

Work, a Path to Holiness¹

Janne Haaland Matlary

University of Oslo, Norway

When I was asked to deliver a key note speech with the title “Work, a Path to Holiness”, I was both honored and awed, but most of all, surprised. I am no expert on Escrivá, no theologian, and certainly no expert on holiness. I lead an ordinary life as a mother and professor of international politics at Oslo University.

But I have discovered his message about work to be true, in my own ordinary condition.

And this must be the very core of the issue: that the Work *works*, so to speak.

1. INTRODUCTION

I unfortunately never met Escrivá. He must have been a man of intense work, passion, and energy in every sense of the term. Each time one reads his small aphorisms, one is left with a bad conscience and spurred on to work more and better. I think I have read most of what he wrote, and find it painfully penetrating. There is no small talk or comforts, but direct, blunt, and realistic advice. One’s own non-compliance becomes very obvious, which is one reason why a dose of Escrivá may be too much for some.

It would be wrong to start to talk about work, however. We should first talk about the main question, which is the universal call to holiness and the lay apostolate.

¹ I am thankful for comments on an early draft of this speech from Johannes Bernaldo, Yago de la Cierva, Edna Kavanagh, Jose Luis Illanes, Llorens Gonzales, Joaquin and Rafael Navarro-Valls, Covadonga O’Shea and Dennis Searby.

Being a convert to Catholicism, I have only gradually become acquainted with clericalism and the traditional primacy of the consecrated life over lay life that still lives on in many places despite the Second Vatican Council.

In Scandinavia there are hardly any Catholics, hence no clericalism. There the problem is rather the lack of a Church that teaches anything. Lay people are left to themselves to interpret Christianity.

But the role of the laity is the key one in Christianity in these countries. In Norway, the Protestant layman's movement has been the hallmark of Christianity, and the lay preacher Hans Nielsen Hauge in the 19th century spurred a countrywide movement of the holiness of ordinary lay life that challenged the state church and the role of the clergy. Hauge himself was imprisoned for many years because of his revolutionary spirituality, whose impact is still strong today. I would say that what remains of solid and vibrant Christianity today in Norway owes its legacy to Hauge. The word '*legmannsbevegelsen*' (the layman's movement) is synonymous with solid piety and strong faith.

But his is a lay movement '*tout court*'. A friend's father, on his deathbed, said these words: «Every man his own priest». That characterises the Protestant layman's movement fairly well: there is no need for any church. All is up to each layman himself, who interprets Scripture and seeks to live as a good disciple.

This demand is reminiscent of the key notion in Escrivá about *being*, not doing — the person can only be an apostle when he or she really *is* a Christian, not when one proclaims to be one.

But at this point the similarities between Escrivá and the Protestant lay movement end. The intellectual and doctrinal tradition of Catholicism is lacking, as are the sacraments.

I became a Catholic, coming from an agnostic background, but struggled with the problem of 'Sunday Christendom' for many years. It was as if Catholicism belonged to Rome, not to Norway. That was of course all my own problem, although my country has virtually no Catholics and a very anti-Catholic tradition.

At a certain point, a crisis occurred: I knew that Christianity somehow had to be real in the middle of my ordinary life; or I would leave the Church. There would be no point in seeking Sunday 'consolation' in a privately Catholic world. Christ was either incarnated in my everyday life, or not at all. At the time I led the kind of 'double life' that Escrivá talks about so often, and I knew that something was terribly wrong about it.²

I met someone from the Work in 1995, and that was the Copernican point for me. That person quoted these famous words about finding God in the street,

² See ESCRIVÁ, J., *Homily "Passionately Loving the World"*, included in *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, London 1993.

or not at all. I reluctantly started to read Escrivá, but did not like him too much, as I then harboured all the usual prejudices about the Work. His message was simple and almost too good to be true: Find Christ in what you do — work, family life, social relationships. That is possible, and that is the way to serve Him, sanctify yourself and others. This promise kept me interested, as I had to find Christ in my ordinary life, or not at all. So I read on, everything I could find about this spirituality, while my prejudices were alive and kicking.

This spirituality of work was logical, so logical that one is surprised that it has not been clear to everyone always; but knowing and intellectually accepting it as true does not mean *practising* it.

