

# Ageing, Suffering and Death in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The reality of human ageing has been present throughout history. The twentieth century saw the birth and life of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and the foundation of Opus Dei. It was also marked above all in the second half, by significant demographic changes. The ageing population, associated with increased life expectancy and a significant downturn in the birthrate, principally in developed countries, is bringing about tremendous social changes. The effects of these changes can be observed in the fields of health and social security, among others.

This demographic change has been accompanied by the changing profile of the family, wherein the broad multi-generational unit capable of providing the means of support for its members is being progressively replaced by the nuclear, bi-generational family (parents and few children) with its increasingly limited possibilities of supporting the disabled or older family members.

The materialistic outlook prevalent in many societies, wherein wealth, power and knowledge are valued more than the person, can be considered both as a consequence and as a cause of this change.

It is easy to see how, in such an environment, elderly people can find themselves in a difficult situation. At the same time as elderly people find their physical, cognitive and financial limitations increasing with the years, they now often

face difficulties in obtaining family support, and also fear rejection by society. This rejection is the fruit of prejudices and perceptions of which elderly people themselves may not only be the object, but which they may also harbour, or have harboured themselves.

In a materialistic environment suffering can be seen as something meaningless and even obscene, and death a form of oppression. Depression, due to progressive physical, cognitive and social loss can easily lead to desperation on the part of the elderly person and the family. This is certainly fertile ground for dissemination of anti-life mentalities, such as that propagated by those who defend various forms of euthanasia or suicide. This results in the technologisation and impersonalisation of death which, often unnecessarily, takes place in the cold and sterile environment of an institution, without family support and affection.

The Church has not remained aloof from the contemporary human problems associated with ageing, suffering and death. Notable recent examples of the Church's interest in these topics can be found in the document of the Pontifical Council for the Laity on *The Dignity of Older People and Their Mission in the Church and in the World* of 1998<sup>1</sup>, and Pope John Paul II's *Letter to the Elderly* in 1999<sup>2</sup>.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer lived the greater part of his life, saw what God was asking of him, and founded Opus Dei, before the rise of the problems that have accompanied demographic ageing. Few of his writings, therefore, are dedicated specifically to the problems that this has caused for the elderly. All the same, we do have his considerations about the Christian meaning of the family, suffering and death, and the example of his holy life in which he himself suffered. These treasures make it possible for us to make some considerations about his teachings and his contribution to solutions for today's problems.

## 2. LEARNING TO GROW OLDER, LEARNING TO DIE

Ageing, which Cicero compared to the autumn of life<sup>3</sup>, has like any other of life's stages its own joys and difficulties. While the experience of ageing is more common today than ever before, less attention is paid to it than in times gone by. How can a Christian, who feels, in his or her own limitations and the passing of

<sup>1</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY, *The Dignity of Older People and their Mission in the Church and in the World*, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, *Cato maior sey de senectute*, 19, 70.

time, deal with this stage of life with nobility and make the most of it? How is he or she to face the infirmities, discomforts and inconveniences more common in this phase of life? These are essential considerations for one who wishes to live a true Christian ageing process. It is important that one perceives the passing of the years as something full of meaning, a blessing from God and not as a curse.

“Man remains forever made ‘in the image and likeness of God’<sup>4</sup>, and each stage of life has its own beauty and its own tasks. Indeed, in the word of God, old age is so highly esteemed that long life is seen as a sign of divine favour<sup>5</sup>. In the case of Abraham, in whom the privilege of old age is stressed, this favour takes the form of a promise: ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. I will bless those who bless you and him who curses you I will curse; in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’<sup>6</sup>. At Abraham’s side is Sarah, a woman who sees her body growing old, yet experiences within the limitations of her ageing flesh the power of God who makes good every shortcoming<sup>7</sup>”.

The teachings of Blessed Josemaría express the very essence of the joy of ageing, which can be experienced with spiritual youthfulness when it is lived in union with Jesus Christ. “I was saying that young people understand this very well. I might add that anyone who tries to live it will always feel young. A Christian who lives in union with Jesus Christ can relish, even if he is eighty, the words we pray at the foot of the altar: ‘I will go unto the altar of God, of God who gives joy to my youth’”<sup>8</sup>.

When Blessed Josemaría Escrivá spoke about spiritual youthfulness, he united heaven and earth as he advised elderly people to take care of their personal appearance: “As years go by a woman who lives in the world has to take more care not only of her interior life, but also of her looks. Her interior life itself requires her to be careful about her personal appearance; naturally this should always be in keeping with her age and circumstances. I often say jokingly that older facades need more restoration. It is the advice of a priest”<sup>9</sup>.

