

## **A Priest and only a Priest. St. Josemaría Escrivá as a Model of Priestly Life\***

*Most. Rev. Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei*

I extend my thanks to my dear brother in the episcopate, Msgr. Ramón Búa, for his kind invitation to address some words to the Riojan clergy. He suggested that I speak about the call to sanctity in the priestly ministry, following the example and teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, who was recently canonized by John Paul II, and I am very pleased to do so.

In effect, it is a great joy for me to consider this holy priest and his teachings. If, in addition, those who are listening to me are priests, my joy is even greater, since I know very well the warm love — and even more, the veneration — which the Founder of Opus Dei had for all of his brothers in the priesthood. How much he enjoyed the opportunities that he had to meet with them! He learned from everyone, and he did not hesitate to open his heart to speak about the great loves of his life to those who asked him: Christ, Mary, the Church, the Pope and all souls. He used to say on those occasions that he felt like the man trying to sell honey to the beekeeper. But his honey was of such good quality that those who listened to him came out of those gatherings renewed in their desires of fidelity to their vocation, with their souls overflowing with optimism, determined to give themselves completely and joyfully to their apostolic and pastoral task.

\* Words delivered in the Seminary of Logroño — of which Josemaría Escrivá was a student — January 20, 2003.

## 1. THE IDENTITY OF THE PRIEST

I will begin with some words which St. Josemaría used to address to those who had been recently ordained, but which are also useful — and perhaps even more so — to those who have spent many years in the priesthood. He would say: be, in the first place, priests; afterwards, priests; always and in everything, only priests. This piece of advice reveals his very elevated concept of the ministerial priesthood, by which some poor men — which is what we are before the Lord — are constituted as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God<sup>1</sup>. So firm was his faith in the identification with Christ carried out in the sacrament of Orders, that his only seal of glory, besides which all the honours of the earth fade in comparison, was that of being a priest of Jesus Christ.

From the earliest times, the saints have spoken of the dignity of the priesthood. Various Popes — among those which I recall especially are St. Pius X, Pius XI and the current Roman Pontiff — have written unforgettable documents which have nourished and which continue to nourish our priestly lives. St. Josemaría has also left us his teachings. In a homily in 1973, when distorted views about the priest's identity and the value of ministerial priesthood were circulating, he summed up his thoughts with the following words: "Here we have the priest's identity: he is a direct and daily instrument of the saving grace which Christ has won for us. If you grasp this, if you meditate on it in the active silence of prayer, how could you ever think of the priesthood in terms of renunciation? It is a gain, an incalculable gain. Our mother Mary, the holiest of creatures — only God is holier — brought Jesus Christ into the world just once; priests bring Him to earth, to our soul and body, every day: Christ comes to be our food, to give us life, to be, even now, a pledge of future life"<sup>2</sup>.

The sense of the greatness of the priesthood leads the priest to lovingly nurture his priestly vocation, with which he finds himself more and more deeply in love. When St. Josemaría would refer to his own vocation story in response to the inquiries of those of us who were at his side, he always stressed the initiative of God, who went to seek him out when he was fifteen or sixteen years old. As you well know, it was in Logroño, in December 1917 or January 1918, when the young Josemaría Escrivá experienced the first presentiments — inklings, he called them — that Our Lord was calling him for something that he could not yet identify. It had never even occurred to him before that it could have been the priesthood. Nevertheless, faced with this divine motion and with the goal of

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. 1 Cor 4:1.

<sup>2</sup> *In Love with the Church*, 39.

preparing himself to carry out the Will of God, he decided to enter the Seminary. As years went by, he could affirm with complete honesty that the beginning of his priestly vocation had been a call from God, a premonition of love, the falling in love of a fifteen or sixteen year old boy<sup>3</sup>.

