

JOHN M. HAAS

PASSIONATELY LOVING THE WORLD, THE MESSAGE OF ST. JOSEMARIA

To love the world passionately. This is what God has called us to do through the example and teaching of his saint, Josemaria Escriva. To love the world passionately.

However, this is a “hard saying” for many Catholics in our day. We are to love the world. Yet we live in a broken world with millions of abortions committed every year, with our societies awash in pornography, with even



John Haas at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, January 10, 2003.

Catholic couples undergoing surgical sterilizations, with record numbers of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and venereal diseases, with fierce media assaults upon the Church and her teachings, with human embryos being engendered for destructive research, with attempts at human cloning. How do we passionately love this world? After all, should we not repudiate “the world, the flesh and the devil”?

St. Josemaria, who called us to love the world passionately, was himself no stranger to the disorder and ugliness of fallen humanity. He lived in a world with totalitarian regimes repressing and murdering the innocent by the millions; he lived in a world suffering the unspeakable cruelties of the Spanish Civil War; he knew priests and women religious who were brutally murdered by Communists. As a youth he prayed a lot for Christians persecuted in Mexico and for Catholics in Ireland.

The founder of Opus Dei witnessed the dangers of the Civil War first-hand and indeed suffered from them himself. St. Josemaria had to go about in disguises, travel at night, use code language. On one occasion it was thought he had been killed when friends saw a body resembling his hanging from a tree just outside his home.

On another occasion in 1936 he was in hiding in an apartment. The militia began searching the houses on the street, beginning in the cellars and going

to the attic floor by floor. St. Josemaria and others fled to the attic of their building. Of course he was not wearing clerical garb, and one of his party did not even know he was a priest. As they huddled in the hot, dusty attic, they could hear the militia in the attic next door. In this very dangerous situation, Father Josemaria approached one of the men hiding with him and said, "I am a priest. We are in difficult times. If you want, you can make an act of contrition, and I will give you absolution."

Revealing himself as a priest could have meant death for St. Josemaria. Indeed, the man to whom he had offered absolution could have betrayed him to try to save his own life. Fortunately it did not come to that. The point is that St. Josemaria knew well, he had ample experience of, the evils of a fallen world.

Before, during and after the war, he suffered false accusations and calumnies from his own brothers in the Faith, which was particularly painful for him. And as we do today, he lived in a world of increasing divorce, spreading public immorality, desertions from the priesthood in the thousands. As we know, he condemned the fruits of this *fallen* world in language as harsh as any used by Old Testament prophets or by Our Lord Himself, who excoriated the religious leaders of his day as white washed sepulchers and broods of vipers. Yet, remarkably, it was still this world he called on us to love passionately.

How is this apparent contradiction to be resolved? What exactly *is* the world St. Josemaria calls us to love so passionately? The answer to that question might help us understand the message of this newly canonized saint and in turn help us in our struggle to build the civilization of love to which our Holy Father has called us.

As noted, St. Josemaria was no stranger to a world suffering from the harsh effects of sin. But he was even more intimate with the world as God created it, as God intended it to be, and as He redeemed it in Christ. St. Josemaria loved this world because he knew and understood it from a supernatural perspective; he saw it in its relation to its Creator and its Redeemer.

In his 1967 homily at the University of Navarre, entitled "Passionately Loving the World", St. Josemaria reminded us of a profound Catholic truth, a truth of which we cannot be reminded too often: What God created is good. And this good world coming from the hand of God was created for the crown of creation, for man. When the world was sullied through human sin, it was restored in Christ and elevated to previously unimaginable heights — again, for the sake of man.

It is precisely this world, for which Christ poured out His life's blood, that St. Josemaria loved so much as a son of the God who brought this world into being out of nothing for the sake of love. The Founder of Opus Dei deeply understood the words of the Evangelist John: "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son that everyone who believes in Him should not die, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This was the world St. Josemaria knew and loved — through the grime and the filth of human sin. The theologians tell us that we are to love the sinner, not

"as sinner" but rather as a potential friend of God. We are never to love Satan and the fallen angels because they can never become friends of God, but the sinner can. It is human nature only to love that which is good and which has the potential to be good. St. Josemaria had a supernatural vision which allowed him to see the good wherever it was and to love every sinner he encountered—who was everyone he encountered (!)—as a potential friend of God.