We all know these penetrating words so well. But the *praxis* is difficult — a life-long struggle against one's whims, will, desires, and laziness. This vocation is certainly no easier than a monastic one; in fact, it requires the Christian to be a contemplative in the middle of the world. It is in fact very difficult indeed to put into practise.

2. THE ONLY IMPORTANT ISSUE: SANCTIFICATION

The importance of work can only be seen in this *larger* context: The goal of human life is to love and praise God, and therefore one who aspires to holiness will necessarily serve every human being as well as 'improve' the world. The main aim is to become holy, to imitate Christ, and this main and personal goal has as its *consequence* that one brings Christ to others and makes the world a better and more just place.

The *primacy* is on the *personal* quest for holiness, and all the other consequences flow from this.

This means that one does not 'play a role' in society and work, in order to attract others to Christ, but one must really and genuinely *become* Christ-like — become a person who carries out God's work by cooperation with grace and in constant 'conversation' with God. There can be no difference between the Christian and the worker or citizen — there is only one life. One does not 'join' the Work of God; one really has to *become* it.³

This accent on *being* before any *action* is often very much misunderstood by those who criticise the Work: they think one 'belongs' to something that is hidden from view and kept secret, when one in fact is *becoming* something that one was not fully before, but in the same place, same job, and same circum-

³ See e.g. O'CALLAGHAN, P. (2000), pp. 411-415, ILLANES, J.-L. (1968) p. 39, and FABRO ET AL. (1993).

stances. The dictum to ‘make heroic verse out of the prose of everyday’ captures this eloquently. This is extremely obvious and simple to those who seek God in the middle of the world and who already have discovered that He is in the middle of work — but it is too simple for the world to understand.

This *obviousness* about the Work strikes me again and again. It is obvious that the place and circumstances where I and you are born and live must be the basis for our vocation to holiness. How could it be otherwise? It would be absurd if God had placed us in circumstances where we could not fulfil our Christian life and vocation. Further, it would be equally absurd if only those with a monastic vocation had a ‘real’ vocation. Christ himself, the carpenter, would then not really ‘count’ during all his thirty working years, but only during those few years of public ministry.

When I work with political analysis, which I love, I am at the very core of what my identity is all about and where my talents are unfolded. How could this be distant from my Creator? And even more so, when I am with my children, teaching them and taking care of them, then I really and deeply know that I encounter God. The peace and joy of that, but also all the sorrows and the hard work of motherhood, undoubtedly bring me closer to God than most other situations of my life.

3. THE VIRTUES AND WORK

In Norwegian there is no word for ‘virtue’. The concept does not exist apart from having a meaning like sexual prudishness — ‘*dydig*’ means someone who does not have sex because he or she disdains it. This change of meaning signals the extreme weakness of classical learning and especially the Christian natural law tradition in Scandinavia, which one must say is completely unknown.

Nonetheless, virtue is the key word for the spirituality of work. The issue is how we are going to become saints; how we will become Christ-like in this life. Everything else — a better world, imbued with Christ, the apostolic activity — all this can *only* flow from becoming Christ-like ourselves if it is to be sustainable. There will be no conversions and no improvements without this. Escrivá underlines this time and again — prayer, contemplation before any action⁴, and his realism is lucid in his insistence on beginning again and again, with the right intention. The difficulty of sanctifying work lies in our lack of correspondence because we lose the awareness of God and cease to ‘converse’ with Him. This is

⁴ ESCRIVÁ, J. (1987) *Forja*, nos. 71-76, 435, 756, 949; *Camino*, “Vida sobrenatural” and “Más de vida interior”.

not surprising, Escrivá seems to say, since you are in the middle of the hustle and bustle, but it can and must be dealt with - through your effort at an intense spiritual life.

We all know how 'easy' it is to pray during a retreat or in Church, and we all know how fast our spiritual resources are depleted in the middle of secular work and ordinary stress. But this is why the spiritual life is key: we need all aspects of this 'spiritual support system' because it is so difficult to make work into prayer.

