

BLESSED JOSEMARIA ESCRIVÁ

Christianity as adventure

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

In May 1992 Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was beatified by Pope John Paul II. Below is the text of a homily given by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a group of German-speaking pilgrims who attended the ceremony. He highlights the fact that Blessed Josemaría's primary concern was to do in all things the will of God. To ascertain it he had recourse to the prayer of the blind beggar Bartimaeus: 'Lord, that I may see'.

But for a Catholic God's will is also mediated through the Church and especially through her sacramental system. Through these seven sacraments and through listening to and living by the Word of God we can all achieve the one goal given us by the Lord: personal holiness. It is holy persons who do great things, and Blessed Josemaría is no exception to the rule. With God's grace he dared to undertake many daunting tasks and saw them to completion. He was also able to move many others to take seriously the call of God to holiness and to make their lives an 'occasion of loving God and of serving the Church, the Pope, and all souls, with joy and simplicity, lighting up the ways of the earth with the brightness of faith and love.'

The Revelation to St John, which has so many awe-inspiring things to tell us about the past and the future, throws heaven open and reminds us that God never forgets this world. Evil may flourish but final victory awaits. A song of praise to God arises from this vale of tears. Around God's throne there is a growing choir of the redeemed, whose lives are now a selfless progress of love and glorification. Not only in heaven are those voices heard; they rise from us too, for a call comes to us from the throne, from

the depths of God: 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great' (Rev 19:5). An appeal for us too, here and now, to join in this eternal liturgy. Josemaría Escrivá's beatification tells us that this contemporary of ours is in that joyful gathering, as do the words of the Reading: 'those whom he predestined he has also glorified' (Rom 8:30). This glorification is not just a future matter. It has already happened, as the ceremonies of beatification remind us. 'Praise our God, you small and great.' For Josemaría, these words were a calling, but not only for himself. His task was to echo them all over the world. He gave glory to God precisely by bringing the great and the small to praise him.

Discovering God's will

Josemaría Escrivá realised very early on that God had something in store for him. But what this task might consist in, he had no idea. How was he to find out? He looked, above all, in the Word of God, in the Scriptures. For him the Bible was not a book from the past, a subject of learned controversy: it was a living word, with a claim on us today, in which we all find our place and our path in life. He was particularly touched by the story of the blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the road to Jericho, hearing about Jesus passing by and crying out for mercy (cf. Mk 10:46-52). The disciples try to hush him but Jesus asks: What do you want me to do for you? Bartimaeus answered: Lord, that I may see. Josemaría saw himself in this man. 'Lord, that I may see, that I may see your will,' became his own motto. We start to see aright when we learn to see God, identifying God's will and trying to make it our own. Discerning and following God's will became the driving force of his whole life. 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' So he was ready, when enlightenment came, to answer with Peter: 'Master, at your word I will let down the nets' (Lk 5:5). His 'yes' was every bit as daring as Peter's. Spain at the time was seething with hatred towards the Church and Christ, even towards God. When he was asked to let down the nets for God, there were people trying to wipe out the Church all around him. But he gave his whole life as God's fisherman, letting down the nets into the waters of our contemporary world, drawing 'great and small' to the light, that they too might see.

God's will: our holiness

Saint Paul said to the Thessalonians: 'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess 4:3). God's will is the same for all of us—that we be holy. And holiness means becoming Christlike (cf. Rom 8:29). Josemaría understood this not only as a personal matter, that *he* be holy, but also as a mission towards others, to encourage them to seek sanctity, that he might gather a communion of brothers and sisters for Christ. The idea of holiness has, unfortunately, undergone a narrowing over the years, and even today it leads us to think of canonised saints, miracles and heroic virtues, things which are all very well for the chosen few, but not for us. Holiness then becomes a matter for this mysterious élite, while we carry on as we were. Josemaría Escrivá's words shook people out of that spiritual apathy: sanctity is not unusual, it is expected of every baptised person. It does not consist in extraordinary deeds, but has thousands of facets. It can be practised in all sorts of situations and jobs. Holiness is the norm, and it means living one's life in the light of God, in accordance with the faith. Our *beatus* travelled the world with this message, encouraging people to seek holiness, to take on the adventure of Christianity. He became a tireless man of action, but no mere moraliser, for he knew that we are incapable of sanctifying ourselves. Just as love always includes the passive side, being loved, so too holiness has its receptive dimension, the acceptance of God's love for us. He founded *Opus Dei*, not *Opus nostrum*. He had no interest in setting up Josemaría Escrivá's work, or building a monument to himself. My work is not my work, he could say with Christ (cf. Jn 7:16). He wanted not to do his own thing, but to leave room for God's craftsmanship.

