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WORK AND FAMILY—AND SANCTITY TOO

I hope no one thinks that the title of this talk is an advertisement of how I have successfully combined work, family and sanctity too. Perhaps exclamation



St. Josemaria at Villa Sachetti, Rome, April 6, 1971

marks should have been used, or the upper case symbols on the keyboard that are the sign for frustration in the cartoon strips. The title of this talk was actually chosen to reflect the impatience and the normal frustration that arises when we initially think about making God a bigger part of our already busy life. There are days when we all have so much to do and are so busy at work that it takes all our effort to maintain our sanity. To this we add the need to be calm and serene in our family life—as if we can even think about being calm and serene. We are then expected to top it all off with some sanctity, like icing on a cake!! The first temptation may be to say, “Get real.”

Then I realised that one of the big things that Opus Dei has done for me is to change my *modus operandi*. The starting point is neither my work nor my family. The starting point is sanctity, the opposite end of my original focus. The day is viewed from the point of what God is asking of me on this day, from this work, at this particular time.

When I was asked to give this talk, it seemed simple enough. Just talk about Opus Dei and what it has meant in your life. As I have been a member of Opus Dei for quite a few years it didn't seem too difficult. Just relate a few

anecdotes. Talk a bit about how it impacted on my family and that should fill the time with ten to fifteen minutes left for questions and discussions. Then I began to think about which anecdotes I would tell. It seemed that they were all too personal for such a public forum. These stories would be about my most intimate joys and sorrows. No way could I talk about them in public. I get very uncomfortable at the thought of speaking about my personal life. I also cry when I recall some particularly rough places when I felt the warm affection of the members of the work looking after me and mine—all the members, including the now deceased prelate, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, and the current prelate, Bishop Javier Echevarria. So the safest route seemed to be to talk objectively about what I have learned and what I am struggling to practice.

When I met the Work in my early thirties, I was your average, overwhelmed wife and mother who did not understand any of this. I was a typical product of the '70's. The really burning issues were how to save the world from the evils of pollution and over-population. This from someone who had not learned how to get matched pairs of socks from the dryer into the bedrooms. Dinner at a regular hour was not even on the radar. The children's lunches were put together as they were heading out the door to catch the school bus. Somehow I was not living in the real world.

What I have since learned is that life is a complicated bit of business. The call to sanctity is not just a call to say more prayers in the day. We are called to sanctify the total package—the spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual aspects of my life, because they are intertwined. A lack of sleep makes the whole world unbearable. One difficult child can upset the balance of the entire family. Even tracing the effects of trying to practice a particular virtue is difficult because the other virtues increase simultaneously. It is so easy to become confused and not know where to start.

For me the first steps were confession and spiritual direction to get things into perspective. Like most people I suppose, I expected a spiritual director to peer into my soul and tell me what to do with my life, how to pray and be happy all the time, or how to get to heaven with a minimum of effort. Nothing remotely like that ever happened. Instead, I had to make an effort. Imagine! I had to work at this. Nobody ever told me what to do about *anything* unless I asked. Even then, I only received suggestions about personal sanctity and apostolate.

I had to make an effort to make myself understood. Both as I was, sometimes really vile, and as I wanted to be, totally unrealistic, up there with the angels. It was all about openness—mine; making a few decisions—mine; and choosing one or two to put into practice for a couple of weeks—again my responsibility. I guess you could say it was all about me! Of course these all dealt with spiritual situations and apostolate but there was a spill over effect.

The founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaria Escriva, realised that if people were to do things well they needed to learn *how* to do them. As a result of his foresight, courses on Catholic doctrine, the role and dignity of women in modern society, professional work, including such things as household management (thanks heavens) and time management, were offered at the women's

centre. This was not just the effective use of an agenda. From these courses I was finally learning to get my life together *and* schedule the agenda accordingly. Meanwhile, a very real problem was how to recreate in my own home the warm, serene atmosphere I found in the Centres. Finally, there was a coming together of what I was living and what I was thinking. I was developing unity of life. Now it was God first, so that I could then care for my husband, family *and* friends, *and* professional work, with an emphasis on professional, meaning well done.

This "work" does not always have to be unpleasant. It can be loving attention to my spouse, appraising one-of-a-kind, million dollar properties, or lobbying on behalf of the so-called traditional family with senior diplomats and committee representatives at the United Nations. All of this is my "work" and normal material for my sanctification.

In the newly discovered reality of my world, putting God first means that wherever I am, I start my day with prayer and Mass. During that time of prayer I consider what kind of a day lies ahead and I schedule some other time for a little more prayer and a few other spiritual practices. This is the backbone of my day whether we are on office time, home time, holiday time, or on committee time at the UN. Now I am bullish on prayer. I now know, from personal experience, when supernatural outlook drops below the horizon I am left on my own. The impatience mounts, the frustrations build, and the quality of life suffers. I suffer and so do those around me. Those upper case symbols appear again! You must have heard people say, "I don't know how you find the time" to do this, that or the other thing. Well, when they say that to me I answer that I pray a lot.