The physical limitations and the other sufferings inherent in the chronic illnesses that frequently afflict the elderly cannot be used to excuse the Christian from his or her responsibilities; otherwise they could not attain their true meaning as means of sanctification of oneself and one’s neighbour. Christians cannot

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Gen 1:26.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Gen 11:10-32.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 12:2-3.

<sup>7</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Conversations*, 102. Cfr. Ps 42:4.

<sup>9</sup> *Conversations*, 107.

let their sufferings go to waste. “Those who, leaving action for others, pray and suffer, will not be noticed here; but what a radiant crown will be theirs, in the kingdom of Life! Blessed be the ‘apostolate of suffering’!<sup>10</sup>”.

The example of the life of the founder of Opus Dei speaks eloquently. God tested him with many health problems, most of which became most evident in his years of maturity<sup>11</sup>. Besides the grave sickness of his infancy, during which he was, in the words of his mother, “more dead than alive”<sup>12</sup>, he had a serious attack of rheumatism in 1936 during which he was effectively paralysed for some time. In Burgos in 1938 he had several episodes of haemoptysis, associated with loss of voice, which led to a provisional diagnosis of tuberculosis, which was later excluded. In 1944 he developed severe diabetes which he suffered until 1954 when it disappeared in an inexplicable way after a grave crisis. Incidentally, this sickness was the subject of the only occasion which Blessed Josemaría deliberately disobeyed his doctors when, against medical advice, he travelled to Italy in 1946 to begin the ‘Romanisation’ of Opus Dei. In 1966, when he was 64, he was diagnosed with renal deficiency, which was soon followed by a significant loss of vision. It is well known that he suffered altitude sickness and a serious lung infection when, in 1975, at the age of 73, he visited Quito during his catechetical journey through Latin America.

The majority of the people who lived with Blessed Josemaría during these years had no idea of the illnesses he suffered. His constant cheerfulness combined with a great finesse of spirit made them believe that everything was fine. At the same time, none of these illnesses prevented him from fulfilling his foundational and apostolic duties, but rather served as a backup for his intense apostolate. He did not allow himself to lose time being sick, as he affirmed in 1936: “In the Work, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of being sick, and I often ask Our Lord to keep me healthy until a half an hour before I die. There is a lot to be done and we need to be well in order to work for God. For this reason, you have to take care of yourselves so that you die very old, very old, squeezed out like a lemon, accepting the Will of God from this moment on”<sup>13</sup>.

The teachings of the founder of Opus Dei about death are no less forceful than his teachings about suffering and sacrifice. Despite praying that those around him would not die until they had reached old age, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá always taught that death should not be feared. “When facing death, be calm. I do

<sup>10</sup> *The Way*, 969.

<sup>11</sup> For more details regarding the illnesses of Blessed Josemaría mentioned in this paragraph, see A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*. Vol. 1, Princeton 2000.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, Madrid 1983, p. 377 (my translation).

not want you to have the cold stoicism of the pagan, but the fervour of a child of God who knows that life is changed, not taken away. To die is to live!”<sup>14</sup>.

Taking the unnecessary anxiety away from ageing, suffering and death by highlighting their transcendental Christian meaning, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá could say at age 70 that he did not want to be any older than 7 years old<sup>15</sup>. What he was talking about was a true ‘Christian rejuvenation’, based on fidelity to his vocation. “It is difficult to keep this keen sense of loyalty constantly active, as it is always difficult to apply a principle to the changing realities of the contingent world. But it is the best defence against ageing of the spirit, hardening of the heart and stiffening of the mind”<sup>16</sup>. He also said that the “great Christian revolution has been to convert pain into fruitful suffering and to turn a bad thing into something good. We have deprived the devil of this weapon; and with it we can conquer eternity”<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR THE ELDERLY

One of the realities that societies with ageing populations are experiencing is the need to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of persons who are increasingly restricted in their daily activities. In societies constituted by small nuclear families, this responsibility which has traditionally been met by the extended family, may now need to be assumed by social assistance structures for the elderly supported by the wider community.

Clearly, the best place for the elderly person is with his or her own family. “In addition to the obvious psychological need of the elderly themselves, the most natural place to spend one’s old age continues to be the environment in which one feels most ‘at home’, among family members, acquaintances and friends, where one can still make oneself useful. As the number of older people increases, keeping pace with the rise in average life expectancy, it will become more and more important to promote a widespread acceptance and appreciation of the elderly, and not relegate them to the fringes. The ideal is still for the elderly to remain within the family, with the guarantee of effective social assistance for the greater needs which age or illness entail”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> *Furrow*, 876.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, cit., p. 381 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> *Conversations*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Furrow*, 887.