God works through us

Of course he was also aware that Jesus had said in St John's Gospel: 'This is the work of God, that you believe' (Jn 6:29)—that you leave yourself in God's hands. And so he saw himself, once more, in the Gospel. He took Peter's words—*homo peccator sum* (I am a sinful man)—and applied them to himself. When he looked around at the mighty draught of fish, he was shocked, like Peter, at the contrast between his own insufficiency and what God had done through him. He used to call himself 'a founder without a foundation' and 'a clumsy instrument'. He was only too conscious that he could never have done all that, so it must have been God,

using the most unsuitable tool imaginable. But is this not what the concept 'heroic virtue' really means: that things happen which God alone can do? Josemaría certainly admitted his ineptitude, but he gave himself over to doing God's will. He often referred to the 'follies' he had taken on: starting apostolates without a penny to his name, launching into the impossible. They really did seem mad. But remember what his compatriot Miguel de Unamuno said: 'Wise men play the clown, but fools make sense.' He was God's Don Quixote. For was it not quixotic to talk to people today about humility, obedience, chastity, poverty and generosity? For Escrivá 'being sensible' meant doing God's will at all times, and so the method of his apparent madness always came to light.

The Church—God's will embodied

The Will of God. God's will has a definite setting in this world. It is *embodied*. Christ remains in his church in bodily form. Obedience towards God is inseparable from obedience to the Church. The only way to be sure that one is following God's call, not seeing God's will in one's own ideas, is to submit to the Church's judgment. Josemaría saw obedience to the hierarchy as the basic criterion for his mission. Not because 'might is right', for the Church is no mere power structure: she is not set up by people seeking certain religious, social or ethical aims who want a structure to achieve them, and then perhaps adapt the structures to suit changing times. She is a *sacrament*. That means that she does not belong to herself. She is not doing her own work, but God's, and is totally bound up with his will. The sacraments are the very structure of her life. The central point of these sacraments is the Blessed Eucharist, where this bodily presence of Jesus touches us most closely. For our *beatus* the ecclesial spirit meant, above all, living by the Eucharist. He loved and preached the Blessed Sacrament in all its dimensions: worship of the hidden presence of the living body of our Lord; a gift, in which he communicates himself to us anew each day; and sacrifice: 'Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me' (Heb 10:5; cf Ps 40:6-8). Christ can communicate himself because he has first surrendered—and still surrenders—himself, undergoing the 'Exodus' of love in his sacrifice. We become conformed with the image of the Son by entering into that 'Exodus' and offering ourselves

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as sacrifice. Love needs that passive dimension, the *passio*, source of transformation and openness to the divine.

Mother of God and our Mother

When he was two years of age, Josemaría fell seriously ill, and was despaired of by the doctors. But his mother decided to dedicate him to Mary. This she did after a gruelling journey to the Marian shrine at Torreciudad. Ever after he believed that he was under that motherly mantle. In his office, for example, opposite the door, there was a picture of our Lady of Guadalupe, the first thing he always looked at on entering. It was also the last thing he saw before he died. He came in and had just time to glance at her before he collapsed. The bells of the noonday Angelus were ringing out, proclaiming Mary's *fiat* and the Incarnation of the Son, our Redeemer. So this sign, which accompanied him at the beginning and right through his life, was also present at his homecoming.

We are here to thank God for this witness to the faith in our time, for this tireless preacher of God's designs and our prayer is: Lord, that I too may see, that I may know your will and do it. Amen.

This is the text of a homily delivered in the church of the Twelve Apostles in Rome on 19 May 1992.