Part of my prayer life is of course devoted to my marriage and family. They are the primary means of my sanctification. Originally my prayers were probably more like, "God give me strength to put up with him—my husband, or them—my children." I had no idea of what real family life was all about. It was only through courses offered by some people that I met at the Opus Dei Centre and the University of Navarre that I discovered the importance and permanent value of normal family life and the marriage relationship. Now my prayer is more like, "Thank you God for this wonderful husband and family. Please help me not to mess up!"

It was with great wonder that I realized that normal family life, well lived, is the ideal environment for the development of children. I discovered the best place for children to grow and develop is within the family. No special equipment is required. A lack of money or the realisation that money does not grow on trees is actually a definite asset. I was reassured to learn that parents are the primary educators of their children and no one can usurp that right. We actually know what is best for our child. Schools and government are supposed to reflect our will and protect our family and not vice versa.

I learned that caring for my husband, in accordance with my vocation to marriage, was less about food and interior decorating than it was about creating a warm home atmosphere and being emotionally present for him. That the

greatest gifts that we can give our children are the happy marriage of their parents and some more brothers and sisters. That children grow happier and healthier when the parents put *each other* first, not the children. Raising children is just that. Bringing those tiny, crying, babies to greater heights over a period of time by teaching them values and letting them see *me* struggle to be a better person. Struggling with one's character in order to improve is a life-long reality. The sooner children learn this, the happier they will be. Eventually they will also be nicer people too.

As a woman, I tend to get obsessive about my children or my sick relatives, assuming that my husband will be able to take care of himself. My husband assumes that I will understand his career plan. No one is looking after the shop, as the expression goes. This is a huge mistake both for the husband and the wife. The marriage relationship is the most important relationship for any married person. It is God's plan for married couples. If we look after this, our married life is much happier.

All of the above can be learned by anyone. The previously mentioned Family Enrichment courses have helped many couples all over the world. This includes those who have experienced true family life in a traditional family or those who have not. The latter may have suffered the instability of a common-law union or the divorce of their own parents. It takes a bit of effort but we must also teach these people about their intrinsic worth. About the fact that Christ came and died for them too. Again we are encountering the complexity of the human person.

It was the faith that attracted me to the Work but it was the warmth of the family Opus Dei that initially kept me there. The genuine affection that members have for one another really impressed me. After being at the canonization of Saint Josemaria Escriva I know this family life spans continents, language and politics. After meeting Opus Dei, my social life took a turn for the better. I began to enjoy the good life. Not wine, shopping and holidays, although these are to be enjoyed in moderation. It was the truly good things that I was finally noticing – good people with human virtues, good work well done, good friends, etc.

The book *God and Children* by Jose Urteaga gave me my first inkling that there was something more to raising children than good marks in school. It was followed by courses on family, conferences on various aspects of family life, and eventually apostolic exhortations and encyclicals. Some of this was because of my interest in family and some was spiritual reading suggested by my spiritual director.

Spiritual reading is a wonderful way of staying connected to a normal world, to the world as it should be. The few minutes of daily spiritual reading has given me some unexpected insights, the first being that saints, just like St. Josemaria Escriva, are wonderful people with a great sense of humour, personal charm and a true understanding of human nature. My spiritual reading includes modern writings as well timeless books such as those by Saint Francis de Sales. In his book, *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, he gives advice to

married couples to be devoted to one another. It is interesting that he calls both spouses to be responsible for the other. This is the ideal that the church has always encouraged even before women's rights were an issue.

Something else that I learned is that the parents need to present a united front at home, to the extent that it is better for both parents to be united *and wrong* than for one parent to contradict another in front of the children. This provided me with some very interesting food for thought.

All of the above made a huge difference in my daily life. They are things I learned through being in touch with Opus Dei. However, I was also learning more about my faith on the doctrinal level. Truths of my faith became clearer because of the doctrine courses offered at the Centres. Figures in the New Testament suddenly began to take shape and their importance was becoming clearer.

I can remember when the topic of devotion to Our Lady was first raised by my spiritual director. My response was something like, "Yes, Our Lady is nice, but when I pray I prefer to go to God himself. It's more direct." Fortunately, my spiritual director did not give up on me. Over the next several years I learned about the importance of Our Lady in God's plan, how much she truly cares for us, and how much more effective her prayers are than mine alone.

Another figure that has taken shape since being in touch with the Work is St. Joseph. St. Josemaria referred to him as, "Our father and lord". I wondered why. Why was the founder happy when St. Joseph was made the universal patron of the Catholic Church? Now St. Joseph seems to me to be so human, just like any spouse. He was born flawed, not perfect, he does not immediately have all the answers, but he does know when he needs to really think about things. He may not be as gifted as his spouse, but he gave the very best of himself to his wife and family.

These things are useful for any husband and wife to know—with the exception of the wife being more gifted than her husband, of course. There is still a lot to be learned about St. Joseph, but now at least I am beginning to understand why he is important as a role model in the universal church and for the members of Opus Dei.