The story is told of the father of a prostitute in Madrid who was dying in the brothel where the daughter lived. Friends came to Father Escriva asking him to administer the last rites to the dying man. The saint could have refused to enter such a vile establishment but he knew there was a soul in need of redemption, who, like the thief upon the cross, could be snatched from Satan and stolen away to heaven, even at the last moment. St. Josemaria said he would come, but only on the condition that the sinful activity which occurred in that place cease the day before and the day after.

It is interesting to note that St. Josemaria did not place such a heavy demand that it may not have been met, and the dying man deprived of his last chance of salvation. But on the other hand, he did not act as though he were indifferent to the sinful activity taking place in that house. He insisted that it cease for a while almost as though a truce had been called between the warring factions of good and evil, so that the priest could make his way to the battlefield to anoint a poor soul wounded and dying. What always struck me about that story is that St. Josemaria saw a potential friend of God in that dying man and did his utmost to reach him before it was too late.

But the virtues of prudence and fortitude which the founder of Opus Dei manifested on that occasion were won with struggle and hard work. Virtues work as second natures in us, but they do not come naturally. They must be formed. If we would be entirely honest about this holy man, we would have to acknowledge that it was not easy for St. Josemaria to control his anger and to be meek. But his anger was not a disorder; it was the virtue of righteous indignation. He became angry with injustice, sinfulness, disorder. When one reads through his aphorisms and counsels in *The Way*, *The Forge* or *The Furrow*, one is often struck by his brutal frankness. He will reassure his spiritual charges with soothing words, such as "Forgive my sincerity ..." ¹ or "Don't be angry if I tell you ..." ² and then he will go on to hit them with characterizations of their attitudes or behaviors which are remarkably severe.

We read, for example, in the *Furrow*, 708: "Malicious, suspicious, devious, mistrustful, grudging . . . these are all adjectives which you deserve, even though they might annoy you." "Might annoy you!?" I dare say, if my spiritual director ever said such things to me, I would be devastated. But St. Josemaria did not mince words in his fraternal corrections. He did not mince words because he loved his spiritual children, and he knew full well just how serious

¹ *Furrow*, 600.

² *Furrow*, 706

is the spiritual struggle in which we are all engaged. The stakes could not be higher. They are, frankly, eternal bliss and happiness or eternal damnation and torment.

The Founder of the Work wanted us to love that which is truly good, not some counterfeit good; he wanted us to love the world God created and Christ re-created. This is the world which we are to love passionately and which we are to help bring to its promised fullness in Christ. And in the estimation of St. Josemaria, nothing we know lies outside this lovable world, either as already worthy of love or as having the potential to be worthy of our love.

St. Josemaria respected and admired the vocation to religious life; he particularly venerated contemplatives. But he knew that most of us called to be followers of Christ have the vocation to live in the world, not apart from it. This world is not to be feared but to be loved and through that love this world is to be transformed according to the mind of Christ. Clearly we are not to love the disorder which human greed and pride and sensuality have managed to engender but we *are* to love that which God intends the world to be. And this gives us another profound insight into the thought of St. Josemaria, since it takes a contemplative soul to be able to see reality for what it truly is, as it has proceeded from the hand of God—and what it can be as we unite it to our prayer and our acts of love for God. We hear St. Josemaria saying over and over: “I will never tire of repeating that we have to be contemplative souls in the midst of the world, who try to convert their work into prayer.”³

It is instructive that St. Josemaria does not simply speak of praying while one works but rather of actually converting work into prayer. Our work, our daily professional or domestic work, becomes the means of our sanctification, of our growing in holiness, of our becoming more fully one with God in Jesus Christ. St. Josemaria liked to reflect on the hidden life of Christ as being particularly edifying for us.

Jesus was engaged in His redemptive work even before His public ministry began. At that time he was perceived as the ordinary son of Mary and Joseph, working in the carpentry shop, attending the synagogue, celebrating at wedding feasts with his friends, fulfilling his religious obligations by going up to Jerusalem. All of these ordinary activities were so ordinary in fact, that none of the evangelists take note of them. They were indeed so ordinary that the neighbors were perplexed by Him when He began His public ministry. Yet despite their ordinariness, His daily chores and activities were ineffably extraordinary acts bringing about the redemption of the world. They were redemptive acts precisely because they were joined to the Person and the Mission of the Incarnate Son of God—just as our ordinary deeds can be redemptive of the world as we offer them to the Father in union with His Son.

