MEMORIES OF MGR. ESCRIVÁ

Maura Gibbons

I had the good fortune to be in Madrid when the Venerable Josemaría Escrivá spent 2 months in Spain and Portugal on a catechetical journey in 1972. A letter arrived on my desk from a Catholic friend who lives in Washington D.C. She and her Lutheran husband would be coming to Madrid. They wanted to see Mgr. Escrivá again.

Again! I wondered! This was October and they had already been to Rome to see him the previous January and had had a private visit with him. It was Jim, Edith's husband, who suggesed returning to Europe. He wanted to see Mgr. Escrivá again, privately. The fact that neither of them spoke Spanish didn't trouble them at all! Of course Edith, who is a member of Opus Dei, was delighted. Would I arrange the visit? A tall order, said I to myself! Just at that moment thousands of people —young and old— were a bit fidgety: 'Would I be able to get a ticket for the getogethers with Mgr. Escrivá?' was the thought on everyone's mind, and here were my friends hoping to meet him, privately!

The previous January they had stopped off in Madrid to see me on their way to Rome. We talked about their forthcoming visit over the dinner table. Edith was very excited, Jim a bit reserved —he couldn't see what all the fuss was about— but being the good man he was, he went along with everything. They came to see me on their way home. Jim was a changed man. I asked him what impressed him most about Mgr. Escrivá. He said simply, 'his humility'.

Edith told me Mgr. Escrivá had given her husband a warm and affectionate welcome. I remember thinking then that cordiality was perfectly in keeping with his convictions. He would often say to his non-Catholic friends that he believed he himself had the true faith, otherwise he wouldn't be dressed as a priest, but that he respected their beliefs. Indeed, he would give his life, he said, to defend their right to believe as they believed.

That warmth and affection of his were what drew people out and won their hearts. They sensed his immense and genuine love for them, in spite of the language barrier and they responded accordingly. They reflected on it. As time went by, it brought to

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birth in them a deep and abiding conviction that God was very near and loved them as Mgr. Escrivá loved them —only infinitely more so.

Well, I did manage to arrange the meeting. We were to go to one of the big getogethers with the Venerable Josemaría Escrivá in Tajamar. We had a special place on the balcony and went down to a small visitors' room to meet Mgr. Escrivá afterwards.

Tajamar is a very interesting place. Edith and Jim certainly thought so when they went on a tour of it a few days later. It is a school for over a thousand boys in a rundown area of Madrid, called Vallecas. Incidentally, Mgr. Escrivá brought his student friends to teach catechism to the poor children there in the early thirties, soon after Opus Dei had started. They were often stoned and spat upon in those years but it didn't deter them. Just outside the gates of this school you could see many little shacks. I've never seen anything like it in Dublin. Oddly enough I saw similar ones in very poor parts of Virginia, in the States. I understand a housing estate has now replaced them. These were the homes of the students of Tajamar.

The auditorium where we were was packed to capacity —2,000 approximately. My friends and I were on the balcony. From here we could see the stage where Mgr. Escrivá sat and on which he walked to and fro. We could also see the crowd below. There was joyous expectation in the atmosphere and a murmur of happy voices, as we waited. It fascinated Jim. He wanted to take a photo of those faces. When we were chatting, as we waited, he took lots of photographs. He would lean slightly over the balcony murmuring 'all that, one man could do', 'all that, one man could do!'

At the end of the getogether he and Edith talked to Mgr.Escrivá and once again he gave Jim a big hug before they parted.

A few days later, we went to another getogether in Tajamar. This time we were in the general auditorium. We arrived very early in order to get seats near the front. As on other occasions it was packed to capacity and there was no standing room when Mgr. Escrivá arrived but there was a huge round of applause. He asked us not to waste time clapping.

After addressing us for a few minutes he invited us to ask him questions about anything we liked. The questions were always about things of a spiritual nature —indeed he would often say that he couldn't talk about anything else. Hardly had the gettogether

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begun when some man from the side aisle nearest to us began to ask him questions about his ideas on sociology. Mgr. Escrivá answered him graciously, saying he knew nothing about sociology. As a priest he only knew how to speak about God and the things of God.

Two things stayed in my mind from that getogether. One was a question put to him by a lady to the right of us. She told him she had a terminal illness and that she was afraid to die. I remember him well as he moved thoughtfully across the stage. He then said death was a hard pill to swallow. But God wasn't like a hunter hiding to catch his prey unawares. No. He was like a loving gardener who plucks the fruit when it's mature. I see him now in my mind's eye imitating the action of the gardener, gently easing the fruit off the branch. There was a hushed, deep silence and there must have been joy in many a heart.

The second thing I recall was the question put by a man who was half way down the auditorium. We all heard him say he had a son in prison. What we didn't expect was his question! What he did say was: 'What can I tell my son so that he can help his companions to be better.'

Mgr. Escrivá was very moved by that question. To an apostolic soul it said so much about the father and the boy. That boy was a good boy who had made a mistake.

What was it that moved ordinary people to stop, as they went about their daily business, and take note of what this wonderful priest was saying? What was it that arrested their attention? There is only one answer that satisfies me. Mgr. Escrivá placed within reach of the man-in-the-street of our time, a lofty ideal of holiness. Holiness —making your work a prayer. That was why my friends came all the way across the Atlantic to see him for a few minutes. Mgr. Escrivá had touched a chord, had stirred a memory in those human hearts. Isn't it true that all of us, young and old, rich and poor, sick and well, long for that interior intimacy with God that allows a person to operate with peace, serenity and freedom of spirit. Mgr. Escrivá has shown us a cheerful, demanding but very attractive way to do it.

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