

# GETTING THE CHANCE OF APPLYING THE TEACHING OF THE BLESSED JOSEMARIA AMONG RESEARCHERS IN SWEDEN

MICHELE ROBERTO PESTALOZZI\*

## Introduction

In this contribution I will present how the teachings of Blessed Josemaria Escrivá can be fruitful among researchers in Sweden, where I have been living for almost three years. Every statement contained here is the result of a personal analysis of facts and discussions occurred, in that time, and therefore do not have the force of a conclusion. I hope nevertheless to give rise to further, more detailed work.

The outline of my contribution is as follows:

- Introduction: Sweden and its peculiarities, from the weather to the situation of Catholics.
- Ordinary life and scientific work: truth, order and joy as the link.
- Conclusions: human virtues are the ground, faith builds the bridge.

## Sweden: the north of Europe

It appears useful to me to introduce the country in which I gathered my experiences, in order to have an as clear as possible picture of the environment where people act. I will begin with the first impressions that came to the mind of this newly landed, fully

motivated young foreigner, trying then to go deeper in my observations and disclose some aspects that are important for the understanding of my remarks.

The first thing that one realises when coming to Sweden is the general quietness of the environment. No excessive traffic, no hooting, no screaming or loud speaking... Everything seems to be perfectly organised, planned and thought through carefully, nothing seems to happen by chance, no surprise... This is just marvellous and appreciable, when compared to the situation in some other countries, especially in the South of Europe. What is more, the feeling of full organisation is somehow sustained by some well established myths about Sweden, making it no surprise either. Signs everywhere remind you what you have to do and how, every possible service you can get is listed somewhere and updated regularly (mainly on the web...), every rule is clear to everybody.

Life in the city is perfectly organised: public transports are always on time, even in the most remote places in the country; bureaucracy takes some time (as everywhere) but is done in the best way; you can pay everything by credit card, down to 10 SEK (about 1 USD) when shopping; people queue very politely for everything (from the post office to the grocery, the same in a hospital as for the bus) and

\* Michele Roberto Pestalozzi: Birthdate: 19-02-1973 Nationality: swiss. Education: - grade in physics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, Switzerland, 1998. PhD in astronomy in progress, at the Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden, planned 2003. Languages: Italian (mother tongue), french, german, english, swedish, spanish (fair knowledge), arabic (some knowledge).

many queues are organised by a system of numbers that avoids just useless standing around for a long time. People in general do not seem to be particularly «excited» but mostly quiet and peaceful.

The countryside is beautiful, of a beauty that is appreciable almost only some short period per year. Long winters, embedding people and land in darkness from October till April, dampen enthusiasm a lot and make it hard to propose «exciting» activities. Mid-seasons like spring and autumn are almost non-existent and one experiences an abrupt change in weather conditions passing e.g. from winter to summer, where in a couple of weeks everything becomes green and the days are brighter and longer. This change in the local climate affects people in every sense, from the way they dress to the way they behave: cheerfulness and joy dominate the general attitude in the summer and the dark days are quickly forgotten.

It is not the aim of this work, of course, to present a complete sociological study on Sweden, but I think it is worth mentioning the real sense of respect present in every Swede. In the time I have been living in this country, I have never experienced any attack against my person nor have seen it towards another person. No opinion is contradicted immediately, prior to a consideration of the deep motivations that lead someone to express it. The response is usually not explosive but peaceful, and if it is the case of an unknown topic of discussion, silence is preferred to an answer without deep understanding or even with only partial knowledge about the subject. This makes all opinion-based discussion very essential and «purified» from all kinds of superfluous expressions and in some cases half truths. Respect and seeking for factual truth are major components of the way of thinking and acting in Sweden.

What role does religion play in this scenario? The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden has up until recently been a state church to which every new-born child belongs by birth. It represents 90 % of the population. Catholics are a clear minority (about 160.000), most of them are immigrants. Among Swedes, Catholics are mainly converts. It is interesting to notice how the Catholic community is full of affection for the faith, offering a lot of courses about the Catholic faith, preparation for baptism, regular celebration of masses, sometimes masses in Latin and so on. There is in general a great zeal in preserving as original as possible all expressions of faith, putting special effort in taking care about the liturgy and personal piety. Prejudices against Catholics are also present, but this has often an effect of strengthening the community. On the other hand, since Catholicism has suffered very much in the recent history of Sweden, one observes a clear separation between life of faith and «ordinary life». The intersection of these two aspects of people's life is very small. It is still thought that the best way to live one's faith is to adhere to a monastic order or to become a priest. I have, for example, often met young men who have followed an education in a priest seminary for a time. Furthermore, the tradition of a very well developed structure that is responsible for the organisation of all activities makes sometimes the personal involvement in such organisations be seen as the only way of putting one's faith into practise: «It would be nice to create a sort of PR office in the parish, in order to build a bridge between the Catholic church and the protestant church, to be the official organ through which the Catholic church informs about itself» I was told by one of the new converts. In general, «practising the faith» is the central difference between Catholics and all others. The layman mentality, fundamental in the teaching of the founder of Opus Dei, is a new way of

