

BLESSED JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA

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In this homily at a Mass to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá – he will be canonized by the Holy Father on October 6 – Cardinal Daly give us some insights into his life and message.

Introduction

Josemaría Escrivá was born on January 9, 1902 in Barbastro in the North of Spain, into a devoutly Catholic family. He died in Rome in 1975, aged 73. Grace and nature are so closely intertwined in a family like his that the call to priesthood comes as though naturally into a boy's heart. He entered the diocesan seminary and was ordained priest in 1925 in Saragossa. But from a young age Josemaría had the feeling that there was something that God was wishing him to do, though he was not sure what that something was. He kept searching to see God's will, but could only cry, like the blind Bartimeus: "Lord that I may see."

It was during a retreat, three years after ordination, that he received the light he had been seeking. It was on October 2, 1928 that there came to him what he called, "an illumination about the entire Work".

He always remembered this date and recalled that he had at once knelt down to thank God for this great grace; and, as he knelt, the bells of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels were ringing.

We can regard this date as the birthday of Opus Dei. As we celebrate this Mass today for that birth and for the

birthday of the Founder, the bells of Our Lady of the Rosary here in Harold's Cross can ring out in joyful thanksgiving.

Josemaría was convinced that what he felt committed to inaugurate on October 2, 1928, was indeed a Work of God, an Opus Dei. Every founder and foundress of a new religious institute in the history of the Church has been driven by some fresh insight into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every religious rule and constitution is an application of the Gospel in a particular historical situation and in response to the needs of the Church and the world at a particular historical moment. The Gospel is the original text of which all rules of religious institutes are a translation and an application. Religious founders are like the scribe in the Gospel of Matthew, who, Jesus tells us, "brings out from the storeroom (of the Gospel) things both old and new" (cf. Mt 13:52). The great number of religious institutes which have sprung up in the Church across the centuries are an illustration of the permanent vitality of the Gospel.

Gospel insights of Josemaría

The truths brought out by Josemaría are as old as the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and

yet as new as the so-called post-modern age of the new millennium. They are wide ranging, but one may single out some of the core principles. Josemaría reiterated the New Testament teaching that every Christian, in virtue of his or her baptism, is called to be a saint. Saintliness can and should be pursued by lay people through their worldly tasks and pursuits. For saintliness is not a form of other worldliness, it is not an escape from this world and from earthly realities and earthly tasks into an other world of 'saintly' tasks and 'holy' or 'spiritual' realities. Rather, this world is the very stuff of holiness. Earthly tasks become saintly when done for God's glory in a spirit of love and service for God and for our fellow-humans.

Josemaría, indeed, often spoke daringly and unconventionally, to emphasize this point. He spoke, for example, of the need to 'materialize' the quest for holiness; one might say, the need to 'earth' holiness in ordinary tasks, whether these be what are called 'menial' tasks, or more esoteric careers in, say, cosmic physics or biochemical research. He once said: "I don't mind whether (a person) is a road-sweeper or a government minister; what I am interested in is that he should sanctify himself in his work." He even spoke of a kind of 'good anti-clericalism', in the sense that a lay person who aims to be holy should not seek to imitate the lifestyle, or take over the work, of the clergy, nor should the clergy live and act like laity. As a concomitant truth, Josemaría saw that the world is not primarily to

be seen as a place of sin and temptation, though it can also be this; but above all it should be seen as a place where lay persons find God and give him glory by their worldly tasks. The poet, John Keats, called the world "a vale of soul-making". For Josemaría Escrivá, the world is a place of saint-making.

Not surprisingly, since both had their source in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, many of Josemaría's themes are stressed by the Second Vatican Council. One of the most neglected chapters of the Council perhaps is Chapter V of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, on "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness". Here we read:

All the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God and who obey the voice of the Father, worshipping God the Father in spirit and in truth. Every person should walk unhesitatingly, according to his or her own personal gifts and duties, in the path of a living faith which arouses hope and works through charity (*Lumen Gentium* 41).

Holiness rooted in baptism

The call to holiness of every Christian is rooted in baptism. Indeed, it could be said that one of the great graces of the Council and one of the great resources of the post-conciliar Church, has been what one might call the rediscovery of baptism as the source both of the call to holiness and of the call to apostolate of every Christian. Baptism

incorporates us into Christ; it immerses us in the life of the Holy Trinity and in the "Christ life" through which the Holy Trinity itself enters into a sharing in the life and destiny of the human family. In baptism, we receive a Christian name; indeed, we take on Christ's own name; for the name "Christian" implies 'Christ-person'. We are called to be Christ-persons, Christ-like persons. We are called to be "living icons" of Christ. We should live in such a way that others might see in us something of what Jesus Christ is like. No other name should be seen as more distinguished or more honourable in the Church than the name "Christian". St. Gregory Nazianzen, whose feast, with that of his dear friend, St. Basil, we celebrated recently, said that what united both of them was "to be Christians and to be called Christians".