He received his first priestly training in the Seminary of Logroño, which he later completed in Zaragoza. God wanted that the seed which he was to sow on earth on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 1928 would find the heart of a priest truly prepared to welcome it and to make it bear fruit. For this reason, St. Josemaría affirmed with gratitude to Our Lord, that his vocation was — allow me to insist — that of being a priest and only a priest and always a priest. He was madly in love with this condition which, by configuring him to Christ, had prepared him to become the instrument, in the hands of God, to found Opus Dei.

## 2. GIFT AND TASK

The conditions for a candidate to the priesthood used merely to state that he should be chosen from among men who led an honest life. This minimalist formulation, which has already been improved upon, seemed very poor to St. Josemaría. “We understand, together with all of the ecclesiastical tradition”, he wrote in 1945, “that the priesthood requires — for the sacred functions assigned to it — more than just an honest life: it requires a holy life to be led by those who exercise it, constituted — as they are — as mediators between God and men”<sup>4</sup>.

According to the testimony of witnesses of the time, Josemaría Escrivá received a profoundly Christian formation in the heart of his family and at school, which encompassed doctrinal knowledge, frequent reception of the sacraments, and concern for the spiritual and material needs of people. However, his existence underwent a radical change when he received the divine call to the priesthood, in the sense that the intensity of his relationship and frequency of his contact with God increased, along with his apostolic concern for others. This gave him a maturity which was beyond his years, but which was perfectly logical from the supernatural point of view. That of which Sacred Scripture spoke was fulfilled: *super senex intellexi quia mandata tua servavi*<sup>5</sup>: “I have become wiser than the elders because I have faithfully kept your commandments”. From the time of

<sup>3</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in a family gathering*, 28-XI-1966.

<sup>4</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter 2-XI-1945*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ps* 118 (119): 100.

those first presentiments, the teenaged Josemaría began to take holiness seriously, trying to discover and to fulfil the Will of God.

When Second Vatican Council, in Chapter V of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, deals with the topic of the vocation of the baptized to sanctity, it states: “The followers of Christ, called by God not for what they had done but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons and daughters of God by the Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God”<sup>6</sup>.

As members of the Mystical Body of Christ, into which we have been inserted by Baptism, all of us have been radically sanctified: we bear in ourselves the seed and the beginning of the new life which Christ gained for us with his Death and Resurrection. This baptismal consecration forms the foundation for every other more specific call to sanctity. Considering the absolute gratuitousness of that which we have received, sanctification clearly appears in its dimension as gift: an unmerited gift granted by our Father God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. At the same time, holiness is a personal call, a task which becomes the personal responsibility of each Christian. As St. Josemaría would say, it is the task of a lifetime<sup>7</sup>.

Sanctity is thus both gift and task. It is the gratuitous giving of an unmerited good, and at the same time, a task which one has to accomplish with personal effort, with heroic correspondence, with the determination to live Christian life with a real sense of commitment.

### 3. PRIESTLY SANCTITY AS A GIFT

Since the radical condition of the baptized is one and the same in all — both priests and lay people —, all of us have been equally called to the fullness of Christian life. “There is no such thing as second class holiness. Either we put up a constant fight to stay in the grace of God and imitate Christ, our Model, or we desert in that divine battle. God invites everyone; each person can become holy in his own state in life. Our Lord invites everyone to sanctify their own state in life”<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. *The Way*, 285.

<sup>8</sup> *In Love with the Church*, 37.

We are now considering one of the central intuitions which St. Josemaría Escrivá received and preached with a divine mission since 1928. In founding Opus Dei, Our Lord showed him that each person should strive to sanctify himself in his own state, in the type of life to which he has been called, in and through his own work, in accordance with the well-known phrase of St. Paul: *unusquisque, in qua vocatione vocatus est, in ea permaneat*<sup>9</sup>.

Holiness, in both priests and lay people, is thus built upon the same foundation: the original baptismal consecration, which is perfected by Confirmation. Nevertheless, it is evident that the duty to tend towards sanctity urges the priest in a special way, since he has been taken from among men and appointed for men in the things pertaining to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins<sup>10</sup>.

