

JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ—A SPIRITUAL FATHER

Tatiana Goritcheva

Tatiana Goritcheva's discovery of Christ and her activity in clandestine Christian circles earned her an expulsion from Russia in the early 1980s. Her books—many auto-biographical—are a resurrection of faith, a fresh look at the truth that liberates. Here she examines the spirit and work of a great Western spiritual master: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, whose feast is celebrated on June 26.

Our bloody but unbowed Russian people always had one figure of moral authority: the *starets*. It was—and still is—hard to lay one's hand on a Bible, but these monks were the living Gospel, the living proof of the existence of a God who transcends political and secular calculations. They have always been spiritual guides, fathers even. As fathers they save, direct, strengthen and encourage us.

I have only met Josemaría Escrivá through his writings, but I get the same feeling from him, the same strength, the same limitless love, discernment of spirits and a ready answer for those who seek trust. And that unmistakable authority which does not oppress but draws out love and enthusiasm: fatherhood, in short.

Holiness and happiness

Our age is not interested in authorities which bind us. This is not the age of the father. No wonder we have become homeless, drifting. Human bonds have been broken, in both East and West. 'God is dead' and man's life is in danger too, both spiritually and physically. We find the same nihilism in both places. That is why we need these figures which will shine out in our European darkness and be our moral authorities, where the very concept of authority has disappeared.

'That man is happy. He cannot be an atheist' (Dostoyevsky). Josemaría Escrivá never stops reminding us to be joyful, because

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we are children of God. Holiness is quite a paradox. 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:44). We are to leave everything, take up our cross and obey Christ, with no strings attached. And it is this very obedience which sets us free. It is an inner obedience, far from slavery to ideology or political system. This inner obedience is different in that it has to be freely chosen. Hence holiness and happiness belong together.

Freedom and obedience

Twentieth-century man longs for freedom, but he is so often a prisoner and not only of his passions, for a worthwhile passion could well burst open a mean or narrow heart, or a cold, programmed rationality—the rationality of the computer. No, we are still oppressed, because we have turned from the icons to the TV screen, seeking the fulfilment of our wishes in the promises of advertising.

But man asks whether the Church might not just be another form of slavery. That question cannot be answered in terms of tradition or morality. Only a living Christianity will convince. A friend of mine spent 35 years with the motto: better die on one's feet than live on one's knees. Now he tells me that he discovered the infinite freedom of obedience, the first time that he went into a church and knelt down. Today's saints offer the answer too. Looking at them broadens our hearts and brings true peace. We begin to retrieve that inner life.

The joy of spiritual childhood conceals a Golgotha within, for freedom has to be bought at a price. Spiritual fatherhood is linked with God's fatherhood, which saved us and freed us in love. No wonder we say 'bless me Father', precisely in confession. In that sacrament of loving forgiveness we discover this spiritual fatherhood and its mysterious way of serving us.

Holiness: a positive endeavour

Confessors and spiritual guides are not just there to tell us what to do and avoid. Christian asceticism is not a series of practices, but a way of going 'from strength to strength'; not an avoiding of sin, but a growing in love. The *starets* Father Sofronij held that if a monk merely battled against evil without joy or inspiration, his asceticism would be worthless. And Escrivá: 'Your chastity must not be a mere denial, an expression of cold insensitivity. A Chris-

tian should, rather, attract by his purity, which is a joyful affirmation' (*Forge*, nos. 91-2).

Chastity and purity do not come across here as ethical concepts or matters of morality. There is a lot more to them: depth, mystery, strength and gentleness, 'which shuns even vulgarity as a slight on the divine.' This ecclesial wholeness comes into every facet of our lives, for everything can be a matter of loving sacrifice. Loving the Church, with mind *and* heart, with senses and instinct, we know that sin is powerless in the presence of holiness: 'these world crises are sanctity crises' (*The Way*, no 301), as Escrivá puts it.

He spoke of an atmosphere of holiness, an 'odour'. Yes, indeed, unmistakable, shareable, and unitive. People who cut themselves off from it tend to live on the surface. Paradox again: seeking self we flee from self into the impersonal, into communal existence. We end up saying, with Sartre: hell is other people. We cannot stand others, or even ourselves. Love, however, turns the presence of the other into a paradise. It also defends the inner I, the spirit, open to God.

Sanctifying everyday life

Escrivá's insistence on sanctifying the ordinary is also noteworthy. We tend to wait for big opportunities. This is typical of human (especially ideological) projects. But Christianity is not a utopia or an ideal. Our icons always had room for little things: the widow's mite, the narrow gate, the eye of the needle, for the greater God is, the smaller the world. That interest in detail is a proof that icons are not ideological. God is looking at us through each of those details. Ideology is also geared to the *future*, whereas God is present; Christ is here and now. 'Today' offers us infinity and eternity. 'Renew each day the effective desire to annihilate yourself, to deny yourself, to forget yourself, to walk *in novitate sensus*, with a new life, exchanging this misery of ours for all the hidden and eternal grandeur of God' (*Forge*, no. 97).

So everyday little things are the appropriate—and above all, real—place for faithfulness and love. Christianity's poetry is found there. A Christian, for Escrivá, is to 'turn the prose of each day into epic verse' (*Conversations*, no. 116). In the same way *starets* Paisij Weltchkowski called the monk a 'daily martyr' and Escrivá called the secular Christian a 'silent martyr'.

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Guided each step of the way

Fatherhood is spiritual inasmuch as it, too, is obedient, directed from heaven. Equality and authority blend, quite surprisingly, in spiritual guidance. A spiritual father leads his son or daughter upwards, shows them how to take the next step. Dionysius the Areopagite claimed that the highest and lowest levels of the heavenly hierarchy are not opposed, for all are the same in the eyes of God. So spiritual guidance presumes equality, demands courage, and draws out Christian creativity.

This article was contributed as the foreword to the German edition of Footprints in the Snow, Denis Helming's biography of Blessed Josemaría.