«interpreting» one's faith, which in many cases appears to be more fitting to the normal conditions of life. Not without a certain prudence, the message of the blessed Josemaría Escrivá awakens great interest and people ask for information demonstrating a great level of understanding and curiosity, parallel to a clear will of defending their in many cases newly discovered interior life. There are as well some rare cases of demonstration of interest for the spirit of Opus Dei coming from non-Catholic people. These are nevertheless confined to a little number.

### The point

I will now try to link the above picture to the everyday life of a Ph. D. student at Chalmers University of Technology (CTH), a high level engineering school in Gothenburg, the second city of Sweden.

CTH «produces» highly qualified engineers, who are very much required by the local industry. What happens quite often is that newly graduate students leave research and are employed as engineers in one of the big companies in the economic area of Gothenburg. In general, these positions are more likely to attract people since they guarantee better incomes than an academic curriculum. Nevertheless, there are some researchers, and it is about these that I am going to talk. Throughout this presentation I will refer to «pure research» as research in natural science.

### The search for truth

Pure research is known to be an activity for very special people, often very much worried about their

research but very little about what happens outside of their lab. Pure research is in general not driven by market pressure or industrial requirements, but only by curiosity and fascination. No place for routine, no special regularity. The questions in this type of research refer to phenomena which most of the time do not have any direct consequences for everyday life. The typical attitude is the search for knowledge, the search for ultimate explanations, the search for truth about nature. From this point of view pure research has an advantage over all other scientific activities since by its very nature, it is its «everyday business», to deal with fundamental questions. This is the greatest aspect of research: the opportunity to solve problems that elevate human mental activity to the highest levels, and shows its excellence. Once you come to the interface between the known and unknown, it is natural to ask «And what afterwards?», «Is what we see true?», «Why?». Still, despite all the positive aspects mentioned above, science is not immune from the danger of false interpretation or overestimation.

The efficiency with which science has given answers to the questions above has gradually established science as the measure for the degree of truth in knowledge in general. Every statement has to be justified scientifically in order for it to be accepted for discussion. The matter of truth becomes everything you can «prove scientifically». All the rest will be «matter of taste» or very personal conclusion, and would not be discussed, as not leading to any generally valid law or theorem. Pure research leads in some way to the elimination from discussion of all elements that are not measurable by means of scientific proofs and thus cannot be considered as being part of the truth. This situation easily excludes the acceptance of a truth in matters of e.g. morality or ethics. Everyone is allowed to construct his/her

«personal truths» to be adapted in case of strong conflicts with one's lifestyle. Everything becomes relative except the statements of science.

The search of truth has always been an important point for Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. Truth must be sought for constantly and with uprightness of mind. Therefore the search for truth requires that people are prepared to accept the results of this search ('*el compromiso de la verdad*' as the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá used to name this attitude). All truth comes from God, who alone is true. Truth regarding mankind is especially preserved by God. The «scientific truth» characterises scientific research. Actually both truths lie on two parallel planes. The scientific truth is reached by means proper to science. The truth about man by other means (philosophy, faith). Both have to coexist. The influence goes in fact in both directions, from scientific truth to truth about man and back. The former direction gives solid instruments for investigating faith, the latter opens the horizon of the researcher giving the right sense to his/her activity (*Fides et Ratio*). Science has to answer questions about science and set the truth there, and not vindicate the truth of answers in philosophy. Uprightness of mind and existence of an absolute truth are the pillars of research.

In a very much evolved and advanced society like there is in Sweden, truth is confined to science or to its most popular manifestation, technology. Ethics for example does not belong to science or better, it is not a matter of research because no absolute proofs or measurements can be drawn from its study. This is the mechanism that «flattens» the general view of life: the supernatural aspect, which is able to give absoluteness to knowledge about man, is cancelled. Doing so the link between every day

life and its supernatural value is lost. In fact, without knowing what man is about, it is not possible to appreciate activities that do not «produce science» or «technology». Man is reduced to a system that acts according to laws that are sometimes better sometimes worse known. Because of the argumental strength and objectivity of the results proposed by science, a researcher runs the risk of forgetting what a man is about and, who is God and where also is to be found.

