

HEROISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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This article highlights a number of similarities between St Thomas More (1478-1535) and St Josemaría Escrivá (1902-75). While not claiming to be a comprehensive study it allows us to understand why a Spanish priest chose an English lawyer as an intercessor for Opus Dei.

Introduction

St Josemaría chose Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor as an intercessor for Opus Dei in its relations with civil authorities. He could well have chosen any one of a number of saints. In fact, he vacillated between choosing St Thomas and St Vincent Ferrer, O.P. (1350-1419).

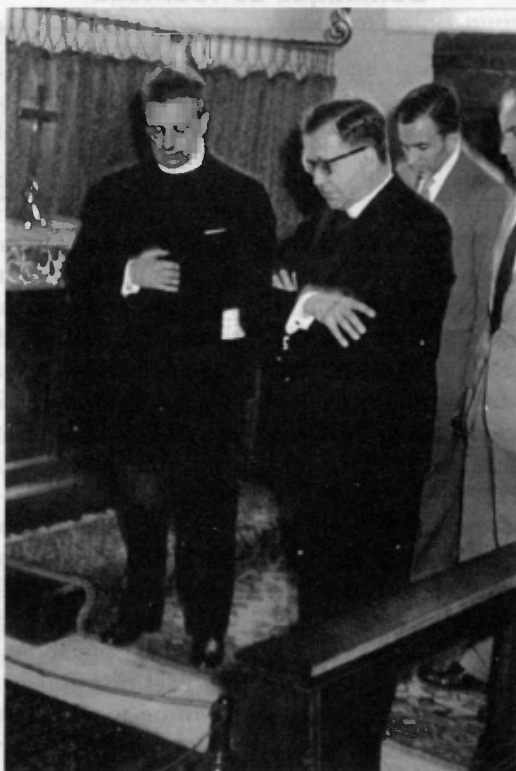
St Vincent was born in Valencia (Spain) and died in Vannes (France) and was virtually a compatriot of St Josemaría's. He is well known in Spain where he played an important role in the constant and ongoing strife between Spanish kings, and was prominent during the period of the Great Western Schism (1378-1417). However, as St Josemaría realized, Opus Dei did not "seek to meet the needs of a particular country or of a particular time, for, from the very first moment, Jesus wanted his Work to be catholic, to have a universal heart."¹ Furthermore, he sought to promote the holiness of laypeople in the world, through their everyday work, their family lives and their social activities. Accordingly, the choice of an Englishman (husband, father and lawyer) as an intercessor

underscored two important factors: on the one hand, it emphasized the universality of Opus Dei (its not being linked to the Founder's homeland), and on the other that St Thomas' sanctity, as a layman, was forged in the service of King and Country (that holiness of life in the world is an achievable goal).²

St Josemaría first prayed at St Thomas' shrine on August 28, 1958, and returned there for four consecutive years, up to and including 1962. An anecdote from about the same time as his first pilgrimage reveals his own devotion to the saintly statesman. In the oratory in Rome where he usually celebrated Mass, St Josemaría had had five reliquaries placed, one for each of Opus Dei's intercessors. Each one contained a relic of one of the saints, with the exception of St Thomas', which remained empty. And so, St Josemaría

2. Opus Dei's other intercessors have also been chosen to reflect this call to universality: St Pius X (Italian) for relationships with the Holy See, the Curé of Ars (French) for relationships with the bishops in whose dioceses the Prelature organizes its apostolic activities, St Nicolas of Bari (Greek) for material needs, and St Catherine of Siena (Italian) for matters concerning public opinion.

1. St Josemaría, *Letter* 19-3-1934.



September 3, 1958, St Dunstan's church, Canterbury, the resting-place of St Thomas More's skull. The Founder of Opus Dei, St Josemaría Escrivá with Fr Alvaro del Portillo, his successor and first Bishop-Prelate of Opus Dei.

put it up to Opus Dei members in Great Britain: "If you don't succeed in acquiring a relic of St Thomas More I'll be forced to place a note in the empty reliquary stating that 'this vessel is empty because my children in England have been unable to obtain a relic of Saint Thomas More' ..." It turned out to be quite a daunting challenge since Saint Dunstan's is an Anglican church and all the artifacts once belonging to More had long since been

claimed, authenticated, catalogued. However, the following year, in 1969, the abbess of a religious community that had conserved St Thomas' hair-shirt kindly offered St Josemaría a small piece of that material.