Another name for baptism is "Christening"; and this is the beginning of a life-long process whereby we are progressively Christ-ened in our minds and our hearts, our emotions and feelings, our wills and our energies. The end to which baptism points is that expressed by St. Paul in the words, "I live, now no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

St. John, in his first Letter, which we have been reading in the Eucharistic Liturgy since Christmas, writes: "We can be sure that we are in God only when the one who claims to be living in him is living the same kind of life as Christ lived" (1 Jn 2:5-6).

The same kind of life that Christ lived; that is the life of a saint; and this

is what is expected of any Christian.

Called to be apostles

We are, each of us, also called by baptism to be apostles for Christ. We are called to be afire with love for Christ and with eagerness, impatience, to spread the love of Christ everywhere. St. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (cf. Lk 3: 16). Christ himself said: "I came to cast fire on the earth, and how great is my distress until I see it blazing" (Lk 12:49).

We too should be filled with that holy distress, that holy impatience. Josemaría spoke of a "loving craziness" which should grip us. When conscious of our weaknesses and feeling miserable with our lack of progress and holiness, we should, he said, "lay our heads on the breast of Jesus" so as to be made altogether 'crazy' by the beating of his most lovable Heart. He insisted, however, that he was not asking for anything extravagant or dramatic or extreme. Those who use extreme or intolerant language or who use dramatic methods can be calling attention to themselves rather than to the Lord.

But, we must ask ourselves, do we look like people who are 'on fire' with love of Christ? How did Christians ever let religion come to be seen by people such as Karl Marx as "the opium of the people".

I heard someone saying, quite casually and matter-of-factly, recently on radio that football has taken over from religion as the opium of the people. The words "God's in his heaven, all's right

with the world," are thought to be typical of Christians and thought to be a call to 'opt out' from the world, a call to escapism, fatalism. There is, of course, a profound sense in which the words themselves are true, but they are very far from being a recipe for escapism or "quietism". The prayer which the Lord himself taught us begins by addressing God who is in heaven; but it goes on to acknowledge that, because God's in his heaven, all's wrong with the world, because God's will is not being done in it, because it is organized on lines that are far indeed removed from the shape of God's Kingdom; and all's wrong with me until I begin in earnest doing God's will and striving to have it done on earth as it is done in heaven, and until I begin doing my part to make the world around me more aligned with the pattern of God's Kingdom.

After the Ascension, as the Apostles stood gazing up to heaven after our Lord vanished from their sight, two angels said to them: "Why are you standing here looking up to heaven? Jesus will come again." It was as though to say to them: "Why are you standing here gazing nostalgically into heaven? There is work to do, here on earth, for Jesus, until he comes again." One of the most poignant sayings of Jesus is this: "When the Son of Man comes do you think that he will find faith upon the earth?" (Lk 18:8). Let us apply that question to ourselves, and to Ireland, in this year 2002. We are here in the world in order to keep faith with Christ. We are here to spread faith in Christ; we are called, and are

empowered by God's grace, to move mountains and renew the earth by that faith, and in the power of the Spirit of Christ which we received at our baptism and continue to receive everyday of our lives. Jesus called the Spirit "power from on high" and the Greek word is *dunamis*. We are called and empowered to be dynamic Christians.

A future of hope

We face the future, therefore, with realism, with a full awareness of the urgency of the crisis which faces the Church at this time. But "crisis" is also "kairos". Crisis is also challenge; it is also opportunity. The Vatican Council makes its own the words of St. Augustine, who said that the Church "like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolation of God" (*Lumen Gentium* 9). As St. John puts it: "This is the victory which overcomes the world our faith" (1 Jn 5:4).

"You have in you One who is stronger than anyone who is in this world" (1 Jn 4: 4).

Abbot Vonier once said: "Christ has won all our battles for us, long before we were born."

The One whom we have in us is indeed stronger than anyone in this world. But we have to draw that strength from Christ into our whole being; and the means for doing so are prayer and the Holy Eucharist. The real "work" of God is prayer and worship; these are the one foundation for any work of God and for the whole Prelature of Opus Dei. Jesus

assures us that whoever receives him in the Eucharist "will draw life from him" (Jn 6:57). From that food, foretold by the prophet Elijah, we draw the strength we need to walk to the Mountain of God (cf. 1 Kgs 19:9). Josemaría speaks of "spiritual calories".