<sup>18</sup> JOHN PAUL II. *Letter to the Elderly*, 13.

In addition to this, inter-generational communication problems may appear at times, even in the home environment, as values and opinions of people of disparate ages naturally differ. With respect to inter-generational communication difficulties Blessed Josemaría said: “Life changes, and there are many new things which we may not like. Perhaps, objectively speaking, they are no better than others that have gone before, but they are not bad. They are simply other ways of living and nothing more. On more than one occasion conflicts may arise because importance is attached to petty differences which could be overcome with a little common sense and good humour”.

“However, not everything depends on the parents. The children also have to play their part. Young people are always capable of getting enthusiastic about great undertakings, high ideals, and anything that is genuine. They must be helped to understand the simple, natural and often unappreciated beauty of their parents’ lives. Children should come to realise, little by little, the sacrifice their parents have made for them, the often-heroic self-denial that has gone into raising the family. They should also learn not to over-dramatise, not to think themselves misunderstood nor to forget that they will always be in debt to their parents. And as they will never be able to repay what they owe, their response should be to treat their parents with veneration and grateful filial love!”.

“Let’s be frank — the normal thing is for the family to be united. There may be friction and differences, but that’s quite normal in a certain sense; it even adds flavour to our daily life. These problems are insignificant; time always takes care of them. What remains firm is love, a true and sincere love which comes from being generous and which brings with it a concern for one another, and which enables the members of the family to sense each other’s difficulties and offer tactful solutions. Because this is the normal thing, the vast majority of people understand me perfectly when they hear me say (I have been repeating it since the 1920s) that the fourth commandment of the Decalogue is a ‘most sweet precept’”<sup>19</sup>.

At the same time, situations may arise such that it is not possible or advisable for the family to live together permanently. “On the other hand, there are situations where circumstances suggest or demand that they be admitted to ‘homes for the elderly’ where they can enjoy the company of others and receive specialized care. Such institutions are indeed praiseworthy, and experience shows that they can provide a valuable service when they are inspired not only by organizational efficiency but also by loving concern. Everything becomes easier when

<sup>19</sup> *Conversations*, 100-101.

each elderly resident is helped by family, friends and parish communities to feel loved and still useful to society”<sup>20</sup>.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá reaffirmed that the Christian faithful of Opus Dei should participate in the normal activities common to any citizen, including the institutional support of the elderly: “Opus Dei has no political or economic orientation in Spain or elsewhere. Undoubtedly its members are led by Christ’s teachings always to defend personal freedom and the rights of all men — the right to live and to work, to be cared for in sickness and old age”<sup>21</sup>. A range of initiatives have sprung up in response to this inspiration, from institutions to care for Alzheimer’s or dementia patients in Dublin<sup>22</sup>, to painting and repairing the homes of elderly people in Hong Kong<sup>23</sup>. These and many other projects merit the words of Pope John Paul II: “How can we fail to mention here, with admiration and gratitude, the [...] volunteer groups specifically devoted to the care of the aged, especially the poor, the abandoned and those in difficulty? Dear elderly friends who feel insecure because of ill health or other circumstances, I assure you of my closeness and affection. When God permits us to suffer because of illness, loneliness or other reasons associated with old age, he always gives us the grace and strength to unite ourselves with greater love to the sacrifice of his Son and to share ever more fully in his plan of salvation. Let us be convinced of this: he is our Father, a Father rich in love and mercy!”<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND THE ELDERLY

For health professionals who deal with elderly people with significant physical and cognitive limitations, confronting disability, suffering and death every day can be a trying experience. The professional is constantly reminded of his or her own limitations and finitude, and when he or she is not inwardly equipped to deal with this and lacks a transcendent vision of life, then he or she can deal with the patient in an impersonal and detached way, avoiding commitment and shielding him or herself behind a clinical, technological approach

<sup>20</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Conversations*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Assistance to Alzheimer’s Patients*. Office of Communications, Prelature of Opus Dei ([www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org)).

<sup>23</sup> *The Sun Reaches out to the Elderly*. Office of Communications, Prelature of Opus Dei ([www.opusdei.org](http://www.opusdei.org)).

