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## THE BEATIFICATION OF JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

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The personality of Josemaría Escrivá, rich and yet amazingly simple, is of considerable interest to the People of God and to theologians. The study of his writings and his contribution to the Church show that the character of the Founder of Opus Dei marks a development in the spirituality and life of the Church.

The timeliness of his message and work are plain to see. Pope Paul VI described him as a 'living expression of the perennial youth of the Church.' Pope Pius XII said of him that he was a 'true saint, a man sent by God for our times.' Cardinal Joseph Hoeffner of Cologne declared that his work 'is providential in the history of the Church and has such saving power that it is impossible to exaggerate its value.'

### God's initiative

The theologian should recognize in the charism of the Founder of Opus Dei an example of God's free initiative, who bathes his chosen creature with an unexpected light and assigns him a task which he is neither unable or wants to resist. The historian, on the other hand, has to look for an intellectual framework to explain the phenomenon and its effects on his subject's soul. The message of Monsignor Escrivá transcends the events of his personality and apostolate. His personal experience, the history of his vocation and mission, is one thing; but one also has to examine the external circumstances in which his mission developed. Or, putting it another way, one has to look at both the charism he received and how in fact he 'incarnated' it.

His pastoral activity in the Church took shape against a background of extreme secularism. The early thirties were characterized by an intense anti-Catholic campaign to dechristianize society —not just the rarefied circles where ideas are incubated, but all aspects of social and cultural life. It gave birth to bitter anticlericalism, violent persecution of the Church, and anarchist revolution. In the years that followed, the battle against religious belief has been waged in a less extreme fashion, but the secularization of life has continued almost irresistibly: secularization as

a manner of thinking, as a way of life, and even in the field of theology.

### **Recapitulation of all things in Christ**

Escrivá's answer was always the same: 'These world crises are sanctity crises.' He highlighted the need for Christians to bridge the gap between faith and daily living, proclaiming the universal calling to holiness and announcing boldly that work is the means whereby God calls man to cooperate in the plan of Creation and Redemption. The world of work, which had hitherto been seen as a source of alienation and abasement by the prophets of a 'new age' who dreamed of a mankind finally emancipated and master of itself, was seen by the Founder of Opus Dei as a means of sanctification: Christ placed 'at the peak of all human activity,' the life of society instilled with a striving for the divine to which nothing is foreign. It is ordinary Christians, of all types and social conditions, whom Escrivá inspires to recapitulate the world in Christ, from within.

### **Living a unity of life**

In this inspiration one can detect traces of his early priestly experiences among the farmworkers of Perdiguera, the university students of Saragossa and Madrid, the workers and homeless persons of the poor sections of the Spanish capital. Nor has it lost any of its impact today, in this climate of apathy and irrationalism that modern humanism has finally attained. It is not accidental that the *Decree of Heroic Virtue* (9 April 1990) says the following:

This message of sanctification both *through* earthly realities and *of* earthly realities appears to be providentially relevant to the spiritual temper of our time, so concerned to exalt human values yet so inclined towards an immanent approach which looks on the world as independent from God. Furthermore, by inviting Christians to seek union with God through everyday work, which is both a duty and a source of dignity for man while on earth, the message of the Servant of God seems destined to endure, as a constant and inexhaustible source of spiritual light for changing ages and situations [Italics added].

### **God-centered, Christ-centered**

Josemaría Escrivá began his work in a situation in which the traditional pastoral responses were showing the first signs of being unable to cope with the great challenge of atheistic and agnostic

humanism. And in his later years he witnessed the crisis of those who hoped to solve the problem by proposing that the Church come to terms with the world. Once more his answer, in its characteristic consistency, is unchanging and fully responsive to the new requirements: we must return to a radical Christianity, Christ-centered and God-centered, giving primacy to the power of grace, of communion with Christ through prayer and the sacraments, if we wish to generate man anew and make him a witness to Christ in his working environment.

This approach foreshadows the central message of Vatican Council II, in which the founder of Opus Dei had the joy of seeing his basic message approved. And at the same time one notices a jump of centuries that links it to the true source of Christian spirituality: the undiluted Gospel and the experience of the early Christian community.