The motto of Benedictine monks is “Ora et Labora (Prayer and Work)”. As a motto for Opus Dei, we might suggest “Ora per Laborem (Work as Prayer)”. Our life is not bifurcated into mundane work and spiritual work. Rather, St.

Josemaria meant it quite literally when he said, “Pray without ceasing.” Our work and activities can be a prayer if they are offered up to God and done with a supernatural motive.

I must say, I think this truth of the thought of St. Josemaria is difficult to grasp precisely because of its simplicity. When Naaman, the Syrian general, turned to the Prophet Elisha seeking to be cleansed from his leprosy, he was prepared to do extraordinary things. Yet all the prophet told him to do was to go bathe in the Jordan. Naaman was furious. He was prepared to do so much more. He was a courageous and important man! Was the prophet mocking him?

The message of Josemaria may at times seem even a little disappointing, as Elisha’s did to Naaman. “Is that all I am to do to be raised to the altar? To be a saint? Simply my daily chores, my daily work? Helping my wife with the dishes? Repairing the garage door? Making sure the data I am using in my research is correct and not tainted? Helping my son with homework? Attending the parent-teacher conference for our daughter? Please, Lord. I am ready to do so much more. I am ready to embrace martyrdom, to witness to you before the mighty of the world.” And then St. Josemaria whispers to us Our Lord’s own words. “Because you have been “in pauca fidelis” – ‘faithful in the little things’ – enter into the joy of your Lord. The words are Christ’s. ‘In pauca fidelis!...’ Now will you disdain little things, if heaven itself is promised to those who keep them?”⁴ The little things. Indeed, guarding our tongue from a malicious, but delicious, piece of gossip can be a martyrdom of sorts. Not succumbing to a particularly seductive sensual temptation may actually be more difficult, and require more fortitude, than witnessing to the faith before a persecuting Caesar.

I had known the Work for several years before I began to grasp the real significance of the teaching of St. Josemaria in this area. I had had a consulting contract with the Department of Justice in the Reagan Administration. At the time I was offered the position of chief financial officer of a Catholic college and seminary. I was struggling with what I should do, stay with my current position or pursue the new one. Over lunch one day with a member of the Work, a numerary, I mentioned that I thought I would probably take the position with the Catholic college and seminary, since I had always wanted to serve the Church. I was startled when he suddenly slammed his fist on the table repeatedly and shouted, “No! No! No! You don’t get it! You just don’t get it. You ARE the Church. You serve the Church most effectively by advancing your own professional work, by doing your professional work well. *That* is serving our Lord and His Church.”

This is a difficult lesson to learn, since we invariably fall into the trap of thinking that we truly serve the Church only in some institutional or quasi-clerical role. It is thought that the earnest Catholic is the one who enters the sanctuary to be a lector or an extraordinary minister of the Holy Eucharist or who enters into some position with the institutional church. But St. Josemaria and

³ *Furrow*, 497

⁴ *The Way*, 819; cf. Mt. 25:21.

his children know that is not the case. Whether we are preparing a legal brief, doing stock analysis, or selling an automobile, our work itself can become a prayer and a means of sanctification. The truth is profound in its simplicity. As Our Father said in *The Way*, 359: "Add a supernatural motive to your ordinary professional work, and you will have sanctified it." No need for a religious habit, no need for a monastery or retreat house, no need, even, for a weekend away. At 10:30 on a Monday morning at your desk on Wabash Street in Chicago, or Park Avenue South in New York or Walnut Street in Philadelphia or Bay Street in Toronto, you can and should be engaged in sanctifying yourself and the world through your daily work.

However, we must remember that doing our work with care, with attention, with professionalism will not accomplish our desired purposes if we are not in a state of grace, if we are not in close friendship with God. St. Josemaria uses a wonderful image to make this point. He says that without grace we are no more effective in our work than a busy, industrious seamstress who feverishly sews all day but with no thread in her needle. However, if the needle is threaded, if we are in a state of grace, what magnificent garments we can engender.