The human virtues are necessary but not sufficient conditions for sanctification. They are well known to all of you. The hard thing is to acquire them, not to know what they are. In addition, Escrivá talks a lot about the importance of examination of conscience, frequent confession, the sacraments, prayer, and so on — the entire spiritual 'support system' that the Church has always recommended. All this is required in order to progress.

The common obliviousness to sin today is like the tip of an iceberg: the sins you still see form the visible part, while nine-tenths of the iceberg is hidden below water. Many do not even see the visible part any more, and are shipwrecked. But those who gradually penetrate below the water appreciate how hard it is to see farther down, and also how surprising it is to discover the immense size of the iceberg. Only an intense spiritual life will be able to bring self-insight and thereby, knowledge of how far we still are from God.

Advancement in human virtue is the platform for any real Christian life. Thus it is only to be expected that Escrivá always talks about prayer before work. Work, however well done, without prayer is useless from the supernatural point of view.

This insight came late to me. For several years after I became acquainted with Escrivá I concentrated more on my work — that it be well done and important in human eyes — than on my spiritual life. I tended to neglect the fact that work can only be sanctified and sanctifying when done in the context of spiritual life and with the right intention. With the purely human perspective I had on work, even after becoming utterly fascinated by Escrivá's message, I was prevented from making this work into more than that — just work, well done. My understanding of the importance of work started with the work itself, not with its supernatural 'setting'. When I finally discovered that prayer must precede and supersede work, I understood the real spirituality of Escrivá.

Working well without a supernatural perspective is good, useful, laudable, and develops both human virtues and society, but it is nothing more than that. It is not sanctified; it does not sanctify the worker nor his fellows.

This may sound harsh, but it is a major point. As Illanes points out so well, the world of work, done as well as possible from a human point of view, must be 'integrated with' the supernatural life of the worker. Only then does the work

become prayer, and the worker prays through his work, praises and loves God while striving to work as perfectly as possible.⁵

There is a very large difference between work seen from a human perspective and work seen from God's perspective. We catch glimpses of the latter as we progress spiritually, but do not see it clearly ever here on earth. We see our work and its meaning, like everything else, 'through a glass, darkly'. But if we abandon the effort to acquire the supernatural perspective, our work remains simply the empirical work we see and do. It is not transformed into God's work, does not transform structures and persons, nor ourselves.

This difference is key to the spirituality of work: it is obvious that work must be humanely well done in order to offer it to God as a service and a sign of our immense love for Him. But in order for this gift to be 'raw material' not only for us, but for God in re-Christianising the world from within, we must offer it with the right intention, intensely desired, and enveloped in prayers.

When I was only concentrating on doing the work well, thinking that the work that I saw as important also was so in God's eyes, I used human logic which says that the more important my work was and the more people I reached, the better. Maybe I was right in this assessment, but I may have been wrong as well.

But if I were right, then all the hidden work of all the 'insignificant' people in the world — work that never reached many, never became very visible, would be less important than mine. What about the anonymous potato-peeler that Escrivá uses as an example? How was I to know that her work was less important than mine?

Indeed, the human perspective quickly betrays its ignorance, for God's perspective can be entirely different. In the human perspective, the obscure work of Jesus the carpenter would not count for much.

When one discovers that one knows nothing about the importance that God attaches to one's life and specific vocation, one discovers that the way is called humility and abandonment. We know nothing about His plans until we have taken the steps, one by one, and can look back and discern a certain path. Therefore we must battle on two fronts simultaneously: the *second*, necessary but easier, is to work well; the *first* and vital one is to have an intense spiritual life, which permeates the life of work.

4. WHERE DOES THE SPIRITUALITY OF WORK COME FROM?

It would be wrong to look for a full-fledged theology of work in Escrivá's writings. The insights he had were given to him in inspirations not created by him

⁵ ILLANES, J-L., *op.cit.*, pp. 46-55.

through an intellectual process of study. He had no plans to start what has become known as the Work, but recounts how it was made clear to him what this mission of his was. De Prada's biography gives fascinating insights into the development of his vocation while Escrivá was young priest in Madrid, how God gave him graces that provided a gradual insight into what his mission was to be⁶. I cherish this biography because here we see how Escrivá, without means, learned about his way and his extraordinary mission from God as a very humble person. He was willing and ready; God set the scene for the development of the plot of how the *Opus Dei* was born.