The considerations commented above let us believe that in science no place is left for the supernatural. It is nevertheless not uncommon to meet researchers who during the discussion find the weak points of this way of thinking: man does not seem to be reducible to a series of algorithms or schemes of whatever complex structure. If one thinks about what a man is, going a step further than mere instincts or bodily needs, than there must be place for something else. Science is obliged to surrender in its purpose of explaining everything, and a new horizon opens the researcher's mind. In this way it is possible to speak about the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá: faith can expand the researcher's views about man and consequently about nature. Faith can lead to Truth, the truth that is fundamental for every man. In this way one discovers not only the 'weak points' mentioned above, but on the contrary, one can make them the starting points for an expansion of his/her knowledge. Again, the idea is not to point out weaknesses in people's knowledge, but to strongly and courageously affirm the absolute value of truth, once reached. There is *one* truth, to which everything refers and it is the only one which is worth searching for. The 'compromise' mentioned by the Blessed Escrivá is not a constraint but rather the starting point for expansion, and thus the liberation of human knowledge.



## Order

The teachings of the Blessed Josemaria Escrivá are not confined to highly theoretical questions about what is truth. On the contrary the founder of Opus Dei was known to have a highly developed sense for practice. The human virtue of order is one of the fields of human activity where practical actions are clearly noticeable. At the same time, there are some aspects of order which do not come to the surface straight away: one can easily «see» order but one can also «feel» order in a person. I will try to see what happens to researchers in Sweden, having in mind that these considerations can well be applied to other researchers all over the world.

The pace of work in a scientific environment is very high, often having the consequence of very long «evenings» or nights, not always justified by the amount of work to be done but very often by just the eagerness to come to a result or the «fun» of a new discovery. Order of priorities are often changed depending on the «scientific mood» (if one feels inspired or particularly bright or on the contrary not inspired at all etc.). It is actually objectively very difficult to stop working when a great result appears on the displays of the different devices, but this general attitude creates a lot of disorder in the life of a person. «Being a scientist and being married is very difficult» I was told once by a colleague. That may be right, but I think the problem is not «being a scientist» but rather «what priorities one builds his/her life on». The founder of Opus Dei insisted very much on offering everyday work to God, elevating not only the work itself but much more everybody involved in that work, whatever work. Scientific research is not excluded. Offering a well done job in research is of great advantage not only for the scientific community but also for all people

«orbiting» around the researcher. A well done job in research is not only full of discoveries, but also ordered and well inserted in one's life. This aspect creates constraints: a sort of priority list must be created between social, familiar, spiritual, bodily duties. The risk for a scientist is to grade every duty by measuring its importance in material terms. For example sleeping in the morning after a very long «exciting» night becomes most important, whereas stopping working at a fixed hour in order to participate in a social event (cinema, theatre, beer with some friends) or meet the family at decent times is lower in the list of priorities... In these matters, one needs a strong presence of God in order not to exaggerate the «bodily» duties. «With order you will multiply time» says the Blessed Josemaria Escrivá, and this seems to be up to date in particular amongst young scientists. With order, fundamental research can be easily linked to one's personal ordinary life and contributes to the personal improvement towards a virtuous life. There will be, there is, time outside the lab!

This is very likely to happen where I work, the Onsala Space Observatory. The Observatory lies at about 50 km south from Gothenburg. We (Ph. D. students) usually travel back and forth every day, but sometimes «scientific work» constrains us to stay there. The result is, as mentioned above, «long nights», not always full of excitement... Since nothing else is around than scientific devices, it is not easy to say «stop», with the result that the working rhythm become very hard. It is a very strange feeling as soon one returns to the city and meets people: one realises that there is a whole world outside the observatory. That cannot be forgotten if order is established, and the right priorities are set. To set into practice the teachings of the Blessed Josemaria Escrivá in this matter is a challenge for everyone, but

I think in the scientific world this challenge is harder to win. Human curiosity being the only driving engine of the scientific product (knowledge), it is very difficult to confine it in a set of rules. The same human curiosity is, on the other hand, responsible for searching the truth, which, as mentioned above, not only is noticeable through scientific or technological results but as well in understanding man as creature of God. In this way the teachings of the Blessed Escrivá help in constructing a scale of priorities which elevates all human activities to their full value. The simple «personal fight» to acquire order in ordinary life gives useful insights in order to understand the importance of the virtue of order: it is easier to make decisions in an ambiguous situation, collaborators can more easily understand what is important and what is not etc. The virtue of order has not only practical, immediately visible consequences, but also deep ones: one becomes «master» of his/her knowledge and is capable to distinguish what is important in order to acquire a real and true knowledge from what instead would make him/her follow wrong directions.

