
THE LAITY AS SAINTS—The Spirituality of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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On Sunday, 17th May, the Holy Father solemnly declared Josemaría Escrivá, Founder of Opus Dei, as among the blessed in heaven. When in 1928 Josemaría issued his exhortation for all men and women to aspire to sanctity, he was doing no more than proclaiming our Lord's own call issued to all in the Gospels: 'And he said to *all*: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"' (Lk 9:23).

This was addressed indiscriminately to *all* who would follow him, of whatever walk of life. And he gave, again to all, the golden rule for becoming saints: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn 15:5). St Paul elaborates this rule for becoming saints through the nitty-gritty things of daily life: 'whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor 10:31). And more explicitly: 'whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col 3:17).

Almost 40 years after Josemaría's launching of his exhortation, the Church at the Second Vatican Council included in its teaching this call of all indiscriminately to sanctity (cf. *Constitution on the Church* and *Decree on Lay Apostolate*). It was the particular charism of Blessed Josemaría to propagate the Lord's universal call to sanctity and to inspire 75,000 lay people all over the world to respond generously to this call to sanctity as members of Opus Dei.

1. Implications

The implications of this spirituality are most far reaching. While formerly we had come to regard sanctity as enclosed by monastery walls, people gradually began to realize that the Lord was calling all in every walk of life to be saints. Sanctity had, so to speak, its two feet firmly planted on the kitchen floor . . . on the workshop floor . . . on the farm . . . behind the office-desk, the editor's desk,

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in the broadcasting studio . . . in the teacher's or professor's rostrum . . . in the operating theatre . . . at the nurse's station. All of us, of whatever walk in life, are called to be saints. The means of achieving sanctity for each one of us, as St. Paul taught, are through the ordinary everyday circumstances of our daily lives. Blessed Josemaría reminds us that we are to revere these everyday circumstances as the gift of God to bring us to him. Our love of God will transform this into welcome and precious stepping stones to sanctity. Thus the ordinary daily round of our deeds and days becomes a real spiritual treasury. This was the constant theme of our new *Beatus*:

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. . . . There is no other way. Either we learn to find the Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find him. That is why I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the apparently trivial events of life their noble, original meaning. It needs to place them at the service of the Kingdom of God: it needs to spiritualize them. (*Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá*, no. 114).

Thus the challenge to find the Lord, to see the Lord, to serve the Lord, to love the Lord in every littlest circumstance of everyday life becomes the core of the spirituality of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and of Opus Dei. This spirituality evokes in us the practice of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and of all the moral virtues. The particular contribution of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was to centre the universal call to sanctity on our ordinary daily work.

2. Common priesthood of the faithful

Reflecting on the practice of this spirituality we get a glimpse of the vast potential riches unfolded for lay people by participation in the non-ministerial priesthood of Christ. In their ordinary daily work, whether domestic, industrial, professional or social, they can unite themselves to Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. In union with him they can transform their each day's activity into a Mass,

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giving God the Father 'all honour and glory' (*Eucharistic Prayers*).

In particular in union with his priesthood the professor or teacher may participate especially in the teaching of Christ the priest; the doctor and the nurse may participate in the healing of Christ the priest; the sick in hospital or at home may, in a most precious way, unite their sufferings with Christ on the Cross, and with him, if they will, they can save the world; those who attend them may, by their motivation, minister at an altar of suffering lovingly offered in union with Calvary. Those most generous ladies whom we so often forget, who generously remain single to care for a needy or an ageing relative, will find in this spirituality riches beyond measure.

And of course, remembering the Lord's thirty years of hidden life at Nazareth, we realize that the preparing of the dinner, the planing of planks, and all such domestic or manual work, as indeed all ways of earning our living, may participate in the common or general priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The institution in which Blessed Josemaría structured all this promotion of the universal call to priesthood is Opus Dei, now raised to the status of a Personal Prelature under the guidance of its Bishop-Prelate, at present Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo. And its some 75,000 members all over the world, in all vocations and walks of life, aspire to sanctity in the circumstances of their daily lives. To help them use the things of the world for the glory of God, they are given the opportunity during holidays every year to study the riches of our faith. From among these lay members, some are called to be priests. A bank-official in the Philippines on the eve of his appointment as bank-manager was so called, and is now an Opus Dei priest.

3. The Cross

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was most anxious to institute some means of spiritual help for diocesan priests, for he had been ordained in 1925 as a diocesan priest himself. This he did in the founding of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross for diocesan priests. A diocesan priest who joins this Society has not joined Opus Dei. A diocesan priest cannot, in fact, become a member of

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the Opus Dei Prelature. As a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, neither his status as diocesan priest, nor his responsibility to his Bishop or to his people is compromised. He merely avails himself of the spiritual help offered in retreats, afternoons of recollection, residential seminars which are served by some of the 1,500 Opus Dei priests.

The title of this Priestly Society is somewhat prophetic in the suffering of criticism and controversy that has arisen over the beatification of Josemaría Escrivá. And yet we can never forget that the Cross is the means of our salvation; that our Lord himself, the greatest Benefactor the human race has ever had, was crucified as a 'malefactor'! And indeed we can already see one of the fruits of the particular cross that Opus Dei has mysteriously been called to bear, in the most amazing news of the 30 Russian converts, students and workers, at present aspiring to the priesthood in Saratov, a town 1,000 miles east of Moscow, three of whom are now studying at the Opus Dei run Faculty of Theology in the University of Navarre.