With God's grace, with attention to the details of ordinary life, with a supernatural motive of love in all we do, with an awareness of our own dignity and the dignity of all whom we meet because of our being children of the same Father God, we can wrest from the hand of Satan one piece of fallen territory after another.

I believe that a considerable portion of the genius of St. Josemaria and of Opus Dei is the embrace of the virtue of patience. We see it in abundance when Our Father writes of tribulations, of the interior struggle and of hope.

St. Josemaria knew that nothing can be accomplished without integrity and without God's grace. He knew that, fundamentally, they were all that really mattered. The Work is not and cannot be a "mass movement". It provides personal, individualized formation to help one soul grow in holiness, and another and another. And those souls will help still others grow in holiness, their spouses, their children, their colleagues, their employees, their students. It is an historical fact that the loss of Christendom and the subsequent social disorder were long in coming. The civilization of love and life for which we now struggle and for which we yearn will likewise be long in coming. But it will come only as your life and my life and each particular life are lived in conformity with the mind of Christ.

Moses was never able to enter the Promised Land. St. Josemaria never lived to see the establishment of the personal prelature toward which he groped and worked his entire adult life. John Paul II will not live to see the emergence of the civilization of love and life for which he has struggled so indefatigably. I will never see it either. But there is a sense in which that does not matter. It is not ours to engender but God's. And the sanctified activities which we undertake even now have themselves an eternal significance and build toward that new Christian civilization which will flourish in God's time. But it will be

done in God's time, not ours, which is why the virtue of patience is so important.

"Black Robe" is a moving film made about the work of the French Jesuit missionaries among the Native Americans here in Canada. It is a rough movie, entirely unromantic in its presentation of the deprivations, the sufferings, the tortures, the agonies, and the eventual death endured by many of these Jesuits. Finally, after the most arduous efforts and the most heroic of sacrifices, an Indian village is converted and all the villagers are baptized. Yet at the conclusion of the movie, a post-script written across the screen informs the audience that the entire village was annihilated the following year by a hostile neighboring tribe. Without a supernatural vision, all that effort could be seen as futile, indeed, as unspeakably useless, ineffectual, an unbelievable wastage of human life and talent. But with a supernatural vision, that effort must be understood as supremely effective, as ultimately successful.

Our Father wrote in *The Way*, 691: "Are you suffering some great tribulation? . . . Say very slowly, as if savoring the words, this powerful and manly prayer: 'May the most just and most lovable will of God be done, be fulfilled, be praised and eternally exalted above all things. Amen. Amen.' I assure you that you'll find peace." And that is all that matters. That the most just most lovable will of God be done. That is it. That was the mission that Christ came to accomplish; simply, the Will of His Father. That is the mission for every Christian, to be a co-redeemer, to be an "*alter Christus*"

We carry out our baptismal vows working to transform society according to the mind of Christ. Virgil had declared: "*Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*"—"Such a toil it was to found the Roman people." It will be an even greater toil to found in our day a Christian civilization of love and life. But this is what we have been called to work for, unsparingly.

We struggle and work and pray for the establishment of a civilization of love and life, but not as some abstraction. We do not have a love for humanity in general. (Indeed, save me from the man who does.) Rather we love our spouses and our children. We love our neighbors, our friends, our countrymen. They have names and they have faces. Each is a unique child of God eliciting from us an act of love and an acknowledgment of his or her dignity.

Many years ago I was visiting a dear friend who was serving as the United States Ambassador to Guatemala. It was a time of terrible bloodshed in Guatemala, still known as "La Violencia". My friend offered to provide me with an embassy car and driver, but in light of the fact that one of his predecessors had been assassinated, I respectfully declined. I did not want to be a slow-moving and conspicuous American target in a land torn by violence. I said I would be perfectly happy to take a taxi!

I was directed to the closest taxi stand. However, when I arrived at the location, there was not a taxi to be seen. There were only a number of beat-up old cars parked on the grass under the shade of a large tree. I walked to the edge of what appeared to be a graveyard for abandoned cars. I raised my voice and

shouted out hesitatingly: "Taxi". Suddenly half a dozen men leapt to their feet from the shade of the trees, or rolled out of their cars. I had found the taxi stand.