“Constantly in contact with the holiness of God”, writes John Paul II, “the priest must himself become holy”<sup>11</sup>. And he adds in his book *Gift and Mystery*, written on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his priestly ordination: “While the Second Vatican Council speaks of the *universal* call to holiness, in the case of the priest we must speak of a *special* call to holiness. *Christ needs holy priests!* Only a holy priest can become, in an increasingly secularized world, a resounding witness to Christ and his Gospel. And only thus can a priest become a guide for men and women and a teacher of holiness”<sup>12</sup>.

The priest has been consecrated twice by God: as all other Christians in Baptism, and in the sacrament of Orders. While one cannot speak of a first or second class sanctity — because we are all invited to the perfection with which the heavenly Father is perfect<sup>13</sup> — there is no doubt that priests have a special duty to tend towards sanctity. We can re-read some words of the Founder of Opus Dei which are particularly enlightening. “All of us Christians can and should be not just other Christs, *alter Christus*, but Christ himself: *ipse Christus!* But in the priest this happens in a direct way, by virtue of the sacrament”<sup>14</sup>.

In the exercise of the ministry for which he has been ordained, the priest finds the nourishment he needs for his spiritual life, the material which enkindles him in the love of God. For this reason, it would be a serious mistake to let other aspirations or other tasks overshadow that which is indispensable for him to reach holiness: the careful and loving celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass, the preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments to the faith-

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 7:20.

<sup>10</sup> Heb 5:1.

<sup>11</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, IX.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Mt 5:48.

<sup>14</sup> *In Love with the Church*, 38.

ful, especially that of Penance; a continual life of prayer and joyful penance; care for the souls which have been entrusted to him, together with the thousand services which a vigilant charity knows how to provide.

Since he perceived the call to the priesthood, and more explicitly, since he was ordained a priest, St. Josemaría wanted to identify himself with Christ, to be Christ himself, in the exercise of the priestly ministry and in all of his existence. From there proceeded his life of prayer, his unhurried celebration of the Mass, his 'need' to remain for long periods of time in front of the tabernacle; and at the same time, his urgency to seek out souls in order to lead them to Christ by paths of sanctity. He understood that one can and should behave in a holy way in all states of life, and particularly in marriage; this is why from his first years as a pastor, in addition to placing many souls on the path towards a truly joyful apostolic celibacy, he encouraged many others to discover their vocation to marriage.

John Paul II writes: "in the words *Mysterium fidei* we find ever more each day the meaning of our own priesthood. Here is the measure of the gift which is the priesthood, and here is also the measure of the response which the gift demands. *The gift is constantly growing!* And this is something wonderful. It is wonderful that a man can never say that he has fully responded to the gift. It remains both a gift and a task: always! To be conscious of this is essential if we are to live our own priesthood to the full"<sup>15</sup>.

St. Josemaría Escrivá celebrated the Holy Mass each day with the passion of one who was truly in love, very aware that due to the sacrament of Orders, the priest is enabled to effectively lend Our Lord his voice, his hands, all of his being<sup>16</sup>. Listen to how in a family gathering, he described the mysterious eclipse of the human personality of the priest, who in those moments becomes a living instrument of God:

"I reach the altar and the first thing that I think is: Josemaría, you are not Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer [...]: you are Christ. All of us who are priests are Christ. I lend my voice, my hands, my body and my soul to Our Lord: I give Him everything. It is He who says: *This is my Body, this is my Blood*, it is He who consecrates. If not, I would not be able to do anything. The Divine Sacrifice of Calvary is renewed there in an unbloody manner. In such a way that I am there *in persona Christi*, acting in the place of Christ. The priest as a particular person disappears: Fr. Tom, Fr. Dick or Josemaría... No sir! It is Christ"<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, VIII.

<sup>16</sup> *In Love with the Church*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in a family gathering*, 10-V-1974.