Our prayer is not to be what the Pope calls "shallow religiosity". We must be constantly endeavouring to deepen our prayer. We must aim towards contemplative prayer. Josemaría insisted that contemplation is possible in the life of worldly tasks. He said: "If you are not a person of prayer, I don't believe you are sincere when you say you that you work for Christ."

We must learn prayer from Mary and her prayerful pondering of God's word, which is the original *lectio divina*. Josemaría never tires of reminding us to pray through Mary's intercession, to come to Jesus through Mary with Peter.

Training in holiness

It is in the power of the prayer of faith that Pope John Paul welcomes the challenges of the new millennium. In his inspiring Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he says, however, that we cannot be "content to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity." He calls for programs to prepare people to walk "in the ways of holiness" adapted to people's circumstances and needs. He speaks of programs of "training in holiness". He points to the newer forms of associations and movements which are emerging in the Church as offering resources to meet this need. It is interest-

ing that the Consistory of Cardinals, held in Rome in May 2001, asked that "a pastoral of holiness" be developed across the whole Church.

Opus Dei, like the other modern ecclesial movements, offers such programs and such resources. They are offered to lay people as well as clerics, to married people and single people living in the world, as well as to consecrated celibates, to cooperators and collaborators of Opus Dei, and to its own members. May these become widely known and availed of by many. May I express a particular welcome and appreciation for the "training in holiness" offered by Opus Dei to diocesan priests.

The new evangelization

In his Letter for the New Millennium, as in every major document of his entire pontificate, Pope John Paul has called for a "new evangelization" of countries of traditional Catholic faith. This evangelization must be addressed, not just to individuals, but to the opinion-formers and the attitude-influencing forces which shape a culture and help to form its guiding ideas and values.

He has spoken of the new *Areopagi*, where opinions are debated and disseminated, such as the media of mass communication, whether electronic or print, the world of the intellect, of literature, of art, the university world, the world of science and technology, of scientific research in the physical and biochemical sciences, the social sciences, the human sciences. Here is a vast field for the new evangelization.

Many detect at the present time a new

mood of searching for meaning and for purpose in life, a new quest for a deeper truth. They discern, like Tim Meadows in Christopher Fry's *A Sleep of Prisoners* that "affairs are now soul-size". The French Jewish philosopher, Henri Bergson, spoke of the need for the infusion of a "supplement of soul" into the vast body of modern science and technology. Many 'spiritualities' are on offer in modern society, and here in Ireland, in response to this need. We know that only Christ can fill the void and satisfy the hunger for truth and meaning and value. Spirituality without Christ does not give life. It can lead to Christ, it can be a propaedeutic to the Gospel of Christ; but it cannot substitute for Christ. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, in March 1979, Pope John Paul II declared that "the Church wishes to serve this single end; that each person may be able to find Christ."

Every talent, every skill, every gift, of intellect or of character or of personality, can serve in and is required by the new evangelization. Men and women engaged in every occupation, every profession or career path, are needed in the many-faceted work of God's Kingdom. Teilhard de Chardin loved to repeat the slogan, *Nihil intentatum pro Christo relinquere* (leave nothing untried for Christ).

One of the most urgent tasks facing the Church in Ireland today is the crisis in the family. In 1981, in *Familiaris Consortio*, the Holy Father said that "the future of the world and of the Church

passes through the family."

Married members of Opus Dei can play a leading role in bringing marriage back to Christ and in pursuing holiness through every aspect of their marital relationship and their parental tasks.

Spirituality of communion

But neither Opus Dei nor any other ecclesial movement has a monopoly of wisdom or can lay exclusive claim to possess the key to the new evangelization. Pope John Paul has invariably linked his appeals for that evangelization to a call for a "spirituality of communion".

In his address to an Opus Dei-sponsored seminar on *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, on March 17, 2001, the Pope spoke of the specific mission of this prelature to blend with the evangelizing task of each particular church. In his address to the pilgrims who came to Rome for the beatification of the Founder of Opus Dei on May 17, 1992, the Holy Father said: "All evangelizing activity should be coordinated and integrated into the pastoral program of the dioceses."

The newer ecclesial movements must never allow themselves to become a "Church within the Church", a diocese within a diocese, a parish within a parish. They must never be associated with "elitism" or divisiveness in the community of faith. Ways should be explored for better deployment of resources and methods in a shared evangelizing mission between dioceses and religious institutes; but without detriment to the special charism of each.