

THE IDEA OF FRIENDSHIP AND EVANGELIZATION IN IN THE TEACHING OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA (III)

Michael Kirke

The founder of the Opus Dei Prelature, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá – the centenary of whose birth we celebrate this year – spoke of human friendship as the ideal context in which ordinary Christians bring themselves and others to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the faith. In the third and final article on the subject of friendship, Michael Kirke looks at the parallels between this idea and those of C.S. Lewis on the subject.

FOR EVERYONE familiar with the spirituality which the founder of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, identified as appropriate for the ordinary Christian living and working in a busy modern world, the ideas of C.S. Lewis on human friendship which we looked at in the first two articles on this topic will resonate with many echoes.

The central Christian idea in the teaching of the founder of Opus Dei which is emphasised as the single most important reality affecting all of humanity is that each human being on earth is destined to be a son or daughter of God and that each baptised Christian is, by virtue of that very sacrament, just that, a son or daughter of God. From that truth all else follows, not least the universal call to try to become saints and the identification of all the circumstances of ordinary life – work, family, social relations – as the means, aided by grace and the sacraments, to become such.

But just as he understood clearly that Christ's imperative command "Be you perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect"

applied not just to a handful of disciples but applied to all men for all time, so also he understood that the command to "go forth and teach" also applied to all his followers, to all those whom he called his "friends".

The context in which Blessed Josemaría saw Christians fulfilling this had to be as ordinary and as natural as the work they did and the circumstances in which they lived out their lives. It had to be exercised through the family, the workplace and the social environment in which each one moved. It should normally be devoid of any extraordinary manifestations which might set it apart from ordinary life. That is why he constantly spoke of human friendship as the context in which ordinary committed Christians would fulfil this undertaking given them by Christ.

Pope John Paul II – during whose pontificate Opus Dei and its apostolic charism has received its definitive canonical status within the Catholic Church – put it this way when he spoke to the Prelate of Opus Dei and a few

the matter of inspiring each other with their visions and revelations of the truths of our very existence. The scene is that of the two disciples making their way to Emmaus after the trauma of the Crucifixion.

There were two disciples on their way to Emmaus... And there, without any fuss, Jesus appeared to them, and walks with them, his conversation helping to alleviate their tiredness. I can well imagine the scene just as dusk was falling... Jesus joins them as they go along their way. Lord, how great you are, in everything! But you move me even more when you come down to our level, to follow us and to seek us in the hustle and bustle of each day...

The journey ends when they reach the village. The two disciples, who without realising it, have been deeply stirred by the words and love shown by God made Man, are sorry to see him leaving. For Jesus "made as if to go on further."

This Lord of ours never forces himself on us. He wants us to turn to him freely, when we begin to grasp the purity of his Love which he has placed in our souls. We have to hold him back ("they pressed him") and beg him: "Stay with us; it is towards evening, and it is far on in the day, night is coming on."

And Jesus stays. Our eyes are opened, as were those of Cleophas and his companion, when Christ breaks the bread; and, though he vanishes once more from sight, we too will find strength to start out once more – though night is falling – to tell the others about him, because so much joy cannot be kept in one heart alone.

The road to Emmaus: our God has filled this name with sweetness. Now the entire world has become an Emmaus, for the Lord has opened up all the divine paths of the earth.

While Lewis maintained that friendship was one of life's great treasures – and Sacred Scripture says nothing less – he is nevertheless very clear that it was not in the strict sense an end in itself. People who simply want to "make friends" never do, he said.

The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends. When the truthful answer to the question Do you see the same truth? would be I see nothing and I don't care about the truth; I only want a friend, no friendship can arise – though affection of course may.

For Christian friends sharing the vision of Christ – who is the Truth – this is likewise clearly the situation: the bonding element is the Truth and without it – whether it be perceived or valued to a greater or lesser degree at any one time – there can be no real friendship. But with it, that friendship in itself becomes the very means through which deeper and deeper perceptions of the truth can be arrived at. This is the "apostolate of friendship" in which Blessed Josemaría invited us to participate in as the most natural and appropriate means of helping each other along the road to Emmaus. The same applies of course to a Christian who lays the teaching of Christ before a non-Christian.

Lewis, I think, perceived friendship in its truest form as something similar when he spoke of the secret Master of Ceremonies being at work in our "choice" of friends.

It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others. They are no greater than the beauties of a thousand other men; by friendship God opens our eyes to them. They are, like all beau-

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ties, derived from Him, and then in a good friendship, increased by Him through the friendship itself, so that it is His instrument for creating as well as for revealing. At this feast it is He who has spread the board and it is He who has chosen the

guests. It is He, we may dare to hope, who sometimes does, and always should, preside. Let us not reckon without our I lost.

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