#### 4. PRIESTLY HOLINESS AS A TASK

The incomparable greatness of the priest is based on his sacramental identification with Christ, which leads him to be *ipse Christus* and to act *in persona Christi capitis*, above all in the Eucharistic celebration and in the ministry of Reconciliation. “It is a greatness which is on loan: it is completely compatible with my own littleness. I pray to God Our Lord to give all of us priests the grace to perform holy things in a holy way, to reflect in every aspect of our lives the wonders of the greatness of God”<sup>18</sup>.

Each Christian should seek that his condition as a follower of Jesus Christ be reflected in all of his conduct: in his family and profession, in his social, public and sporting activity, etc. The particular existence of each priest, in his daily activity, should also manifest the fact that he personally belongs to Christ. Due to the indelible character received in ordination, he is a priest twenty-four hours a day, and not only when he is expressly exercising his ministry. This should be kept very much in mind, as in our days — in our multi-cultural and multi-religious society — so many signs that reminded our ancestors of the primacy of God and of supernatural life are disappearing. I do not say this pessimistically, but rather in order to encourage us to make an effort so that we do not lose our Christian roots, which are also manifested in pious traditions, art, culture and popular customs.

The priest needs to approach the summit of sanctity on an inclined plane, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who is the One who models the features of Jesus Christ in the adopted children of God. The docile response of the Christian to the supernatural action of grace is decisive in this lifelong process.

Holiness is not possible without effort to practice the virtues, without constant struggle to develop them on a daily basis. What is centre of the virtuous habits which ought to provide the backbone for the sanctity of the priest? It is the same as in the case of the rest of the faithful, since all of us are called to the same end — union with God — and we have the same means available in order to reach it. The difference lies in the way of practicing these virtues. In the priest, all should be accomplished in a priestly way; that is to say, always keeping in mind the goal of his specific vocation, the service of souls. We need to follow the example of Our Lord, who stated Himself: “*Pro eis ego sanctifico meipsum, ut sint et ipsi sanctificandi in veritate*”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> *In Love with the Church*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Jn* 17:19.

It is not possible in such a short time even just to make a complete list of the priestly virtues. I will thus limit myself to introducing some of those which I consider to be central in the teachings and example of St. Josemaría.

## 5. THE HUMAN VIRTUES OF THE PRIEST

Using the metaphor of construction — an image with biblical roots — the first thing that one seeks is solid ground. Christ Himself alludes to this necessity, in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, when he speaks of the wise man who built his house on rock, in such a way that when the winds blew and the rain fell, they had no effect on his house<sup>20</sup>.

In the spiritual life of the Christian, the solid ground of the spiritual edifice is formed by the human virtues, since grace presupposes nature. One should not forget that the priest does not cease to be a man upon receiving ordination. On the contrary, it is precisely for having been chosen from among men and constituted a mediator between men and God<sup>21</sup>, that he has to take care of his human formation which enables him in turn to serve souls more effectively.

“The human formation of a priest” writes Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, “takes in all the human virtues which go to make up the cardinal virtues, and the non-ecclesiastical culture which a priest must have if he is, with of course the help of God,s grace, to do his apostolate with any ease”<sup>22</sup>. My predecessor at the head of the Prelature of Opus Dei emphasizes the principal motives which ought to move the priest to acquire and develop these virtues: “Because (i) they are part of the ascetical effort normally necessary for attaining perfection; (ii) they help to improve the effectiveness of his apostolate”<sup>23</sup>.

This basic aspect of Christian — and more specifically priestly — formation stands out in the life and teachings of St. Josemaría. We have considerable evidence of this from the time of his childhood until his death in 1975. The witnesses of his pastoral work all agree that he was a priest who was in love with Jesus Christ who gave himself completely to the service of souls, and who had a strong and harmonious personality in which the human and the supernatural were tightly intertwined with unity of life. The homily entitled ‘Human Virtues’ in *Friends of God* is paradigmatic with regards to his teachings: it reveals the centrality of the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word, who is perfect Man with-

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. *Mt* 7: 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. *Heb* 5:1.