A human vocation

St Josemaría laid great stress on the fact that "[one's] human (professional, family and social) vocation is not opposed to [one's] supernatural vocation.

On the contrary, it is an integral part of it.”³ That is to say, nothing in a Christian’s life is marginal to his or her quest for holiness; everything should contribute to attaining that goal. For “there is no clash, no opposition, between serving God and serving mankind; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties, and our religious ones; between the commitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on our way to our heavenly homeland.”⁴

Given this spiritual perspective, it will come as no surprise that St Josemaría found St Thomas a compelling choice as intercessor for Opus Dei. Speaking on June 22, 1972, St Thomas’ feast day, St Josemaría had this to say to his spiritual followers: “This morning I saw it clearly in the Mass of St. Thomas More: to the very end of his life he was extraordinarily faithful to the King, but without ever giving way, not even by a millimetre, where he could not yield. From well before the time when God willed the Work into existence, I perceived two distinct fields [of interest and activity]: people’s rights and duties, first as citizens, and then as Christians; and I have never wavered in this conviction.” More did not take on the duties of a Lord Chancellor in pursuit of personal glory and power. Rather he sought to serve God and country.

His entire life, including and, per-

haps especially, the time he spent in prison, was marked by a number of distinctive traits: a deep respect for his obligations to the civil authority as represented by the monarch; absolute devotion in his religious obligations to God as the supreme power; a constant deepening of his baptismal vocation; and dedication to both his family and professional responsibilities.

These are the attributes of a Christian vocation lived in the heart of society as revealed by God to St Josemaría: what he termed “lay outlook”. This “lay outlook”, he used explain, displayed three basic characteristics:

One should be sufficiently *honest*, so as to shoulder one’s own personal responsibility; be sufficiently *Christian*, so as to respect those brothers of ours in the faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from those which any of us might maintain; and be sufficiently *Catholic* so as not to take advantage of our Mother the Church and involve her in human factions.⁵

St Thomas More was entirely faithful to his conscience. And this led him, as a matter of course, to refuse to go along with the sovereign when the King dissolved his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and denied the Pope’s supremacy. However, that did not prevent him from carrying out his duties as a loyal subject, nor from fully obeying legitimate royal orders. After he had been dismissed from his post,

3. St Josemaría, *Conversations with Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer* 60.

4. St Josemaría, *Friends of God* 165.

5. St Josemaría, *Conversations with Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer* 117.

St Thomas continued to defend the truth in his various writings. We might say that he lived St Josemaría's own prescription: "Be uncompromising in doctrine and conduct. But be yielding in manner. A mace of tempered steel, wrapped in a quilted covering. Be uncompromising, but don't be obstinate."⁶ His "holy intransigence" led eventually to the shedding of his blood, to martyrdom.

Sanctity of work

St Thomas went about his work with earnestness and competence, with honesty and justice, with disinterestedness and loyalty. He understood that "God sent men hyther [hither] to wake and wurke [work]." When he first arrived in the Chancellery he found a huge pile of neglected files, some of which had been gathering dust for years. So he knuckled down to his work eagerly. One day, when he asked for the next file requiring his attention, he was told that there were none left. His response was: "Thanks be to God, that for once this busy tribunal is at rest."

More was very pleased to learn from Pico della Mirandola⁷ that the laity, living in the midst of the world, can live

a life dedicated to God, that holiness was not the unique privilege of clerics and those in religious orders, that "human destiny transcends culture and civilization; the mission of one driven by love is to transform the society within which one lives, by spreading a Christian message to all human enterprises and by re-establishing the kingdom of Christ throughout the universe;"⁸ in other words, by sanctifying work and temporal realities. He also learned from Mirandola that the first rule of the one who dedicates himself to God is to love God and him alone, and scorn everything else for his sake (*amare unum tantum et contemnere omnia pro eo*). This represents the very core of Opus Dei's spirit: "to sanctify work, to attain holiness through work and to sanctify others through work," with the aim of placing Christ at the pinnacle of all human activities, and, as St Paul said, "to bring everything under Christ" (*instaurare omnia in Christo*) (Eph 1:10)⁹. In St Thomas' own words taken from his work of fiction *Utopia*: "the only dignity recognized in Utopia is that of work", and "the Utopian constitution values work to the point of making it a form of worship of the Divine." As such, work is seen as liberating and fundamental to the dignity of man.