<sup>24</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 13.

to death. This is a psychological defence mechanism which can also have significant negative repercussions on the patient. The founder of Opus Dei provided a response to this difficulty when, sick himself, he addressed a group of Christian health professionals in Peru: “Death, my children, is not an unpleasant occurrence. Death is a door that Love opens for us — Love with a capital ‘L’ — to happiness, rest and joy. We cannot wait for death with fear. It is true that a doctor views death from a different perspective; but a Christian doctor like you — I realize how you look at it, may God bless you — should regard it positively. And everyone else as well. It is not the end; it is the beginning. For a Christian, to die is not to die, but to live. To Live with a capital ‘L’. So do not be afraid of death”<sup>25</sup>. To nurses, he said: “May God bless you! Think that you are serving the family of Nazareth, that that sick person is Christ Himself. He said it Himself, remember? Or that the patient is the Mother of God. Care for them for me with affection, concern and gentleness. May they never lack anything; especially spiritual assistance. Prepare them well. May God bless you! I bless all the sick throughout the world”<sup>26</sup>. And in São Paulo Blessed Josemaría Escrivá summed up beautifully how a health professional should see the dying: “You may have sometimes felt a bit of envy towards one of the dying; and before others a bit of sadness because they are not coherent Christians. Pray for them. Be a good doctor, as you are; a good Christian, as you are; and you will do a lot of good”<sup>27</sup>.

## 5. PARTICIPATION OF THE ELDERLY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The History of Salvation is full of episodes in which the elderly are actively involved. “The Gospel of Luke begins by introducing a married couple ‘advanced in years’ (1:7): Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist. The Lord’s mercy reaches out to them (cfr. Lk 1:5-25, 39-79). Zechariah, already an old man, is told that a son will be born to him. He himself makes the point: ‘I am an old man and my wife is well on in years’ (Lk 1:18). During Mary’s visitation, her elderly kinswoman Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims: ‘Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’ (Lk 1: 42),

<sup>25</sup> G. HERRANZ, *Sin miedo a la vida y sin miedo a la muerte. Palabras de Monseñor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás a médicos y enfermos*, en AA.VV., *En memoria de Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Pamplona 1976, p. 160 (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161 (my translation).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162 (my translation).



and when John the Baptist is born, Zechariah gives voice to the *Benedictus*. Here we see a remarkable older couple, filled with a deep spirit of prayer.

“In the Temple at Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to offer him to the Lord, or rather, in accordance with the Law, to redeem him as their first-born son. There they meet the aged Simeon, who has long awaited the Messiah. Taking the child in his arms, Simeon blesses God and proclaims the *Nunc Dimittis*: ‘Lord, now let your servant depart in peace’ (Lk 2:29). At Simeon’s side we find Anna, a widow of eighty-four, a frequent visitor to the Temple, who now has the joy of seeing Jesus. The Evangelist tells us that ‘she began to praise God and spoke of the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’” (Lk 2:38).

“Nicodemus too, a highly-regarded member of the Sanhedrin, was an elderly man. He visited Jesus by night in order not to be seen. To him the Divine Teacher reveals that he is the Son of God who has come to save the world (cfr. Jn 3:1-21). Nicodemus appears again at the burial of Jesus, when, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, he overcomes his fear and shows himself a disciple of the Crucified Lord (cfr. Jn 19:38-40). How reassuring are all these examples! They remind us that at every stage of life the Lord can ask each of us to contribute what talents we have. The service of the Gospel has nothing to do with age!

“And what shall we say of Peter in his old age, called to bear witness to the faith by martyrdom? Jesus had once said to him: ‘When you were young you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go’ (Jn 21:18). These are words which, as the Successor of Peter, touch me personally; they make me feel strongly the need to reach out and grasp the hands of Christ, in obedience to his command: ‘Follow me!’ (Jn 21:19)”<sup>28</sup>.

For Blessed Josemaría age was no impediment to frequent and loving reception of the sacraments, which a priest lives to administer untiringly, renewing his energies in Love for God’s service: “‘Treat him well for me, treat him well!’ Words, mingled with tears, of a certain venerable bishop to the priests he had just ordained. Would that I had the power, Lord, and the authority to repeat that same cry in the ears and in the hearts of many, many Christians!”<sup>29</sup>.

“A long time ago someone asked me, tactlessly, whether those of us whose career is the priesthood are able to retire when we get old. And since I gave him

<sup>28</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Elderly*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *The Way*, 531.

no answer, he persisted with his impertinent question. Then an answer came to me, which, I thought, put it in a nutshell. ‘The priesthood’, I told him, ‘is not a career: it is an apostolate.’ That’s how I feel about it. And I wanted to put it down in these notes so that — with God’s help — none of us may ever forget the difference”<sup>30</sup>.