<sup>22</sup> A. DEL PORTILLO, *On Priesthood*, Chicago 1974, pp. 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.



out ceasing to be perfect God. In this homily he analyzes the principal virtues which a Christian and a priest ought to foster: fortitude, serenity, patience, industriousness, order, diligence, veracity, love for freedom, sobriety, temperance, audacity, magnanimity, loyalty, optimism and joy.

## 6. ON THE FOUNDATION OF HUMILITY

“Humility is the foundation, means and condition of the effectiveness of our life”<sup>24</sup>, writes St. Josemaría, in harmony with the spiritual tradition of Christianity. He is evidently referring to the moral foundations, since the theological — as he preached with his behaviour and his teachings — are centered on theological faith, which leads us to truly live in accordance with the meaning of our divine filiation in Christ. This conviction signals the deepest truth about ourselves and it consequently strengthens humility, which reflects nothing other than what St. Theresa of Avila called “walking in the truth”: walking in the faith.

With a strong faith as the basis of a Christian response, one avoids the error of presenting humility as a lack of decision or initiative in the exercise of rights, which are really duties. There is nothing further from the mind of the Founder of Opus Dei. To be humble — he preached on one occasion — is not to go about dirty or neglected; neither is it a case of showing ourselves to be indifferent to what happens around us, continually forsaking our rights. Much less is it a question of broadcasting foolish things about oneself. There cannot be humility where there is pretense or hypocrisy, because humility is truth<sup>25</sup>.

This virtue is so crucial in the Christian life that St. Josemaría assured that, in the same way as one seasons food with salt so that it is not insipid, we must always put humility into our interior life<sup>26</sup>. And he used a comparison: one should not do what a certain hen did who, having barely laid one egg, went around deafening everyone with the sound of her clucking. One has to work, one has to fill one’s intellectual and manual work — which is always apostolic — with great intentions and great desires — which the Lord will transform into reality — of serving God without anyone noticing<sup>27</sup>.

But let us consider once again the theological foundation, which is to say, faith, and with faith, hope: there is no sanctity if one does not develop an all-encompassing faith in reality, if one does not foster the virtue of hope which leads

<sup>24</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Letter 24-XI-1930*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in a meditation*, 25-XII-1972.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

us on in our earthly pilgrimage. From the beginning, the Founder of Opus Dei was well aware that the mission which God had confided to him completely surpassed his abilities. This was why he had continual and unabated recourse to the only things capable of putting divine omnipotence within our reach: prayer and sacrifice. There are innumerable testimonies that document how he went about the hospitals and marginalized districts of Madrid begging — as if they were treasures — for prayer and for the offering to God of the pain and suffering of many neglected people, to whom he in turn brought the consolation and the encouragement of his priestly assistance.

How necessary it is for us priests that our faith and hope increase continually! We find ourselves involved in a type of work in which what matters the most, is the only thing that is absolutely necessary<sup>28</sup>: the supernatural means. Real miracles are required to lead souls to God. Nevertheless, “you hear people saying sometimes that there are fewer miracles nowadays. Might it not rather be that there are fewer people living a life of faith?”<sup>29</sup>. These words of St. Josemaría resound in our ears like a clarion call, that reminds us of our sense of responsibility, because above all else, a priest ought to be a man of faith and a man who gives hope to others. “Through faith he draws near to the invisible treasures which constitute the inheritance of the world’s Redemption by the Son of God”<sup>30</sup>.

“Now faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen”<sup>31</sup>. And “by doing his prayer perseveringly each day, with facility or with aridity, the priest, like every Christian, will receive from God [...] new lights, firmness of faith, the secure hope of effectiveness in his pastoral work, and renewed love: in a word, the encouragement to persevere in his work and the source of the effectiveness of that work itself”<sup>32</sup>. A. del Portillo, “Priests for a New Evangelisation”, closing address at the Eleventh International Theology Symposium (18-20 April 1990) held at the University of Navarre, Pamplona, Spain. In these words of Msgr. del Portillo, who was the closest collaborator of the Founder of Opus Dei for many years, we can discover a delicate allusion to the spiritual life of St. Josemaría, who received the grace from God to be a contemplative in the midst of the most absorbing tasks. Don Alvaro adds: “Without

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. *Lk* 10:42.