St Thomas' thirst for work well done

6. St Josemaría, *The Way* 397.

7. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1462-94) a Renaissance philosopher. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* he stressed that man's dignity resided in his universality, that only man combined in his nature the reality of angel, brute, animal and mineral and that human perfection was to be found in an inward, religious union with God.

8. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *Sir Tomás Moro. Lord Canciller de Inglaterra* (Madrid, 1962), p. 77 (my translation).

9. These words were adopted by St Pius X as his Pontifical motto.

and for perfection in small things (which allowed him to accomplish tasks quickly, with intensity and conscientiously) is also found in St Josemaría. The harmony between the two is such that it influences even one's rest and leisure time. The purpose of rest, says St Thomas, is to "serve but for a refreshynge of the wery and forewatched body [...] For rest & recreacyon shold be but as a sawse. And sawse shold ye wote wel serve for a faynt and weke stomake, to gette yt the more appetyte to the meate, and not for encrease of voluptuose pleasure in every gredy gloton that hath in hym selfe sawce malapert all redy inough. And therfore lyke wyse as it were a fond fest that had all the table full of sawce."¹⁰ St Josemaría says that "to rest is not to do nothing. It is to turn our attention to other activities that require less effort."¹¹

Marriage as a vocation

This emphasis placed by St Josemaría on the holiness of everyday life serves to locate marriage as a genuine vocation at the heart of the Church.¹² St

10. In more modern English: The purpose of rest is "to serve by refreshing the weary and worn-out body [...] For rest and recreation should be but as a sauce. And sauce should, you well understand, serve for a faint and weak stomach, to wet its appetite for meat, and not for increasing pleasure in every greedy glutton that has already in himself enough impudent sauce. And therefore likewise become, as it were, a fond feast that had all the table full of sauce."

11. St Josemaría, *Friends of God* 62.

Paul laid the foundations for the dignity of Christian marriage in his *Letter to the faithful in Ephesus* (5:22-23 and 25): "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour." And: "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her." For its part, Vatican Council II stressed that when Christian spouses live in the grace of sacramental marriage, "penetrated with the spirit of Christ, their whole life is suffused by faith, hope, and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God."¹³ However, there was a revolutionary aspect to the teachings of the Founder of Opus Dei, when he wrote in 1939: "You laugh because I tell you that you have a 'vocation for marriage'? Well, you have just that: a vocation,"¹⁴ or when, two years later, he said to a married man: "God is calling you to paths of contemplation." The Holy See recognized the need to acknowledge this reality, as reflected in the foundational charism of Opus Dei, for its membership includes married persons as well as those open to the possibility of marriage; indeed, married people, who live their vocation within the context of their families,

12. See St Josemaría, 'Marriage: A Christian Vocation' in *Christ is Passing By*.

13. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) 48.

14. St Josemaría, *The Way* 27.

make up the majority of the Prelature.

We know that, during his stay at the Charterhouse in London, where he lived without taking vows, St Thomas deliberated at length on whether to follow a priestly calling or to marry. In the end, he decided to marry. And family life furnished him with enormous joy. He wrote to his daughters, on one occasion, to say that he looked forward with all his heart to returning home to the hearth. He understood that he had an important role to play in the family home: "For when I get home, I have to talk with my wife, chatter with my children, and consult with the servants. All these matters I consider part of my business, since they have to be done unless a man wants to be a stranger in his own house."