### **Transformation in Christ**

Escrivá lived and communicated to all Christians the experience of a transforming encounter with Christ. In him there is no intellectual perplexity, no attempt to solve complicated theological issues. Instead, there is the pastoral zeal to speak to all, learned and simple, rich and poor, brilliant minds or poorly educated folk, to pass on a message new and old. It is the message of Christ, in whose saving mystery every baptized person is vitally inserted. This is why *The Way*, his most important and widespread book, is not a systematic treatise but a guide to meeting our Lord: even in its literary form, as unsystematic as life itself, one senses the flavour of the sayings of the first teachers of Christianity. But Escrivá is not in any sense a 'primitive', and in this sense the reading of his published and unpublished writings — at least in the judgment of the theological censors appointed by the Tribunal of the Vicarate of Rome in connection with his Cause of Canonization — is sufficient to dispel all doubts. His is a work of catechesis, of pastoral expertise, of guiding souls. Underneath the deliberate eschewing of formal speculation there is an attentive, perspicacious mind. Without being bound to any particular theological school, he assimilates the basic theses of the theology of the schools and above all of St Thomas Aquinas.

### **Apostolic commitment**

Thus, his teaching always succeeds in being eminently apostolic, as does his activity. The importance which this has had in the authentic advancement of the laity is still hard to evaluate fully, given its vast ramifications. The same could be said of the effects of his work among priests and religious. Josemaría Escrivá led very many Christians, of every state and condition, to a life of intimate union with God, giving them a vigorous apostolic impulse which made them keenly aware of their responsibility to lead others to Christ. These 'others' are lukewarm Christians and those who have fallen prey to secularist values. In this uncircumscribed fruitfulness one notices a deep sense of the Church and a love which we could quite simply describe as *zeal* for all its representatives, starting with the Vicar of Christ.

### **Fidelity to God in the task in hand**

The breath of the apostolic achievements fostered by Josemaría Escrivá around the world, and their response to the pastoral needs of the present day, could make one think that he was above all a man of action. The studies prepared for the Cause of Canonization reveal instead that the true measure of his personality is within, in the innermost recesses of the soul, where one touches the mystery of God's call. Possibly the best definition one could give of him would be that of the *faithful servant*: exemplary fidelity in the daily response to the intense action of grace in his soul and, as a consequence, in the fulfilment of the task received. Just by letting himself be internally and entirely shaped by the love of God, he became the humble herald of the radical message of holiness which is at the heart of Opus Dei. The charism which led him has as its object the building up of the Church. His personal encounter with Christ was a necessary foundation and source of nourishment for his spiritual teaching. Theology has analyzed this experience, which goes under the name of 'foundational charisms', and has shown that its immediate apostolic consequence is not only the testimony or example which enriches his interior life, but a mysterious but real paternity, an active channel of Christ's grace flowing to his members.

### **Children of God, blessed by the Cross**

This seems to me to be the key to the spiritual personality of Monsignor Escrivá. He was above all a deeply contemplative soul.

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From his youth the Lord led him through mystical experiences which brought him to the heights of transforming union: interior locutions, purifications and consolations which made him 'feel' in all humility the forceful action of grace and which he, like all true mystics, answered with a severe ascetical commitment and an exacting apostolic activity, fully identifying himself with God's will. At the same time the Lord made him a master of interior life: when he was only 26 years old, with the founding of Opus Dei he was called to open up a new way of holiness in the Church. Also passive purgations, a key point in the process of sanctification, liken the Servant of God to the great founders: not only the lived experience of the abyss of his own nothingness before God's love, but above all a consciousness of being quite inadequate for the boundless task and the harsh sequel of sudden misunderstandings and difficulties which threaten the life of the newborn creature on every side. It is as if God himself asked for something 'impossible', and at the same time seemed to impede its fulfilment. In the extraordinary richness of his paternity one discovers not only the fruitfulness of grace, but also a special captivating gift.

The spiritual life of Josemaría Escrivá reveals itself at every turn as the overflow of divine sonship in Christ: everything is confidence, cordial acceptance, complete openness. Even suffering is serene abandonment to the Father, who blesses with the Cross. Thus everything is sealed with joy, with a contagious optimism, with a mature enthusiasm which makes his personality so attractive.

**Done by the book**

I thank God for having granted me the role of Relator in his Cause of Canonization. The examinations have been carried out with the strictest respect for legal principles and the scientific methodology required by the Church in such delicate matters: the investigatory proceedings, the collection and evaluation of written sources, the successive historical and theological studies have all likewise been models of scrupulous exactitude, of solid critical assessment, of wise and careful examination. A figure has emerged which now belongs to the treasury of the whole Church. His forthcoming beatification gives us a man in whom God has wanted to reveal a

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*Rev Michael Breen*

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dazzling manifestation of his grace, one which offers every Christian a reflection of the light which only the image of Christ reflects in all its fullness and whose brilliance shines forth in the saints.

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