I chose an old, rusty, dented Chevrolet with a driver who looked little better. He was missing teeth, was unshaven, was wearing wrinkled clothes and sandals without socks. When I found out how little he charged, I engaged him as my driver for the entire stay.

The gear shift had long ago broken off the steering column, but he had made a primitive one which he had attached to the gear box through a hole he had cut in the floor. Whenever he had to go in reverse, white smoke billowed out of the tail pipe enveloping the car. I have no idea how he managed to see where we were going in reverse.

I always rode in the front seat with him, and we talked about many things. Politics, international affairs, the weekly radio shows of the current dictator, Rios Mont, the importance of family. He had a strong sense of justice and of private property. One day he pointed at my brief case. "Nice brief case," he said. "You bought that with your own money." "Yes, I did," I said. "You worked hard for that money," he said. "Yes, I did," I responded. "That nice brief case belongs to you and you are entitled to it." "That's right," I said. He nodded in agreement. Another day, we had a similar conversation about my suit.

Eventually our discussions turned to religion. Evangelical sects were making strong inroads into Guatemala. In fact, the dictator at the time was Evangelical. "You Christian?" he asked me. "Yes, I am," I answered. "As a matter of fact, I'm Catholic." "What kind?" he asked. This was a time of the influence of liberation theology in Latin America. It was a movement which was heavily influenced by Marxist thought and which tried to set up a parallel People's Catholic Church to the Roman Catholic Church. I turned the question around on him. "What kind of Catholic are *you*?" I asked. "Me? I'm a true Catholic," he said, and to impress upon me just how true a Catholic he was he lowered the visor above the windshield and pulled out a prayer card to the Venerable Josemaria Escriva. "Un catolico verdadero! A true Catholic," he declared. Not to be outdone, I took my wallet out of my suitcoat pocket and pulled out my prayer card to Josemaria. "Hey, hermano (brother)," he exclaimed. "Hey, mano a mano", roughly translated, "Hey, brother, shake!" The conversation became very warm and very animated. He wanted to know how many children my wife and I had, their ages, their names, and he told me all about their children.

When I finally left Guatemala, we promised one another our prayers. As we stood on the sidewalk beside his beat-up old Chevrolet and took our leave of one another, he told me to give each of our girls a kiss from him and each of our boys "un abrazo", an embrace. His love was concrete, it was personalized. It was the love that would build a Christian civilization.

My Guatemalan friend had called me "brother" because we were children of the same Father God. It is the reality of divine filiation, of our being God's

children, that bestows dignity on us. The teaching of St. Josemaria on divine filiation is usually seen in light of its implications for personal piety and for the interior struggle of individuals as they grow in holiness. However, the teaching also has profound implications for communal life, for social policy, and for the shaping of a culture of life. St. Josemaria was always aware that it was individuals living and working and worshiping and growing toward holiness who *together* would give rise to a just and humane society.

It is a Christian reality that as individuals grow in holiness, as they become aware of their own vocation to sanctity, as they faithfully fulfill their own professional and personal lives, they contribute more effectively toward a humane culture with public policies respectful of the dignity of the weak and vulnerable in their midst.

The greater the awareness of the loving goodness of God and of the divine source of all human life, the more just and humane will be the institutions of any society. This insight is not limited to Catholics, since every human person has been created in God's image and likeness. Even those who do not share our Catholic faith should be able to be aware of the unique quality of human life. The human characteristic which ought to prove to our contemporaries who do not share our faith that the human person has a transcendent, divine origin is the human capacity to love, to form friendships, to care for and to sacrifice for others. And we are the ones who can provide that proof to them.

In his emphasis on divine filiation, St. Josemaria taught a truth which even non-Christians should be able to intuit. Human life does not define itself. It does not provide the ground of its own being or a rationale for its own value. Human life enjoys a participatory value. Human life is a reflection of that which is goodness itself, truth itself, life itself. As Blessed Josemaria wrote: "(A son of God). . . says to himself: God is my Father and he is the Author of all good; he is all Goodness."⁵ Pope John Paul II expresses the same truth when he teaches: "Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself."⁶

Regrettably, in our day a human being becomes valuable only when he is deemed to be valuable by those who have ultimate control over his life or death. Parents decide whether a so-called defective child is worth bringing to term. Indeed, in some societies, parents decide whether a girl baby or a boy baby is worth bringing to birth.