His acceptance of God's will can well serve as an unparalleled example of how to acknowledge divine providence, and may be seen as a model of saintliness as expressed through professional work done both skilfully and dutifully. "Whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles, it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully", he once wrote. It is what St Josemaría often called "care for small things": "Do everything for Love", he wrote. "Thus there will be no little things: everything will be big."¹⁵

With St Thomas it is impossible to separate the lawyer, the statesman, or the father from the Christian, – or from

the saint, for he became a saint by and through every facet of his life. In him we find the perfect synthesis of living a coherent Christian life allowing faith to permeate every thought and gesture. It is what St Josemaría called a "unified life". A unified life "simple and strong", is one where the Christian no longer distinguishes between prayer and work, because "one reaches the point where these two notions become indistinguishable [...], contemplation and action come to mean the same thing in spirit and in conscience."¹⁶ For the statesman, there was never a contradiction between what he felt in his soul, and his behaviour in the workaday world: "Christianity is not just eagerness of spirit, but the whole work of man, in body and soul; and it must impregnate, therefore, his devotions, family life, leisure activities and daily work."¹⁷

To be of the world without being worldly, such is the mark of a Christian who tries to avoid becoming so attached to the world as to prevent his entering into the kingdom of heaven and bringing other souls along as well. And while St Thomas certainly loved the world, he maintained, nonetheless, a detachment from it, drawing strength from the Cross to remain true to both God and his faith. Take, for example, his reaction upon learning that a fire had destroyed some of his personal belongings. He wrote to his

16. Quoted by myself, in *L'Opus Dei*, (Paris).

17. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

15. *Ibid.* 813.

wife: "take all the howshold with you to chyrche and ther thanke God bothe for that he hath geven vs and for that he hathe taken from vs and for that he hathe lefte vs, which yf it please hym he can (in)crease when he wyll and yf it please hym to leve vs yet lesse, at his pleasuer be yt."¹⁸

In addition to this command to love the will of God, he added instructions to compensate any neighbours for losses they might have incurred and to care for workers who might have lost their jobs because of the destruction of the barns that had burnt down. This example provides insight into his 'lay outlook', his concern for, and involvement in, secular matters. A reversal of fortune, or a situation of austerity imposed by circumstances beyond their control, did not affect the More family's unity nor distract from a joy that played an important role in their lives: "This harmony between the natural and the supernatural is perhaps the element which more than any other defines the personality of this great English statesman."¹⁹

Friendship

It is generally acknowledged that St

Thomas was a particularly faithful friend. History has furnished us with the names of many of them.²⁰

Antonio Bonvisi, an Italian merchant was his friend for forty years. While imprisoned in the Tower of London, he bade farewell to Bonvisi: "Thus of all frendes moste trustye, and to me most derelye beloved, and as I was wont to call you the apple of myne eye." And, in the most miserable moments of his incarceration, he added, "[I] repose my selfe in the swetenesse of thys merveyulous friendship of yours. And the faithful prosperitie of this amitie and frendshippe of yours towards me (I wot not howe) semeth in

19. (*contd.*) *men and politicians*, October 31, 2000, (see *Position Paper* 326 [February 2001] for the full text).

20. Among his friends were: John Colet, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, More's confessor and spiritual director, and founder of St Paul's School; William Grocyn, pastor at St Lawrence Jewry (London), and professor of Greek at Oxford who invited More to give lectures in his church; Thomas Linacre, physician and priest, and More's mentor in his studies of Aristotle; William Lily, principal at St Paul's School in London, whom More considered "the dearest partner of my endeavors"; the humanists Francis Cranevelt, Jerome Busleyden, Juan Luis Vives, Peter Gillis (Petrus Aegidius), Town Clerk for the city of Anvers, with whom More spent the happiest days of his life; Guillaume Bude, a frequent correspondent of his; Cuthbert Tunstal, Bishop of London and then of Durham, whom More accompanied on ambassadorial missions to Bruges in 1515 and 1521 and to Cambrai in 1529.

18. In more modern English: "Take all the household with you to church and there thank God for what he has given us and for what he has taken from us and for what he has left us, which if it please him he can increase when he will and if it please him to leave us still less, at his pleasure be it."

19. Pope John Paul II, *Motu proprio proclaiming St. Thomas More Patron of states-*

a maner to counterpeyse this unfortunate shipwracke of myne.”²¹

His friendship with Erasmus of Rotterdam was something special. It was founded primarily on the *communitas studiorum*, on the fact that the two were, in a way, “brothers in arms”. But it was also an “alliance in the struggle of spirits, a struggle in which the humanists defended the revival of Antiquity and, above all, Greek Antiquity, not merely as a general cultural artifact, but also as something specifically Christian.”²² Theirs was a friendship founded on an unconquerable love.

