critical theory, the question of the relationship between work and recognition is being debated today on a society-wide level.⁶⁸

65. The possibility of discovering a truly human meaning in work is also pointed out by Jaspers in *Ambiente espiritual de nuestro tiempo*, p. 186. But in the writings of St. Josemaría, this vision is raised to a much higher level.

66. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, n. 48.

67. For a discussion of the views of Weber and Durkheim on this question, see Fernando Múgica, *La profesión: enclave ético de la moderna sociedad diferenciada*, Notebooks on Business and Humanism, University of Navarra, 1998.

68. "From the historical point of view, the fact that bringing up young children and domestic chores have not been valued up to now as perfectly valid types of work in society can only be explained with reference to the social disdain that has been shown within the framework of a culture determined by male values. From the psychological point of view, this also leads to the fact that, under the traditional distribution of roles, women can count on few possibilities to find in society the degree of social recognition that forms the necessary condition for a positive self-definition." Axel Honneth, *La sociedad del desprecio*, pp. 143-144.

More generally, we can say that the message of sanctifying work brings with it an increasingly vivid awareness of the importance of work in human life, not only on the individual level but also in society as a whole. This awareness can lead to a wide variety of initiatives, especially those aimed at promoting decent conditions of life and work for all men and women. In this context, I would like to quote a passage from the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis warns of a possible misinterpretation of the message of sanctifying work: “No one should say that he stays away from the poor because his life choices involve paying more attention to other issues. This is a frequent excuse in academic, business, professional, and even ecclesial circles. While it can be said in general that the vocation and the proper mission of the lay faithful is the transformation of the different earthly realities so that all human activity is transformed by the Gospel, no one can feel exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice.”⁶⁹

If we understand work in all its human depth, that is, not only as a factor in personal improvement but as structuring the social order, work will be seen in all its dimensions; not simply as a place for individual “self-realization,” but as a platform from which to deploy, in all its breadth and depth, human and Christian concern for others and for the social conditions that make their development possible.

As we have already seen above, work for St. Josemaría “is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love.”⁷⁰ Here lies its greatest dignity. And precisely because he sees the source of human dignity in the freedom to love God, he does not hesitate to present himself as a “rebel”⁷¹ and to describe religion as “the greatest rebellion of man, who refuses to be a beast.” Therefore, when the need arose, he could also speak in a legitimate, holy, way of rebelliousness, when what is at stake is the freedom of consciences, the freedom that determines the destiny of every human being. The freedom by which men and women pay tribute to their Creator cannot be subjected to any human authority. Hence his refusal to interpret religion, the demands of the human spirit, through the lens of simply political categories. When once asked about the role of fundamentalist and progressive tendencies in the life of the Church at the end of the Second Vatican Council, he answered: “As regards the tendencies which you call ‘integrist’ and ‘progressive,’ I find it difficult to give an opinion on the role which they can play at the present moment, because I have

69. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 201.

70. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 48.

71. The rebellion against whatever dwarfs the human spirit, in the name of nobility understood as authenticity, is a theme often present in existentialist philosophers (see Karl Jaspers, *Spiritual environment of our time*, p. 189). But the authenticity that Jaspers thinks he finds in “philosophical life” is found by St. Josemaría in holiness, in the fullness of divine filiation that is nothing other than identification with Jesus Christ.

always rejected the suitability and even the possibility of making classifications or simplifications of this sort. This division is, at times, taken to great extremes and perpetuated as if theologians (and the faithful in general) were destined always to be circling these opposite poles. As far as I can see, it seems to derive ultimately from the belief that progress in the doctrine and in the life of the People of God is the result of a perpetual dialectical tension. I, on the other hand, prefer to believe wholeheartedly in the action of the Holy Spirit, who breathes where he will and upon whom he will.”⁷²

St. Josemaría was always attentive to signs of God’s providential action. Perhaps that is why he was so often able to rise above the prejudices of his own day and age. For example, we can mention here his positive view of the role of women and their co-responsibility with men in constructing culture.⁷³ I think that in this question, which today seems almost common sense, St. Josemaría was able to overcome the inertia and conventions of his time simply because he let himself be guided by the Spirit of God.⁷⁴

If we remember that this was often not the case even with the most eminent philosophers, who remained subject to the inertia of their time, we will understand why the saint is particularly intriguing for philosophers. He shows them their own limitations, and a different way of transcending them.

72. St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 23.

73. For St. Josemaría, women are first of all daughters of God, called, like men, to assume freely and responsibly the direction of their lives before God, and to find self-fulfillment in the gift of self out of love along the various paths of human life (marriage, apostolic celibacy, etc.). He also stresses the need for women to acquire a sound education and training, and their human dignity in being able to take up and develop a professional vocation and participate in public life.

74. See Mercedes Montero, “*El papel de la mujer en la sociedad democrática. Edición crítica de Conversaciones con monseñor Escrivá de Balaguer*,” *Nuestro Tiempo*, vol. LVIII, no. 677, (2012), pp. 92–95.