

Citizens of the World – Through Christianity, Culture and Campus Life

Katrina Lee
University of Technology, Sydney. Australia

This presentation will look at Christian identity and its indissoluble connectedness to culture and faith in shaping the world so clearly recognised by the Founder of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría.

Reflections on the writings of Blessed Josemaría will contribute to the particular emphasis on how faith can be experienced and shared in the midst of professional, secular reality when academia is passionately committed to viewing their ordinary work not as a profession in isolation but as a vocation.

I have referred to “citizens of the world” because the writings and teachings of Blessed Josemaría emphasise the key objective of Opus Dei — to see that there be men and women of all races and social conditions who endeavour to love and to serve God and the rest of mankind in and through their ordinary work — in the middle of reality and in the interests of the world.

The paper will also attempt to understand why the writings of Blessed Josemaría have so much relevance for young people today. Perhaps young people see the relevance in the unity of life this priest preached and practised. Or perhaps it is recognition of Blessed Josemaría identifying, loving and embracing the will of God that speaks more of truth, faith and freedom — the searching questions of youth — than a culture of individualism and materialism.

Blessed Josemaría often said he founded the Work of God on the grace of God and good humour. Nothing else. Fortunately since that second day of October in 1928 and for the ensuing forty-seven years, Blessed Josemaría was able to add many writings and messages to the grace of God and his good humour. He left Opus Dei with the theological and cultural principles that not only help to guide the Prelature but help others to understand its overall message.

This paper will consider many of the writings of the Founder of Opus Dei but it will draw deeply on the homily *Passionately Loving the World*, delivered during a Mass celebrated on the campus of the University of Navarre in

Pamplona, Spain, on the occasion of the General Assembly of the Association of Friends of the University, In October 1967¹.

That day more than 30,000 people heard Blessed Josemaría call them to an encounter with Christ in their everyday life, and to sanctify themselves in their everyday lives.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, Blessed Josemaría's words reverberate with clarity and urgency.

In *Passionately Loving the World*, Blessed Josemaría expresses the core aspects of his message — a universal call to holiness — and challenges everyone to find God in the heart of everyday life.

The challenge is in the panorama of Opus Dei – to share in the task of making temporal society more human and just.

To live a holy life in the secular world “without fuss, with simplicity, with truthfulness”².

But the challenge is not a rallying call for the converted living in a segregated world. It is a challenge for each and every individual, no matter who or where they are, no matter what they do.

“God is calling you to serve Him in and through the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us everyday, in the laboratory, in the operating room, in the army barracks, in the university hall, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work”³.

His opening words in this homily are in preparation of the “wonder of the Eucharist”, to be celebrated on the campus of the University.

I believe reflection on these words allows us to explore more deeply the message that “wonder of the Eucharist” not only points to the bond of unity shared by all Christians, but to the unity of life.

The link of course is the Eucharist, that mystery of faith, which in itself links all the mysteries of Christianity and is the “source and summit of the whole Christian life”⁴.

It is the most sacred and transcendent act which man, with the grace of God, can carry out on earth. The faithful can share the Eucharist with the entire community in the sacrifice of the Lord, where Christ the Lord Himself is contained, offered, received with his body, blood, soul and divinity, where Christ is truly, really and substantially present.

¹ BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, homily *Passionately Loving the World*, October 9, 1967, in *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, Dublin 1970.

² *Ibidem*, 123.

³ *Ibidem*, 114.

⁴ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Consti., *Lumen gentium*, 11.

It is a moment of sublime love and filiation and it is a moment of thanksgiving when a soul knows it is loved by God.

The Eucharist is the supernatural life of the soul, it increases our union with Christ and, as such increases a bond of unity with all Christians but it also opens the pathway to a unity of life.

This is the message so often and profoundly emphasised by the Founder of Opus Dei who saw that the spiritual life, and the relationship with God, cannot be separated from the family, professional or social life.

But being a Christian, albeit united, is not just a way to personal contentment. There is a relationship between the devout life and the circumstances of ordinary life and it is this relationship that indicates Christian identity.