<sup>29</sup> *Friends of God*, 190.

<sup>30</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, VIII.

<sup>31</sup> *Heb* 11:1.

<sup>32</sup> A. DEL PORTILLO, *Priests for a New Evangelisation*, closing address at the Eleventh International Theology Symposium (18-20 April 1990) held at the University of Navarre, Pamplona, Spain.

prayer, indeed without a prayer which strives to be continuous, there is no identification with Christ, and hence none with the task to be carried out which has its foundation in the gift of God. Furthermore, I would go so far as to say that when a priest doesn't pray, if he doesn't actually falsify the image of Christ who is the Model for us all he presents a blurred version of it which neither attracts nor leads people who hear us in the right way"<sup>33</sup>.

## 7. PASTORAL CHARITY

Thus we reach the most definitive and characteristic virtue of Christian life: charity, which acquires specific contours in the priest: it is pastoral charity. In short, it is born of the consciousness of being a representative of Jesus Christ, the supreme Shepherd<sup>34</sup> of souls, who has given his life for his sheep<sup>35</sup>. This supernatural conviction has to move the priest to give himself completely in the exercise of his ministry, since it is the charity of Christ which is urging him on<sup>36</sup>. A firm, pastoral charity which is nourished perseveringly in the Eucharist and in prayer, is what gives fruitfulness to his ministry.

The example of St. Josemaría is very illustrative in this respect. From the first moments of his vocation, he did not spare himself any effort when it came to serving souls. Earlier, I briefly alluded to his experiences in the outlying areas of Madrid in the 1920s and 30s, in continual contact with poverty and illness, assisting the dying, comforting the sick, explaining Christian doctrine to children and adults. I can assure you — because I have seen it with my own eyes — that that was how he spent the rest of his life, until his last day on earth: always at the beck and call of everyone, whether they were near or far from him, whether he knew them or not: he willingly sacrificed himself for all souls without exception.

The personal assumption of a man by God, which takes place in priestly ordination, binds and consecrates the priest completely to the service and the total love of Christ. The richness contained in this gift is of such consequence that he can assume as his own — in a particularly profound way — the words of the Apostle: *mibi vivere Christus es*<sup>37</sup>, *vivo autem iam non ego, vivit vero in me Chri-*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. 1 *Pet* 5:4.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. *Jn* 10:11.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. 1 *Cor* 5:14.

<sup>37</sup> *Phil* 1:21.

stus<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, the mission received has a universal character: the priest is sent to the entire world, as a living instrument of Christ, who gave himself up for us in order to redeem us from iniquity, and in order to purify us to be an acceptable people, pursuing good works<sup>39</sup>.

The sacramental identification with Christ and the mission received are found at the base of the specific requirements of pastoral charity and place the priest in a special situation with relation to the mystery of Christ and the Church. Commenting on the deepening of the doctrinal understanding that occurred as a result of the teachings the Second Vatican Council, Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo writes: “If we consider that Love incarnate among men avoided any type of human attachment, no matter how upright or noble, which could in any way hinder this total ministerial dedication, we can well understand how appropriate it is for the priest to do the same by freely renouncing, through celibacy, something which is in itself good and holy, so as to unite himself more easily to Christ with all his heart, and through Christ and in Christ to dedicate himself with greater freedom to the service of God and men”<sup>40</sup>.

Priestly celibacy is a manifestation of the complete offering of his life that the priest freely offers to Christ and to the Church. Under this optic, one can well understand the words of St. Josemaría in a familiar conversation in 1969. “If he truly has a priestly spirit, if he is a man of interior life, the priest can never feel alone. No one else can have a heart which is so much in love as his! He is the man of Love, the representative among men of Love made man. He lives for Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ, with Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. It is a divine truth which moves me down to the deepest recesses of my being, when everyday, lifting up and holding the Chalice and the Sacred Host in my hands, I repeat slowly, savouring these words of the Canon: *Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso et in Ipso...* It is through Him, with Him, in Him and for all souls that I live, despite my personal wretchedness. And despite this wretchedness, or perhaps because of it, my Love is a love which is renewed everyday”<sup>41</sup>.