What makes me so intensely happy about his vocation is not that work is the way, but the tremendous insistence on *ordinary life* as the setting for lay vocations: where we will become saints if we dedicate ourselves to it. This stress on ordinary, hidden life stands in very stark contrast to what must have been a 'natural' clericalism of the day in Spain, where the idea of lay vocations must have seemed utterly foreign. I know some of the same 'natural' clericalism from Hungary, where the Church had been 'frozen' throughout the Communist period, and where the role of the clergy still is very much the Church.

It is easy enough for us, after Vatican II, to see that lay people have their own vocation, but how strange such a thought must have been to Catholic Spain in the 1930s. And the misunderstandings that Escrivá, himself a priest, must have met, can only be imagined. He, a priest, to harbour such ideas! This difficult setting of his is further testimony to the authenticity of God's will in giving him the charism of the Work.

The accent in this spirituality is on the importance of ordinary life, indeed on how *extraordinary* every ordinary life is meant to be. Those who reach the top of their professions, do so because they work well, and that, of course, leaves them much room for reaching out to many through their apostolate. Some would therefore infer that Escrivá intended all to become powerful and important in a human sense, so as to be able to influence all of society. But this is not the point; it is rather the sanctification of the hidden and ordinary, like Christ who lived an obscure life for thirty years in a profession that was not powerful or prestigious.

It follows from this that work acquires its meaning and sanctifying character *only* if it is performed as a service to God and neighbour, as a way of praising God that we are meant to undertake. Work offered as a service to God must be

⁶ VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, A. (2001). Here one sees, starkly, how the poor priest Escrivá worked against all odds in establishing the Work. This account is all the more interesting because it is abundantly clear that the society and clerical tradition in Spain at this time were completely foreign to the idea of lay vocations and apostolate. There was no incentive whatsoever in Escrivá's surroundings that would lead him to undertake his task.

done as perfectly as possible, as one would not give away something bad or ugly to a loved one.

While praise of God and love of God is expressed through contemplative prayer and the Divine Office for those who have a religious vocation; our lay way of praising and loving God is expressed through our work, well done and with the right intention. Our only place is in the world, in the middle of all human work and activity; where else can we be? We see that God has placed us here so that we can imitate Christ in this specific place and condition. It is truly very logical and obvious, but it is also absolutely revolutionary — not only in Church history, which for many centuries saw lay people as ‘deficient’ with regard to having a specific vocation; but much more in a personal, existential sense: your ordinary life is unique, rare, extraordinary — it is the design God has made especially for you — tailor-made for your sanctification.⁷

There can hardly be better news. So many millions of people — Catholics, non-Catholics and non-Christians, are desperately unhappy because they are looking for meaning in their own daily lives. They neither know nor see that right here, in the middle of their boring, hard, monotonous days, there is the hidden pearl. It is not in Rome or Jerusalem; it is in their own heart where God, the source, resides in the Holy Spirit. Their ways to find this meaning are as varied as are the persons themselves, but once they see a little, they can find the fullness of their vocation right where they are, where they work. *This is the greatest of all discoveries: it is possible to live a unity of life that brings joy, serenity, and closeness to Christ everywhere, in every situation.*⁸

Long before I had heard about Escrivá I spent a summer with my family in Annecy, France, the hometown of St. Francis of Sales, patron saint of journalists. While there I read his correspondence with St. Jeanne de Chantal, his life-long *Seelenfreund*. Francis’ immersion in the daily, ordinary life of his parishioners made these letters contemporary, simple, lucid and inspiring to me, so many years later. The sanctity of ordinary life sprang from them, like a natural source of water. Francis seems to have known some of the secret that Escrivá was given to bring to all of us.

5. WORK MEANS HARDSHIP AND JOY

It is easy to say that one should work with human perfection. But this is very difficult, especially when one is tired and lacks inspiration. How many days

⁷ ILLANES, J-L. (1997), pp. 211-242

⁸ ESCRIVÁ, J. (1973) “The Christian Vocation”, in *ibid.*, *Christ is Passing By*.

are there where we are failures! Bored, restless, irritated, tired, uncreative: where we waste time and go home with profound unease about how our day was spent.