Blessed Josemaría often spoke and wrote of the early Christians of the first centuries, men and women who were quite ordinary but filled with the Holy Spirit, who with the help of God were able to transform that whole pagan society, making it Christian and therefore more human.

This universal call to sanctity and apostolate, as seen by those first Christians, is one of the founding principles which gives rise to the spirit of Opus Dei and which the Founder encapsulated nearly seventy years ago.

“Your duty is to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you. Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: ‘Be perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect’⁵.

In other words sanctity is not something for privileged individuals.

“Since the foundation of the Work in 1928, my teaching has been that sanctity is not reserved for a privileged few. All the ways of the earth, every state in life, every profession, every honest task can be divine”⁶.

This universal call was also given great clarity in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*: “Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness... the call to holiness is rooted in Baptism and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the Eucharist. Since Christians are re clothed in Christ Jesus and refreshed by His Spirit, they are ‘holy’. They therefore have the ability to manifest this holiness and the responsibility to bear witness to it in all that they do”⁷.

The Founder of Opus Dei sought God’s will and in seeing, did it. The message is not complex – seek the universal call to holiness through ordinary life and tasks so that work becomes prayer. By doing this the individual is sanctified, others are sanctified through one’s work and the work itself is sanctified.

⁵ *The Way*, 291.

⁶ *Conversations*, 26.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Exh., *Christifideles laici*, 16.

Our individual worth is great and a characteristic mark of Christianity, not apparent outside the sphere of revelation. We know Christianity maintains that a man's soul, and therefore his whole being is of greater value than any treasure, and indeed, than all the riches in the world.

But doesn't the title Christian imply a mission?

For Blessed Josemaría, being a Christian seems not only to imply a mission but also gives a clear vision to carry it out.

"It is the relationship between a devout life and the circumstances of an ordinary life. Christian identity helps us to see this creation, appreciate its beauty, recognise the dignity of each person. Men have not been created to just build the best possible world. Life is short and passing but we must make the most of our time here"⁸.

Let us now look at the link between culture and faith.

The Second Vatican Council laid the foundation for a close and harmonious relation between Christian faith and human culture. However culture is not just anything that man creates or produces, or the traditional customs of each people. It is what is useful in developing, perfecting and humanising man. The Holy Father has said the heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest mystery; the mystery of God and that a "faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived"⁹.

However faith should never be considered a cultural product. It is theological and divine so therefore has the intrinsic capacity to inform any culture.

A civilised society is often called a cultured society but although the Church acts to advance human and civil nature, it is the pursuit of a supernatural end – and that end is evangelisation not civilisation.

"Whether she aids the world or whether she benefits from it, the Church has but one sole purpose – that the Kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished"¹⁰.

A point Blessed Josemaría made very clear when he wrote "Culture, culture! Don't let anyone get ahead of us in striving for it and possessing it. But remember that culture is a means, not an end"¹¹.

Faith can and should become culture. It is the inculturation of faith that is the work of faithfully translating and incarnating faith and Christian life, guided by theology. However in the pursuit of inculturation, not all expressions of human cultures — customs, ways of thinking, new technology — are compatible with faith. Where technology is absent in cultural formation, the growth and development of the divine life is impeded.

⁸ *Christ is Passing By*, 98.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter* instituting the Pontifical Council for Culture, May 20 1982.

¹⁰ II VATICAN COUNCIL, *Apost. Const. Gaudium et spes*, 45.

¹¹ *The Way*, 345.

The Holy Father said in an address to university professors of all nations in September 2000, "...if culture is not directed towards truth, which must be sought both humbly and confidently, it is doomed to disappear into the ephemeral, losing itself to the instability of opinion, and perhaps giving itself over to the domineering will — though often disguised — of the strongest... culture without truth does not safeguard freedom but puts it at risk"¹².

It is this intellectual and spiritual link Blessed Josemaría knew was essential to achieve unity of life and it is a link constantly tested today.