## 8. PRIESTLY FRATERNITY

While he loved all souls without exception, St. Josemaría reserved a truly special love for his brother priests. I have already alluded to his joy when he could

<sup>38</sup> *Gal* 2:20.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. *Tit* 2:14.

<sup>40</sup> A. DEL PORTILLO, *On Priesthood*, cit, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in a family gathering*, 10-IV-1969.

meet with them, in order to learn from their self-giving — so often heroic — and in order to communicate to them something of his personal experience. I cannot help but recall the way that he manifested his dedication to priests, especially during the years in which he lived in Spain. During the 1940s, for example, when asked by various diocesan bishops, he preached many retreats to the clergy, who were in need of spiritual help after the terrible trials they had suffered during the religious persecution of the previous years. St. Josemaría gave himself completely to this task, and at one point even attended to 1000 priests in one year.

He continued until the end of his life to implore, with a sense of urgency, that God would send many priestly vocations to the Church. He personally prepared and directed many young men who were considering their vocations, towards the priesthood. He encouraged the lay faithful to pray with insistence to the Lord of the Harvest, so that He would send many labourers into His field<sup>42</sup>. For St. Josemaría, the pulse of the supernatural vibrancy of a diocese could be taken by measuring the number of priestly vocations, of which the priests themselves were the first ones responsible.

How it saddened him to come across someone who had lost interest in this task! And this was because such a lack of interest constitutes a clear sign that the priest himself is not happy with his vocation. I remember his immediate response to a question about the causes of the scarcity of vocations for the seminary: “Perhaps the first reason could be that we priests often do not really value the treasure that we have and for this reason, we are not enkindled by the desire that other young men also possess this treasure. The seminaries would be full if we loved our priesthood more”<sup>43</sup>.

St. Josemaría’s concern for the sanctity of the clergy had a very long history. He had it very clear in his mind that the first apostolate to be carried out by priests had to be with other priests: not to leave them alone with their sorrows, to share their joys, to encourage them in the midst of difficulties, to fortify them in moments of doubts... He had those words of Sacred Scripture emblazoned on his soul: *frater, qui adiuvatur a fratre, quasi civitas firma*<sup>44</sup>, the brother who is helped by his brothers is as strong as a walled city.

His zeal to help his brothers in the priesthood increased so intensely that in 1950, when Opus Dei had not yet received the definitive approval from the Holy See, he thought of dedicating himself to his brother priests. When he had already offered the sacrifice of Abraham to the Lord — since he had decided to

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. *Mt* 9:37-38.

<sup>43</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Notes taken in a family gathering*, 3-XI-1972.

<sup>44</sup> *Prov* 18:19.

leave the Work if it was necessary — Heaven showed him that this sacrifice would not be required of him. Diocesan priests have the same opportunity to encounter God within the spirit of Opus Dei, which teaches Christians to sanctify themselves in the middle of the world, each person in his own occupation or tasks. It is enough that they seek sanctity in the exercise of their ministerial duties, in full communion with their own Ordinaries and the other diocesan priests, treating their diocesan Bishop with special veneration, warmly united to their brothers in the priesthood. The doors of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, to which the clergy incardinated into Opus Dei belong, were thus opened to welcome those diocesan priests who had received this specific divine call.

Today, in these lands of the Rioja, where the work of Opus Dei has been perfectly integrated into the diocese for many years, I raise my heart in thanksgiving to the Most Blessed Trinity for the abundant fruit which the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross has produced and will continue to produce in the service of the universal Church and of the particular Churches. All of this is fruit of the grace which God granted through the intercession of His Most Holy Mother, and thanks to St. Josemaría's full correspondence to the call that he received to the priesthood — here in Logroño — 85 years ago.