Scientists in laboratories decide which embryo in a petri dish is worth implanting and which ones will be discarded or subjected to experimentation. If we approach human life as crass materialists who deny any transcendent, spiritual dimension to human life, then no criteria other than materialist ones can be applied to moral decisions with respect to such life. If there is no intrinsic

⁵ *The Forge*, 987.

⁶ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, 34.

sic value to human life derived from its reflecting the divine image destined for fellowship with God, then the way in which we relate to human life will be determined by criteria external to human life itself. The criterion by which a human being lives or dies becomes virtually and inevitably utilitarian.

The decision of those who have the power is calculated on what, in their estimation, will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. Since an individual life has no intrinsic value, whether this is viewed from the perspective of the totalitarian state or the totalitarian individual, the decision is made on the basis of how much it will benefit the ones making the decision. And the greatest good will be determined on the basis of whatever maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. By this calculus whatever is defective has no value at all since it will be less useful than a whole and healthy life and will certainly engender less pleasure, since society will have to utilize its resources for its benefit without getting any material benefit in return.

The Christian vision found in the teaching of Saint Josemaria is thoroughly different from this. Life has an intrinsic value, not by virtue of what it can do or contribute, but by virtue of what it *is*, a reflection of that from whom all blessings flow, from whom all life is drawn, from whom all goodness proceeds. The human person is the precious child of the all-powerful, all-loving Father God.

A deep awareness of the divine source of all human existence and of the Christian's participation in the divine nature not only leads to growth in personal holiness, but has profound social and cultural consequences as well. At the beginning of this week we celebrated Epiphany, the Feast of the Three Kings. When St. Josemaria reflected on the implications of Christ's revelation to the Gentiles through the visit of the three kings, he saw its importance for all humanity. Every human soul is of infinite value because of its source and its end, God Himself. On the Feast of the Epiphany Josemaria preached: "We Christians cannot exclude anyone; we cannot segregate or classify souls. 'Many will come from the East and West.' (Mt. 8:11) All find a place in Christ's heart. His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the cross drawing all men to himself."⁷

When Josemaria says we cannot "segregate or classify souls" he was surely thinking of the various races and classes of men on the face of the earth, but the implication of his teaching extends to those we do not usually consider. We also cannot place into a class of less value those who are unborn, those who are in a persistent vegetative state, those who are dying, those who are disabled. We cannot "segregate or classify" those souls either, as though they were of less value than others. Each is a child of God and each carries a dignity as God's child which may never be violated.

Sometimes when we see the pervasive character of what Pope John Paul II has called the Culture of Death we can almost despair. The wealthier nations attempt to impose abortion as a human right on any nation, such as Ireland,

⁷*Christ is Passing By*, 65.

which has the courage to try to maintain constitutional protection for the unborn. The United Nations, the United States, and organizations such as Planned Parenthood expend literally billions of dollars to advance an agenda that will segregate, classify, and destroy souls which they absurdly see as threats. The Pope himself acknowledges the temptation to despair in his great encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*: "Humanity today offers us a truly alarming spectacle, if we consider not only how extensively attacks on life are spreading but also their unheard-of numerical proportion, and the fact that they receive widespread and powerful support from a broad consensus on the part of society, from widespread legal approval and the involvement of certain sectors of health-care personnel."⁸ He even goes so far as to say that it looks as though goodness cannot prevail in the face of such evil. "Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil!"⁹

But St. Josemaria speaks directly to this temptation to despair. He speaks about hope and cheerfulness to those people of good will in the world today fighting for the dignity of all human life when they might feel overwhelmed by these threats. "Cheerfulness is a necessary consequence of our divine filiation, of knowing that our Father God loves us with a love of predilection, that he holds us up and helps us and forgives us. Remember this and never forget it: even if it should seem at times that everything around you is collapsing, in fact nothing is collapsing at all, because God does not lose battles."¹⁰

It is the nature of love to be expansive, to be life generative. Those who love, love life. This is why those who love their spouses are naturally open to the gift of life. A loving society will be a fruitful society. St. Josemaria would be unspeakably pained to know that the land of his birth, Spain, and his adopted land, Italy, home to the Holy See, now have the lowest birth rates in the world. These societies do violence to themselves by not having the love which of its nature leads to life.