“To die? [...] That’s too easy, I say once more. Say, just as that holy bishop did when he was old and sick, *non recuso laborem* — Lord, as long as I can be useful, I do not refuse to keep on living and working for you”<sup>31</sup>.

From this one can understand how Blessed Josemaría reached 50 years of priesthood affirming: “Fifty years have gone by, and I am still like a faltering child. I am just beginning, beginning again, as I do each day in my interior life. And it will be so to the end of my days; always beginning anew”<sup>32</sup>. This is, certainly, the closest that a human being can come to perennial youth.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Church’s teachings about ageing and the insights of Blessed Josemaría constitute a true body of wisdom. They offer Christian answers to the principal medical and social problems associated with the world’s ageing population.

Blessed Josemaría proposes a genuinely Christian response to the anguish and desperation that are found at times among elderly people, fruit of a merely utilitarian vision of the human person. He offers a joyful consideration of the limitations of suffering and death, seeing them in the context of the continuous presence of God in our lives and fidelity to the Christian vocation. Suffering and death become occasions for personal development and for support of one’s neighbour in an apostolate that, with our personal sacrifice, transforms evil into good, in a truly rejuvenating vision of the human person.

In response to current social problems his teachings restore the value of having intergenerational families living together harmoniously, taking into account that, when necessary, recourse may be had to institutions imbued with true Christian values. To health professionals he offers a Christian ideal that encourages them to act in a truly human and personal way in order to lessen the suffering of others.

<sup>30</sup> *The Forge*, 582.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, 1040.

<sup>32</sup> S. BERNAL, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, London 1977, p. 339.

Finally, he reminds us of the need for people of all ages to work in the vineyard of the Lord, serving the Church as the Church wishes to be served.

The long road that each person needs to travel to reach full maturity generally passes through some stages marked by pain and suffering. While the first reaction may be natural repugnance and an attempt to flee, personal reflection can help us to find a meaning for these experiences and to consider life's fundamental values. Suffering offers us the opportunity to forge our character, overcoming character weaknesses; it teaches us to understand others' weaknesses and sufferings and how to treat them with generosity. Seen in this light, suffering shows us the way to reach out to others, in the shared experience of our personal limitations and mutual recognition of the reciprocal need for help which we all need if we are to uphold our human dignity.

This is one of the reasons why, in training doctors and nurses, neither teacher nor student can forget that sooner or later each one of us will be confronted with suffering, the suffering of others and also our own. To try to avoid or to put off the encounter with pain is often unproductive and harmful because it generates weak personalities which are unrealistic and often self-centred, while the true educational challenge lies, not in seeking to avoid suffering, but rather in teaching how to face pain and suffering with courage, remembering that learning to suffer means learning to ask and offer help. Suffering is always a school of solidarity and experiencing it is an opportunity to live the reciprocal generosity which characterises the love that we wish to give and to receive. As Blessed Josemaría Escrivá said, "Sorrow is the touchstone of Love"<sup>33</sup>.

He himself never renounced suffering, freely accepting the various forms of suffering with which Our Lord wanted to strengthen his soul, to make him a docile and effective instrument. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's position as a teacher for the faithful of Opus Dei of such different ages, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds, is founded on the strength of his example. Blessed Josemaría lived as a father who used all the resources he had available to draw all souls to God, generously accepting the responsibility of spiritual fatherhood. This fatherhood made him both tender and demanding, impelling each of the faithful of Opus Dei to become a saint in the ordinary occasions of his or her daily life, without seeking to escape the difficulties that come with each day.

The founder of Opus Dei never lost sight of the fact that pain, without filiation and without fraternity, in short, without human and supernatural outlook, can alienate one from God. This can make a person resentful, as happens when we find ourselves in situations where we do not know how to, and do not wish to,

<sup>33</sup> *The Way*, 439.

forgive. Blessed Josemaría reminded us that, unless we have a true capacity to suffer with and for others, it is impossible to love. He encouraged us to look after each other and to pardon, and to never forget the example of Jesus who died on the Cross for each one of us. At times we could be tempted to think that all this seems too difficult to put into practice, so Blessed Josemaría suggested recourse to Our Lady to make this easier. He himself often asked Our Lady, with the confidence of a son, that she never forget that she was his Mother, *Monstra Te Esse Matrem*, and in this way all his sufferings became easier to bear.