We are living in a time of cultural radicalism and relativism. Universal principles of judgement are being questioned, the correspondence of culture to human nature challenged and the will of the majority, regardless of Christian principles, proposed as the democratic and moral acceptability of society.

And in some quarters there is a concerted effort to separate the intellectual from the spiritual and to make values relative to the culture of the time, which virtually eliminates all absolutes, all permanent realities.

Blessed Josemaría saw that the consistency between faith and culture presupposes and reinforces consistency between faith and life. He believed a person who strives to live according to Christian faith would be in a position to put Christ at the peak of human culture. And he saw that campus life played an integral role in the understanding of culture and faith as well as playing an integral part in securing Christian principles.

Not only did he see clearly the contribution universities can make in bringing young people to an encounter with Christ and the sanctification of everyday life, he saw them as vital communities based on a culture of unity where truth can be discussed along the lines of calm reflection and contemplation.

He saw universities as places where teacher and student alike could come to a true understanding of freedom and not award individual conscience the status of a supreme tribunal or moral judgement. Student and teacher who will see that only freedom that submits to the truth leads the person to his or her true good, who recognises their conscience is always the student and never the teacher.

But one area of study where culture and faith is not always consistent and issues many challenges is the field of media and social communications — "the first Areopagus of the modern age"¹³.

In his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, the Holy Father says the very evangelisation of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media and it is necessary to integrate that message into the "new culture" created by modern communications.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Address to Jubilee of University Professors, September 9 2000.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. Let., *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990.

“New Culture” cultivates attitudes and behaviour, forms of media culture, such as film and television, music and magazines provide role and gender models. We see examples of the narratives of media culture offering moral messages, ideological thinking, social and political conditioning.

With the media and culture playing such a critical role in contemporary life, it is no wonder we have a plethora of courses, studies and essays on the subject. Some commentators and educators will use a single, specific theory to understand, interpret and criticise media and cultural texts. Others will cast adrift all methodological and theoretical strategies and anchor their argument in empirical description and analysis.

Key theories and texts help us to understand structural codes, meanings and effects. A critical understanding of culture can help us view the past and shape the future but in our studies of the subject are we allowing ourselves to be bound by the very texts, theories, models, codes and conventions we engage to help us understand and make sense of cultural and social worlds, which in turn influence and impact on public opinion?

Discourse in this field is often intense and convoluted. But no matter how well we study the concepts, theories and methods, and no matter how we engage in reasoned debate, unless we anchor our analysis in truth then our arguments will be little more than sophisms.

And many studies in this field speak little of truth – if at all. There is much discourse on the production of meaning as the exercise of power, economic and social determinants, mass media in the public interest and in democracy, practices and audience perceptions. We are challenged by those who restrict truth to agreeing with what is popular, considered relevant, rates, looks, sells. Who thinks that who we are or what we feel at a given moment, also means we can decide our “own destiny and future in complete autonomy”¹⁴.

Limiting the field of human knowledge to what can be perceived by the senses cripples our humanity. Blessed Josemaría could well see that truth is not just sense knowledge but intellectual knowledge that penetrates to the depths of the heart that puts us not only in touch with reality but the world and its Creator.

The true formation of young people to be tomorrow’s citizens of the world cannot be emphasised too greatly. The Holy Father has referred to youth as a special moment in life when an identity and vocation form and when the first serious personal decisions are made. It is a time when they question and encounter the mystery of life, the mystery of God. He has said conscience, the measure of human dignity, is in a sense the history of the world.

¹⁴ Cfr., *Passionately Loving the World*, cit.

“For history is written not only by the events which in a certain sense happen ‘from outside’; it is written first of all ‘from inside’: it is the history of human consciences, of moral victories and defeats”¹⁵.

History is driven by culture at which at its very heart is religion. It is this connectedness of culture and faith that educators must carry to their students because it is in education that the primary and essential task of culture finds its home – a point addressed by the Pontifical Council for Culture.

