

ONLY CONNECT

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Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was praised by the Vatican before his beatification as 'a pioneer of the intrinsic unity of Christian life', and this in a century when 'the split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age' (Gaudium et Spes 43). Patrick Gorevan points to the nature and sources of 'unity of life' in Blessed Josemaría's spiritual message.

In his novel *Howards End*, written in 1910, E. M. Forster has a character exclaim: 'Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted.' In 1928 Josemaría Escrivá, a young Spanish priest, founded Opus Dei with a similar aim: to connect the prose of every day with the epic verse of a fully Christian commitment. In this short article I want to look at this aspect of the message entrusted to Blessed Josemaría, with a particular emphasis on this connection, which he began to call 'unity of life'.

This notion is dealt with in a recent book, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei* and subtitled *The History and Defence of a Charism*.¹ The charism was the specific vocation, the light received from God on 2 October 1928, when Blessed Josemaría 'saw' Opus Dei, thus realizing, after a number of years

of prayer, what exactly it was that God wanted of him. The characteristics of what he 'saw' that day—the universal calling to holiness, for lay people in and through everyday life and work—somehow converged in a sense of what he termed 'unity of life'. This was a new-sounding turn of phrase, but his life and work were so effective in implanting it in the Church that the Vatican Decree on his heroic virtues, published when he was made Venerable in 1990, stated in fact that Mgr. Escrivá 'was a pioneer of the intrinsic unity of Christian life.'

Addressing our divided selves

Why is it necessary to speak of 'unity of life'? It is a fact of history that the greatest progress in the Church's understanding of theological realities often comes when they are misunderstood and heresies arise. This is certainly borne out by many of the great Christological controversies and Councils of the early centuries, which

1. Fuenmayor, Iglesias, Illanes (trans. W. Stetson), Scepter, Princeton 1994, cited below as CP.

so formed the Church's understanding of the faith she had received.

If 'unity of life' has come to the fore in recent years, it is also because there is a tragic fragmentation in our Christian lives, which need to be called back to this unity. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on the Church in the Modern World*, diagnosed it as follows:

One of the gravest errors of our times is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives. It is a mistake to think that, because we have here no lasting city ... we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities;... it is no less mistaken to think that we may immerse ourselves in earthly activities as if these latter were utterly foreign to religion, and religion were nothing more than the fulfilment of acts of worship and the observance of a few moral obligations.... Let there be, then, no such pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on the one hand and religious life on the other. The Christian who shirks his temporal duties shirks his duties towards his neighbour, neglects God himself, and endangers his eternal salvation.... Let [them] follow the example of Christ who worked as a craftsman.²

This was later taken up by the Bishops at the 1987 Synod on the *Vocation and Mission of the Laity*:

There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual' life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life ... [E]very area of the lay faithful's lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God

who desires that these very areas be the 'places in time' where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service of others.³

Escrivá on unity of life

'I often said to the university students and workers who were with me in the thirties that they had to ... "materialize" their spiritual life'. Thus Mgr. Escrivá recalled his early days with the new charism in a keynote homily, 'Passionately Loving the World' delivered in Pamplona in 1967.

I wanted to keep them from the temptation, so common then and now, of living a kind of double life. On the one side, an interior life, a life of relation with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life, full of small earthly realities.⁴

The actual expression 'unity of life' first appears in his writings in a note dated 6 February 1931. From then on he uses it more and more, conscious that it summarizes his spiritual message. Unity of life does not have for him a merely generic meaning, arranging one's actions and attitudes around a central point. It always connotes for Fr. Escrivá the *lay* and *secular* status of the people he is addressing. Thus fully understood, the expression denotes the whole spiritual program of the Work. Unity of life, according to the spirit of Opus Dei, means 'being called by God to see the world as part of his plan.' Thus the world plays a

3. *Christifideles Laici*, 59.

4. Found in *Conversations with Mgr. Escrivá* (Dublin 1968), no. 114.

2. no. 43.

part in the spiritual life of ordinary Christians, fusing thereby its theological and apostolic dimensions. In an instruction which he wrote for members of Opus Dei in March 1934 there appears a brief paragraph towards the end of the document outlining the 'ideals' that configure Opus Dei:

To unite work with ascetical struggle and contemplation could seem impossible, but it is necessary if the world is to be reconciled with God. This daily toil is to be turned into a means of holiness and apostolate. Is not this a noble and grand ideal for which it is worth giving up one's life?⁵

The theology of unity of life

If these are the early origins of the phrase and notion, what exactly did Blessed Josemaría mean by unity of life? In a theological analysis of the Founder's writings on the world as the setting for holiness, J. L. Illanes⁶ claims that by 'unity of life' Escrivá meant not just an *ascetical* or *moral* ideal (an upright intention, for example, inner calm, making an effort to avoid distractions and to focus one's thoughts and affections on a governing value); he was referring to something deeper, something which had to be reflected in daily existence and involved ascetical effort, but whose roots go down to the depths of one's being, to that real communion with God made possible by grace. Indeed, although his writings do contain references to asceticism, the strongest note

they strike is that of inviting the person to let faith influence his mind and therefore his heart, so that it ends up affecting all dimensions of his life, including (this is a key part of his message) profane and secular aspects.