St Thomas was also a friend to King Henry VIII. His whole career is proof of this. The King and Queen enjoyed his conversation and company. Roper, his son-in-law, noted that Henry would often walk with the Lord Chancellor, his arm affectionately draped around More’s shoulders.

“When I speak to you about ‘apostolate of friendship’, I mean personal friendship, self-sacrificing and sincere: face-to-face, heart-to-heart,”²³ said St Josemaría. The Founder of

Opus Dei made friendship the foundation of an apostolate that he defined as being one of “friendship and confidence”. Friendship is thus a special means of evangelizing society. “For the world to follow a Christian path – the only worthwhile path – we need to live as loyal friends, with a friendship founded firstly on a loyal friendship with God.”²⁴ To be “friends of God” is therefore a pre-condition, since one’s apostolate is the external expression of the “inner life.”²⁵

The laity

The themes thus far explored – human vocation, sanctification of work, vocation of marriage, friendship – are typical of people who live in the workaday world. St Thomas understood the importance of the laity in the earthly city. As such, we see him react strongly in a letter to a monk in which he refutes “the idea that monastic life is, in principle, superior to the life of the lay person, [and] the conviction, demonstratively espoused, that a monk is essentially a better Christian, closer to God, someone more pleasing to God, the surest of his own salvation.”²⁶ St Josemaría’s whole enterprise consisted in proclaiming, loudly and clearly – anticipating the teachings of Vatican Council II – that, in the first place,

21. In more modern English: “Thus of all [my] friends [you are] the most trusted, and to me the most dearly beloved, and as I was wont to call you the apple of my eye.”... “[I] rest myself in the sweetness of this marvellous friendship of yours. And the faithful prosperity of this amity and friendship of yours towards me (I know not how) seems in a some way to counterpoise this unfortunate shipwreck of mine.”

22. Peter Berglar, *La hora de Tomás Moro*, p. 196 (my translation).

23. St Josemaría *Furrow* 191.

24. St Josemaría, *The Forge* 943.

25. See St Josemaría, *The Way* 961.

26. See Thomas More, *In Defense of Humanism*, Ed. Daniel Kinney, Yale, pp. 197-311.

holiness is not the preserve of an élite, but is rather the vocation of all the baptized and, secondly, that all are called to the one, same holiness, to the fullness of the Christian life. In advocating not “a spirituality for the laity,” but rather “a lay spirituality,”²⁷ he opened paths to holiness for the laity in the course of their daily lives, particularly through work in all its forms. “Your duty is to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you. Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: ‘Be ye perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect’ ” (Mt 5:48).²⁸

All these factors explain why St Josemaría indicated that, because More never ceased to struggle, intelligently and perfectly, to fulfil his family commitments and professional obligations while continuing to love the Church and the Pope, he could easily have been a member of Opus Dei. That is to say, in response to a divine call, he could have participated fully in the apostolic activities of the Prelature, in a manner consistent with his familial, professional and social obligations, and transform his life, by effective

prayer, into contemplation.

St Josemaría was especially convinced that those who built cathedrals, who sculpted lattice works of stone, invisible from below, and who created true works of God, could also have belonged to Opus Dei, because they had learned how to make their personal work a work of God, an *opus Dei*.²⁹

St Josemaría spoke in those terms because he did not think of saints as remote beings, but rather as people of flesh and blood whom he understood and with whom he could identify. Without the shadow of a doubt he put into practice the advice he gave to a historian who was engaged in writing a biography of More. The historian recounts: “I was speaking one day [...], in London, with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer about an aspect of the life of Thomas More that was not easy to understand. He advised me to employ a biographical technique that I have never forgotten: ‘You must put yourself in his shoes.’ ”³⁰

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27. See Cardinal Albino Luciani (later Pope John Paul D, “Chercher Dieu dans le travail quotidien”, in *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, July 25, 1978.

28. St Josemaría, *The Way* 291.

29. See St Josemaría, *Friends of God* 65 and 63.

30. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, p. 13 (my translation).