“...education which, since the times of early Christianity has been one of the most remarkable areas of the Church’s pastoral activity, at the religious and cultural levels, as well as on the personal level and social plains, is now more complex and crucial than ever. It is primarily the responsibility of families, but calls for the help of society as a whole. Tomorrow’s world depends on today’s education and education cannot be seen merely as a transmission of knowledge. It forms people and prepares them for participation in social life by fostering their psychological, intellectual, cultural, moral and spiritual maturity – the future of humanity will depend upon the fully human development and solidarity of all”¹⁶.

Perhaps then it can be said that if education is exposing the intellect to truth, then culture is the pursuit of that truth.

Blessed Josemaría was forthright: a university must play a primary role in contributing to human progress: “A university must educate its students to have a sense of service to society, promoting the common good with their professional work and activity”¹⁷.

And the sense of service must be seen by example. Blessed Josemaría also saw that the value of the academic’s task should not be measured exclusively by the benefit received from it “but by the service rendered to others”¹⁸.

The Founder of Opus Dei also held the very strong view that the study of religion at university was a fundamental need, saying a person who lacks religious training has an incomplete education.

“A University from which religion is absent is an incomplete university: it neglects a fundamental facet of human personalty...”¹⁹.

It is this theological formation that is especially necessary today. Christian identity provides the solid formation to meet difficult situations demanding answers when it is easy to be confused and influenced by fashionable ideologies.

Blessed Josemaría foresaw that need nearly thirty years ago.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Let. *To the Youth of the World*, Rome, 1985.

¹⁶ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, May 6 1999.

¹⁷ *Conversations*, 74.

¹⁸ *Friends of God*, 238.

¹⁹ *Conversations*, 73.

“In so far as possible, each of us should study faith seriously, rigorously – all of which means theology. Ours should be the piety of children and the sure doctrine of theologians. Our desire to advance in theological knowledge, sound, firm Christian doctrine, is sparked from the concern of a faithful; soul ...to attain the deepest meaning of the world seen as coming from the hands of God”²⁰.

In conclusion I would like to focus for a moment on how the university vocation can facilitate an encounter with our Lord and at the same time provide the opportunity to reach many hundreds or thousands of people, who will in turn, encourage the apostolate of friendship and confidence.

A Christian educator draws on his or her faith to look more deeply into the social and cultural issues of the time; to look for the dignity of the person in those issues, whether it be a respect of life or matters of social justice.

Blessed Josemaría encouraged a community of learning within a university where intellectual debate occurs within an ethical framework. A community where selfish individualism and materialism is identified and cast adrift and the true dignity of the human person is recognised. Where spiritual courage and understanding is woven into a lay mentality.

This framework of knowledge, formation and service must be built on the foundations of the human and spiritual virtues.

If we are to encounter Our Lord within our university vocation and bring others to Him, how will this be accomplished without the interlacing of all the virtues – when every virtue works to the good of both our own soul and to the good of those around us?

Without fortitude how will we not appreciate the human and divine virtue of patience that is not only the guardian of virtues but moves us to the understanding of others?

And what of truthfulness and justice, honesty and integrity, which requires sustained commitment in times of subjectivism and relativism? Blessed Josemaría tells us if we are truthful we will practice justice.

“That is if we are truthful and aware of the consequences. Justice is not only giving to each his due but giving more. The best way of living charity lies in generosity outstripping the demands made on us by justice”²¹.

Our professional work and how we sanctify our ordinary work, our example, will be the lamp that enlightens our colleagues and students.

By shining a light into dark places we can reveal the serenity and joy of our conviction and divine filiation.

²⁰ *Christ is Passing By*, 10.

²¹ *Friends of God*, 83.

And when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God.

“A Christian vocation consists in making heroic verse out of the prose of each day”²².

Blessed Josemaría was a pioneer of lay spirituality, not of a spirituality of the laity.

He passionately loved the world because he knew it was the world, not just the temples, where Christ can be found.

And when Christ is sought and found in the everyday world, where our lives can be sanctified, it is then that heaven and earth will meet and reside in our hearts.

²² *Conversations*, 116.