The life engendering nature of human love is what makes it reflective of divine love. St. Josemaria loved fertility – of God, if you will, of married couples, of the apostolate. When he visited Brazil in 1974 he loved hearing a story which was supposed to be reflective of the love, and hence the fertility, of the Brazilian people. He was told of the goal posts which were planted in a soccer field and then began to sprout.

When he addressed the Brazilians, he likened their country to a fertile, loving mother.

Brazil! The first thing I have found here is a mother: big, beautiful, fruitful and gentle, opening her arms to all, without distinction of language, race or nation, and who calls them all her children. . . . There is a lot, a lot to be done

⁸*The Gospel of Life*, 17.

⁹*The Gospel of Life*, 29.

¹⁰*The Forge*, 332.

here. . . . So, get moving! Multiply yourselves and do many good things in this land which is so fruitful.¹¹

That same exhortation could be delivered to every nation on earth. It is love which is fruitful, and only love. Indeed, the most pure of all human loves was so fruitful that it led to a Virgin conceiving life.

It is easy to become discouraged in our struggle for the dignity of the human person in our day. But our sense of divine filiation will give us the fortitude, patience, and cheerfulness that we need to carry on the struggle, not in a half-hearted way but with real enthusiasm and zeal.

In realizing that we are the children of God we take courage in the fact that we have Mary as our Mother. As Blessed Josemaria told us with great simplicity: "Here is a piece of advice I shall never tire of telling souls: Love the Mother of God madly, for she is our Mother too."¹² And she is the Mother who bore the Word of Life, He Who took our humanity of her flesh, Who joined Himself with all humanity, even embryonic humanity. She is a powerful intercessor on behalf of those who are weak and vulnerable and at the margins of society. Under the kingship of Christ and through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and our beloved Josemaria, we can each make our essential and unique contribution to a future civilization of love and life.

JOSÉ LUIS SORIA

SAINT JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA, A PORTRAIT

Introduction

It happens with literary portraits as it does with photographic, sculpted, or painted ones. A person can be described by words in many different manners, depending on the skills, the psychology, and the moods of the artist, but any good portrait demands a lot from the author: in fact not every painter or sculptor is necessarily a good portraitist. It is said that any outstanding painted portrait must take up the challenge to render life without aid of the spoken or the written word. One Dutch poet, commenting on the famous portrait of Cornelis Ansló—a renowned preacher—by Rembrandt said: "That's right, Rembrandt paints Cornelis's voice! His visible self is a second choice. The invisible can only be known through the word. For Ansló to be seen, he must be heard."

A portrait (not *the* portrait) of Saint Josemaria Escriva is my task today. My credentials as painter are non-existent, but my credentials for attempting a literary portrait of the founder of Opus Dei are the 22 years I spent very close to him, in Rome, from 1953 to the very day of his death in June 26, 1975. That day, as his family physician during the last years of his life, I tried to resuscitate him after he suffered a massive heart attack in the room where his two successive successors at the head of Opus Dei and myself were with him. After one hour and a half of vain efforts by a small group involved in the task, some of them also physicians, I closed his eyes with my fingers.

Painters make frequent use of sketches in their work. In a conventional sketch, the emphasis usually is laid on the general design and composition of the work and on its overall feeling, and there are three main types of functional sketches. The first—sometimes known as a *croquis*—is intended to remind the artist of some scene or event he has seen and wishes to record in a more permanent form. The second type is related to portraiture and notes the look on a face, the turn of a head, or other physical characteristics of a prospective sitter. The third—a *pochade*—is one in which he records, usually in color, the atmospheric effects and general impressions of a landscape. Today it is my task to present to you sketches of the first two types (the *croquis* and the notes I keep in my memory from the first time I met Saint Josemaria and the following few years), plus a more complete portrait based in the other twenty years I worked and lived close to him. John Coverdale will take care of the *pochade*, describing for us the times and the historical scenario of Saint Josemaria's life and work.

¹¹ Salvador Bernal, *A Profile of Msgr. Escriva, Founder of Opus Dei*, London, 1977, p. 231.

¹² *The Forge*, 77.