But work can mean much more than self-inflicted hardship: it is also a place where we often suffer from unjust treatment, harassment, perhaps get laid off, get stuck for life with no chance of change or promotion, where we have to persevere because we need the money, and where we become less and less respected as we grow older in a youth culture where one is unemployable after forty.

In work we meet the *cross* in various ways. In addition, it is the place where we develop our skills and human potential, where we experience joy at mastering challenges, where we find that joy of work that my daughter referred to when she asked: «Why is there so much satisfaction in accomplishing something difficult and demanding?»

6. SPIRITUAL LIFE MEANS HARDSHIP AND JOY

The spiritual life we have to sustain if we are to attain sanctification is demanding. It is a programme, Escrivá insists, that is both necessary and good for you. But be realistic: one fails again and again and again. But you get up each time.

The way up that inclined plane is full of instances of backsliding. That is why the means are necessary: the morning offering; the remembrances of the presence of God during the day; the prayers and meditations; daily Mass if possible (which it usually is not in Norway for a working person with a family, as there are so few Masses, even in Oslo); and the examination of conscience with frequent confessions.

To actually practise these norms is very difficult. Not because they require too much, but because the will is too weak. The hardship of this programme is your own failures when you repeatedly promise and fail, and also when you have to force yourself to sit out the few minutes of prayer you have decided at that hour. If a human being followed his inclinations, most of these norms would be abandoned, one by one.

Then there is the logical but dangerous ‘evil circle’: when you feel God’s presence and grace, you pray easily and rejoice in Him anywhere, in the most distracting circumstances. But in dry periods, you go by self-discipline. That is very hard to carry through. If you give in then, lukewarmness sets in, and you may be in real trouble unless you find the way again.

But the joy is there when you least expect it: that joy of intimacy with Him, which surpasses any other joy.

7. ESCRIVÁ APPLIED: A PERSONAL DETOUR

a) Work Well: The First Key

Ordinary life is the place where we are. It may be either a place where we are by chance, or by a kind of 'failure' on the part of God. Then it is a place of insignificance and devoid of meaning, and we do right in wishing we were somewhere else.

«Do you really believe that God has a plan for my life here in Norway?», I once asked a friend. It seemed completely useless to be there, with nothing Catholic at all about life, and rather a hostility that made Christianity seem out of place. Why should I spend my life there? My friend laughed and replied «Of course. You can be absolutely certain of that». I was less convinced. It was easy to be Catholic and Christian among other 'like-minded', but it was seemingly impossible in this place. The surroundings were in fact pagan.

Later I came to love this fact, and count myself lucky to be Christian in such a place. This is because I have found what my friend already must have known for a long time; viz. that the fountain of faith is inside you. You do not need favourable circumstances at all; in fact, the words of St. Paul are deeply true: «When I am weak, I am strong». For those who look for 'empirical' proof, as we all do from time to time, this is interesting: the ones that believe do it *in spite of* the persecutions and indifference of the environment.

I could visit Rome and be a tourist, feeling empty and superficial. The place was not the key. The fountain of life — the nourishment for the faith — was not in the place or in customs, people, or tradition. The 'support system', as I call it, was in the sacraments and in personal prayer, in keeping up a conversation with God under all circumstances, good and bad.

Christ was not to be found in specific places, but in me and in other people. It was necessary to have access to the sacraments, but nothing more. The rest was up to me. If I let myself go astray through negligence, which I did again and again, I had to find the way back through the sacraments and prayer. I more and more started to realise that real life, reality was vested in this 'connection' with Christ, not in anything societal or geographical. This realisation is the beginning of real life in Christ, in seeing life differently. This inner life, as it is called, is the very basis for the 'outer' life, which everyone can observe.

But we are not angels, and we do not spend daily life in prayer inside a church. We are normal people with a lot of work to do all the time. This material reality is also given, and takes up most of our time and our lives. I had overcome the dualism of faith versus life, but how did life itself and all its work become imbued with Christianity?