Finally, it is useful to point out that in the teachings of the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá the idea of having a *plan of life* has a particular importance. A plan of life as a skeleton for one's life is very helpful for winning the challenge of setting order. Regular appointments, even of supernatural character (thus personal), set boundaries not to personal freedom, as cheaply believed, but to inefficiency and distraction in one's activity. It will be easier to 'do what you have to do and to stay in what you do' as the Blessed Escrivá used to say. The challenge is hard, but the price is worth: acquiring a virtue is always a step toward the real realisation of man as such.

## Joy

A third aspect that I would like to go through is contact with people. Since in Sweden everything is automatic, all questions have immediate and automatic answers, all needs are provided fast and in a complete way. There is less and less need for contact with other people. On top of that, the above mentioned great respect for one's opinion does not improve the discussion of many issues. The apostolate of the «grandeur» of every day life becomes difficult. Everyday life is full of already answered questions, nothing seems to be left for discussion, information and so on.

The teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá brings here a particularly useful aspect into the game: joy. The joy I am now talking about does not refer to the particular state of wellness, usually felt in some particularly happy situations. This kind of joy is very nice and an important channel of communication of one's feelings. On the other hand though, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's joy refers to the fruit of a supernatural view of life, sustained by a strong interior life. Only this kind of joy makes one actually able to appreciate the good things and understand the bad ones. Being so deeply embedded, it runs the risk of not being seen straight away. But it is thanks to its beautiful and discrete power that people come in contact.

The first mentioned type of joy has its roots in external events and is a reaction to external situations. It can easily be forced, becoming irritating instead of attracting. A steadily smiling person cannot be considered joyful only for that. On the contrary, the probability for this person to be unhappy or to be only superficially friendly is high. What is more, this kind of «joy» can suddenly

faint and disappear as the environment does not support it in some way. The other type of joy, the real one, the one taught by the Bl. Josemaría Escrivá, is stable. The environment has very little power on it, and, once acquired, it is not only noticeable but also spreads out into the environment. Interior life is mentioned as the mean that makes it possible for everyone to acquire such a stable joy. Building the bridge between man and God, it makes man rejoice whenever he/she fulfils God's plans (The Way, 992). This kind of joy depends only on God and is therefore stable. In the following lines, «joy» is used to indicate the 'real one'.

As mentioned at the beginning of the section, contact with people in Sweden has a particular difficulty to overcome: the almost "no-need" for the other. In my opinion and from my very modest experience, joy is the key element to fill this gap. Not only because it radiates a positive attitude toward life and everything, but also because it gives insights to the existence of the absolute true and stable, God. It says clearly, through people's life, that there is something absolutely true on which one can build his/her life and at the same time give real joy. In science it is often so that once the researcher discovers that science cannot answer to all questions or that it cannot provide the solution of all problems in one's life, he/she falls in deep unhappiness. Only a

friendly and sincere personal contact is the right way to avoid such a sad state. This contact can be established through the communication of real joy. Eventually scientists become less competitors and more collaborators expanding the minds of the whole community.

## Conclusions

In this paper I looked at some aspects of the teaching of the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and at their application in the particular environment of pure researchers in Sweden. Truth, order and joy are the aspects discussed here. As a sort of conclusion I can say that the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei have a great role to play in building the link between the supernatural and the ordinary life. Even in fundamental research, where ordinary life seems to be in conflict with the supernatural, one can find useful inspiration for building up a deeper knowledge both in science and about man. Faith in action that is able to coexist with whatever activity in the life of all men is the bridge connecting earth to stars, and what could be better for an astronomer?

As I said this paper should be considered as the beginning of a deeper and expanded study, in order to catch every single detail of the «grandeur of ordinary life in research».

<sup>1</sup> «Mons. Escrivá, al situarse ante la universidad, la acepta tal como es, con sus características tradicionales, y la contempla con ojos de fe». *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, "Amar al mundo apostólicamente", en *Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y la Universidad*, 118.