Faith in the God-Man

What is this faith? Above all, it is a faith in the Incarnation. For Blessed Josemaría, Christ's human life, death and resurrection, his work in Nazareth and his sharing of our human condition were realities which shed a new, unsuspected light on our human condition. This light had been ignored for centuries, for it had been felt that everyday life and work (or the search for work) had little to do with one's Christian vocation. An Easter homily he preached in 1967, by contrast, shows this faith at work:

Nothing is foreign to Christ's care. If we enter into the theology of it ... we cannot say that there are things—good, noble or indifferent—which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death: 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile with himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the Cross' (Col 1:19-20).⁷

Transformed by Christ

This faith in the transforming work of Christ, in 'the power of the resurrection' (Phil 3:10), is what permits him to speak of 'unity of life'. All things

7. *Christ is Passing By*, 112.

5. *Instruction, 19 March 1934*, 33, cited in *CP*, p. 37.

6. Cf. *Opus Dei in the Church* (Four Courts Press, Dublin 1994), pp. 145-47.

have indeed been reconciled to the Father by Christ. All things are indeed 'yours, you are Christ's and Christ is God's' (1 Cor 3:22-23). In the light of this cosmic view of the Redemption, he can then tell us that cultivation of God, and particularly of Christ in the Eucharist, 'will give you a supernatural instinct to purify all your actions, raise them to the order of grace and turn them into a means of apostolate'⁸

When describing Opus Dei he stressed that its spirit makes for a unity of life which is 'simple and strong'. This was a reality which he found himself practising as well as preaching, as can be gleaned from the following remark that 'there comes a moment when we can no longer tell where prayer leaves off and work begins, because our work is also prayer and contemplation, a true mystical life of union with God.'⁹

Secularity

If Escrivá was a pioneer of the notion of unity of life, he also offered the Church a fresh understanding of *secularity*, seen not as something merely 'worldly', with the loaded sense of disapproval that word can imply, but as part and parcel of one's Christian vocation. He had to, in fact, since the unity he hoped to see in people's lives was aimed above all at the everyday and natural lifestyle of the 'average' Christian, which was to be inspired

8. *Letter*, 2 February 1945, no. 11, cited in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 146.

9. *Letter*, 6 May 1945, 25, quoted in Peter Berglar, *Opus Dei*, Scepter, Princeton 1994, p. 259).

from within by the spiritual dimension. In a similar vein, in 1988, *Christifideles Laici* on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful explained:

The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense but most especially in a theological sense. The term 'secular' must be understood in the light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, at work, and in the various activities of society.¹⁰

An objection can be made: are we not forgetting that these realities, however sanctifiable, are also *autonomous*, with their own ground rules, inbuilt tendencies and aims? Can that autonomy survive this reconciliation with God? Will we be 'clericalizing' the secular environment, or, worse still, going back to mixing the things that are God's with the things that are Caesar's, in 'theocratic' fashion?

A difficult balance

The answer is that it all depends on what is meant by 'autonomy'. The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on the Church on the Modern World* teases out the question by asking us to distinguish two meanings of the autonomy of earthly affairs. The first is simply the nature of creation: our world is endowed with its own stability, order and laws which human activity and knowledge discovers and

10. no. 15.

applies. The second, however, suggests that material being does not depend on God and that we may approach it as if it had no relation to its Creator. The Council concluded in regard to that kind of autonomy that it would have tragic consequences (and it already has), for once we lose sight of the Creator, the creature is forgotten as well.¹¹

But it is a difficult balance, as most important ones are. It cannot be kept upright without a deep awareness of the freedom of each Catholic, in his and her own sphere, to look at circumstances in the light of the faith and in the light of his or her own views and thus to come to shape their opinions as best they can. There are no single Catholic answers to most questions in life. No wonder that the *Code of Canon Law* puts all Catholics, including lay people, on guard against 'proposing their own view as the teaching of the Church.'¹² 'Unity of life' does not require all sincere Christians to think along the same lines in matters social or indeed personal. There can be many equally Christian solutions to the problems of life, and it is up to their proponents to turn them into solutions by trying to apply them.

'Passionately Loving the World'

The world is where lay people seek and find God. Catholic Christianity has always been distinguished by this wel-

come for the world, seen as good in its creation, better still in its re-creation in the Word made flesh, who 'has broken down the dividing wall' (Eph 2:14). A prayer at the Easter Vigil reminds us:

Almighty and eternal God,
you created all things in wonderful
beauty and order.
Help us now to perceive
how still more wonderful is the new
creation
by which in the fullness of time
you redeemed your people
through the sacrifice of our passover,
Jesus Christ.

Blessed Josemaría's embracing of the secular dimension of Christian life and vision of Christ at the summit of all truly human activity was a decisive moment in his life, summed up in the Gospel phrase: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself' (Jn 12:32). It led him to claim that while heaven and earth *seem* to join on the horizon, where they actually meet is in our hearts, when we sanctify our everyday lives.¹³ His search for a unity of life necessarily passed through the theology of creation and re-creation in Christ and found its deep sources, as all Christian spiritualities must, in the living centre of the Church's faith.

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11. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

12. Canon 227.

13. Cf. 'Passionately Loving the World' in *Conversations with Mgr. Escrivá*, 116.