Escrivá's promise that all work could become holy, could transform the world, was what interested me intensely. If he could deliver on his promise, then there was a way for all ordinary working people to find the meaning of life right *here and now*, where they spent their lives. Nothing extraordinary, nothing clerical, nothing away from everyday life. Christ could be found right in the middle of the potato peeling, he had written. This, if it were true, was a revolution.

But this was also simple logic. We are creatures that spend most of our lives working. So if real meaning could not be found in our work, what was the point?

Further, the Incarnation must mean that Christ is present in the world all the time, also in material reality, not only in persons. We are not only in an individual, personal relationship with Christ, but our mission implies bringing Him to others, and also to 'incarnate' Him in the structures of the world — politics, economics, families, the work place. Unless this is possible, Christianity becomes a solipsistic affair for the lucky ones that find Christ for themselves. That is not what Christian solidarity or Christian love is about. The whole world can become transformed into being good and just, but it all depends on the cooperation of human beings with God. We were created with free will, and can choose non-cooperation.

Work well done is really satisfying. The joy of having accomplished something, of having made an effort, of having spent oneself in the process, gives more satisfaction than other things in life. It need not be sophisticated work at all: I am very content and happy when I do the housework well, making the home a pleasant place to be for all of us. When one is sloppy and superficial in one's work, it is such a personal defeat: you know that you have done less than you could, and you are secretly ashamed of your own laziness and lack of ambition.

Then comes the sheer usefulness of good and hard work. It improves the world. There is human progress in almost all fields; what is lacking today, however, is an ethical framework, not improvements in technology. The food production of the world could easily feed the world's population if it were more justly managed, and medicine could be available to all with an effort at redistribution. All this has happened thanks to human work. The Christian has a clear duty to contribute to the common good, a duty that Escrivá underlined all the time,⁹ and which was not common to emphasise in his time and milieu. The duty to be an active citizen is however part of the constant teaching of the Church. Today is it more necessary than ever: we have a duty to work for solidarity, for ecological improvement, for eradication of poverty, and so on. No doubt the active work of all of us would improve the world immensely in these respects if done with zeal-

⁹ See e.g. CHABOT, J.-L. (1997) "Responsibility to the World, and Freedom", in BELDA, M. ET AL., *op.cit.*

ousness and the right dedication. It is far too easy to retreat into the private sphere and simply care for one's immediate family and private life.

But above all good work develops the person. It is where one can develop in virtue. One improves in skills, intellectually, professionally, and one matures in one's way of working. There is a joy of working, like there is a joy of learning: one uses one's capacity and talents as a human being. I love my work because it poses challenges, and it gives satisfaction when I meet those challenges: to accomplish a goal I have strived for — an international publication; a well-written analysis; a political process well managed, etc. We all have our professional criteria and standards, and we pretty much know what is good, bad and outstanding. We also know it when we relax and do just what is necessary. After a while we detest ourselves because we take it easy. Yes, we really ought to detest ourselves then, because we should use our talents and gift to the maximum extent.

The first key to finding Christ in one's work must surely be that it is *done well in purely human terms*.

b) Work as Service: The Second Key

But working well can be done without any other consideration than simply getting a good result and getting satisfaction out of it, both personally and in terms of money. I know many people who work hard and well in order to advance and to make as much money as possible. It is good to be ambitious, but it has to be directed at something. The intention is here the major issue.

As a mother I can more easily understand how work can be service, and why it becomes changed when it has the right intention. I looked in some old albums the other day; the children were so small, yet it didn't seem to be long ago. How much work it all was! I had forgotten about all that, but when I saw the pictures of the four small ones dressed up nicely, two of them in a carriage at the same time, I then remembered the work: the breast-feeding, the lack of sleep, the constant watching over them, putting on winter clothes for the usual minus ten in winter, bringing and picking them up from *Kindergarten*, cooking, playing, staying home when they were ill, always one after the other... years and years of this hard work, which I had forgotten because it was such a joy. I had kept them in mind, not thinking about myself.

I had forgotten all the work it was, because I forgot myself and thought about them. This work with children was not a personal satisfaction or an achievement that I could put on my *curriculum vitae*: «4 million changes of nappies», «600 litres of mother milk produced per year», etc. No, it was work of a different kind, made in a symbiotic relationship with the small ones: a natural and obvious service to them. All my work for them was nothing to me, just a silent,

monotonous, energy-consuming work — but it was work that was much more valuable to those others than my professional work in this one, basic sense: It was a *pure service*, done for someone else because I love them.

At that time I had of course never reflected on this work as being a service to God and also to others — it was simply what came with motherhood. But now I could see that this was a service to Him. Work must be well done, but that is just a *necessary*, but not at all *sufficient condition* for it to be a way to God. It is only when it is a service to Him and to others that work acquires a meaning beyond itself. Even in a purely human perspective one sees that work as service is nobler than work as self-fulfilment and self-development. Work as self-fulfilment develops oneself, and that is good. This is a duty to oneself, to use one's talents as well as possible.

But this is only the first step of what work can and should be. I want to manage to do this, I want this professional challenge, I strive to be best in my field — all this is good and should be aimed at. But then, when this is on the right track, it is time to consider to what extent one's work is a service to others. From the service-perspective, I would venture to say that my work as mother is more important than my work as a professor or as a politician.

One catches glimpses of another reality in those rare moments of disinterested service. The cramp of the self is replaced by self-giving for a moment, and one is in touch with the really human self. It is as if one wakes up to a long-forgotten reality, and one has an insight that this is the key to something fundamental, to an order of things beyond oneself.

Again, in a human context, work as service is gratifying: the nurse that helps the sick knows this, the teacher that helps a weak pupil knows this, but often the mighty in business-life are far from any human insight in this respect. Work as service is the royal road to improving the world itself — it is in fact the precondition for politics beyond mere power-struggles, and it is the key to human sympathy and *communitas*. This work needs to be done well, but then it needs to be directed well, too: a service to others and to society.

In the Christian perspective this service is the practical love for others; doing with deeds what charity expects. Escrivá talks about the sanctification of work itself — that it is not only done well, but also directed well; the sanctification of oneself through work, which is the gradual improvement of the self in terms of virtues — the more service we render, the more virtuous we become; and finally, the sanctification of others through our work — they see how we work and that our work serves them, and they thereby realise that the work itself is a place for imitating Christ.

The moment one can *turn one's work into service*, one has made a major step.

How well do you serve God and others through your work? That does not depend on what kind of *position* you have. It rather depends on what kind of *disposition* you have towards work. It is not easy to view work as a service. It is much easier to work for oneself. But if one tries to see human work from God's angle for a moment, it is clear that it can only be useful for Him if it improves us, others, and the world itself.

And it is equally clear that that work-as-service gives us the same rare joy that self-forgetfulness does.

c) Work as Love: The Third Key

When I thought less about myself and more about my children, I found the third key to the importance of work. The Christian meaning of things is always hidden in everyday life. It is we who are half-blind throughout most of our lives.

After three years in government I returned to normal professional life. The transition had been difficult, but after some months I was settled in a new job which satisfied me and which gave new challenges. I did not miss the old one. But this was all about work as professional challenge, not work as service.

What I had overlooked in my years as foreign policy-maker was that making appearances and creating policy were not necessarily of the first order of importance in God's perspective. They were well and good in themselves — at least most of the time — but what seemed to improve the world to the human eye did not necessarily do so in the divine perspective. The instrumentality of politics, as of business, is often necessary, but one has to learn to try to apply Christian ethics and right intention nonetheless. It is difficult, but imperative. Much international politics could be much less self-centred if one really did this. The cynicism that almost invariably accompanies international politics and business life is negative, whereas realism is necessary. Amidst the tough rules of the game of these two fields, the Christian worker has to seek the right intention to serve God and others. But how?

Again it was my children who taught me a lesson. I had been away from them so much during those years, and hardly had time for them. I had even written a book about how important motherhood is, meaning every word of it, but I had not really penetrated the matter. Now that I suddenly had time for the children, I realised how much I had neglected them. It was not only a matter of time; it was a matter of being mentally present. They had missed me much more than I had realised because I had been so preoccupied with my important work.

Important in what sense? Modestly important to the world of politics, much more important to me in professional terms, but in terms of service to

others, to those entrusted to my care? In God's perspective they come first. I now had time for them again, and this made me see my work in a truer perspective: coming home at regular hours each day, taking the time to listen to their stories about the day's events, reading and playing with them — all this, I realised now, was work of capital importance to their human development. They need me most of all, and God has placed them closer to me than anyone else. This silent work is a work of love, and easy to see as such, because one loves one's children. *Love is the prime mover of this work, which counts as nothing in the eyes of the world. But in God's perspective this must be 'perfect' work: a service done for love.*

This example is so simple, and the work involved is also simple. But it is an excellent example, nonetheless. The love for one's children is the best way for work to become a service, because most parents have this love. One need not love God so much yet in order to work selflessly for these small others. But through this love for children one also finds the love for Christ; when I work well for them, I find Christ in the middle of this family.

In other types of work He can always be found as well, although it may not be so obvious. But if one seeks Him first, one finds the strength to work as a service. The help to do so is given.

Escrivá's message is not intricate or complicated, but it is demanding on you in the 'here and now'. Many times it seems like my work is sterile, done just because I have to, but then, if I really intend it to be a service to God and others, because I love God and therefore also these others — then, all of a sudden, it actually acquires a new meaning. If I can keep this intention all the time — remind myself of it, renew it, insist on it — then the work I do, which few actually see and applaud, can become something useful and holy. What a tremendous prospect this is!

The potato peeling can be sterile and boring, at best somewhat useful for those who will eat them. Or it can be a work full of praise and love for God, offered to Him — and He will transform it and use it according to His plan. Then it is prayer and work united in love for God — a real unity of life.

8. CONCLUSION: A SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

My realisation of the truth in Escrivá's spirituality has come very gradually. In the beginning I was interested in work much more than in spiritual life. I have always loved to work, and loved my own field — to such an extent that the children complain that I do not know how to be on vacation. «You are only happy when you work», they say.

But the supernatural aspect of work and thus, the very key, to this spirituality, was late in coming. I kept a purely natural view of work for a long time. But

when I finally was given to know and understand more of its supernatural aspects, only then did I realise that this is a *specific vocation* as well as a *spiritual revolution*.

Nothing new here in terms of spiritual life, but Escrivá's charism is a *full revelation* of what work is intended to be for man. This is revolutionary because it is in the ordinary, 'hidden' life, not in the spectacular occasions of history. True, also extraordinary work in human eyes is to be sanctified, but God is the one who makes it holy, with our help; and God is the one to decide what importance in the order of Creation and Incarnation any work is to have. We cannot and need not know.

This '*democratisation*' of sainthood that the spirituality of the Opus Dei implies, is this: we can and should all be saints, and God gives each one of us the 'raw material' with which to accomplish this. We have all the means to work on personal happiness — which is our sanctification — as well as the means to make others happy through finding God — their sanctification — and to imbue the world with Christ — its sanctification. This is a tremendous gift and 'condescension' on God's part, and it is very clear to me that He chose Escrivá to give us this gift. When I read de Prada's biography, about the early years of the Work in Madrid, I see so well how Escrivá was without human means, poor, persecuted, in a clerical system — yet how he corresponded with God in discovering what God wanted him to do: to establish the Work. But it was clearly God's Work — Escrivá being His instrument.

REFERENCES:

- ILLANES, J.-L. (1967) *On the Theology of Work*, Scepter Books, Dublin and Chicago.
- IDEM (1997) "Work. Justice, Charity", in Belda, M. et al (eds.), *Holiness and the World: Studies in the Teachings of Bl. Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Books, Princeton.
- O'CALLAGHAN, P. (2000) "The Charism of the Founder of Opus Dei", «Annales theologici», vol. 14, Rome.
- FABRO, C. ET AL (1993) (eds.) *Santos en el mundo. Estudios sobre los escritos del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Ediciones RIALP, Madrid.
- VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, A. (2001) *The Founder of Opus Dei*; vol. I: *The Early years*, Scepter Publishers, Princeton, N.J.
- ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER, BL. J. (1987) *Forja*, Ediciones RIALP, Madrid.
- IDEM (1993) *Camino*, Ediciones RIALP, Madrid.
- IDEM (1973) *Christ is Passing By*, Scepter, London.