Another important lesson that I learned is that sanctity also means being united to the Church and its magisterium. The representative of Christ on earth, the Pope, John Paul II, has made this obedience to the church a delightful duty. His travels have made the papacy come alive. He is the Pope who has written most about family. They are no longer just disembodied writings from Rome but the concerns of a loving and loveable, truly holy father. I have found his writings on the role of women in the church and the dignity of women to be enriching and demanding. For anyone who takes the time to read them, one must conclude that these are the answers to protect the rights of women. As a woman I feel uplifted and grateful for this.

When I became a member of Opus Dei, I agreed to fulfil my Christian obligation to help others get closer to God. This was not to be done by mass mailings or media promotion. It was to be done naturally, one on one, with my personal friends. I had an obligation to love and help them in a supernatural

way as much as I could. They would then be closer to God and happier as a result. This is a teaching of the Catholic Church. The obligation came with Baptism. Therefore it is not an Opus Dei invention. All that Opus Dei does is help me to fulfil that obligation. But when I first heard this in Opus Dei, I thought it was a cover to increase membership. The fact that God is happiness and getting closer to Him naturally makes one happier, and the fact that the Church has always encouraged the faithful to do apostolate didn't seem to carry much weight with me. Again I was not living in the real world.

Twenty-five years later I realize that what you see and hear in Opus Dei is what you get. There are no ulterior motives or hidden agendas. The only point of Opus Dei is to make people happier by bringing them closer to God. This is done through the normal course of events in our life. We meet people, naturally become friends, and want to make them happier. We spend time with them because of shared interests. In fact the Founder has warned us not to instrumentalise friendship.

For members of Opus Dei, God is a really big part of their life. It is natural that it should be shared as a part of any good friendship. Otherwise, it looks like we are hiding something. When we look at friendship this way, it takes on a whole new dimension and we begin to live in a more integrated way. We begin to live and practice what we think. We begin to have unity of life, live in the real world, and invite our friends to come along.

Apostolate is usually done in this natural way. Other times, for reasons that God alone knows, a chance acquaintance will spark an opportunity to speak of God on the first encounter. This usually happens on a plane or train or some other situation when there is little chance of meeting again. A person will bare their soul because time is limited and by doing so they ask for help. This happened to me recently. In the course of my professional work, I met a single mother. After my work was finished and I was preparing to leave, this lady suddenly blurted out that her life was difficult and she was suffering a lot. At this she fought to hold back tears. Not knowing what to do, I said that I would pray for her. She told me that she didn't believe in prayer and asked if I really did. I said yes and that I would pray for her just the same if it was all right with her. She said, "Yes, thank you. You are very kind." It was a combination of work and sanctity that I had not expected. These situations are unusual, but if God allows them to happen, then he expects us to ask for his grace to resolve them.

There are no cookbook solutions in Opus Dei. Everyone is unique and ultimately one responds to one's own situation in his or her own way. My hope of being told what to do with my life to fast track to heaven did not work because personal freedom and responsibility are virtues that the Founder was adamant about protecting. In his homily, "Christ the King", St. Josemaria says, "There is one value which a ... Christian must particularly cherish; personal freedom. Only if he defends the individual freedom of others—with the personal responsibility that must go with it—only then can he defend his own with human and Christian integrity." There are hundreds of by-laws for the city of

Montreal. There are 111 articles in the Charter of the United Nations. Just think of a life that has only ten rules and six precepts. It is wonderfully free. It is true liberation. We have this wonderful freedom when we follow the laws of God and the precepts of the Church. Everything else is up for discussion. What colour to paint the dining room. When and where to go on vacation. In the eternal scheme of things they don't amount to much. They are not worth fighting about. For any legitimate undertaking, the only thing that matters is how much loving work we put into these decisions. It is the effort not the results that count. Fortunately, God does not ask the impossible and He wants us to be happy.

Opus Dei has taught me how to turn the events of my busy, mostly uneventful life into something of eternal worth: the ordinary things that anyone can do. It taught me to live in the present, fulfilling the will of God in the small things. When this is done, then what we perceive as the big things take care of themselves.

The Founder's greatest devotion was to the Holy Mass and the Blessed Sacrament. His homily "The Eucharist, Mystery of Faith and Love" provides me with many points for meditation. His writings encourage me to attend Mass, to learn to love the Mass, and to increase my devotion to the Holy Eucharist as a lifelong goal. He also taught me about unity of life, and about trying to think of God's will before, during, and after my actions. All of these teachings are the basis of a continuing struggle and a strength for me. All of them are one hundred percent in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

It does not seem to matter how many times I read the writings of St. Josemaria, there are always new insights. I would like to end by listing some of the conclusions about my own life and about Opus Dei that I have been led to by those writings. You may have come to some of these conclusions yourselves.

First, the more I think about others, the happier I am. It is a standard joke amongst some of my busy friends that someday, we will have a day off to have our turning-thirty crisis, our turning-forty angst, our mid-life crisis, and our children-leaving-home breakdown. We cannot allocate more than one day because we are too busy. To date, none of us have found the time or the inclination.

Second, marriage is a marvellous gift from God. He has seen fit to allow me to freely choose the person that I want to love for the rest of my life and He has crowned my decision with the promise of the jewel of eternity.

Third, raising a child is the most satisfying and challenging task in the world. There are no guarantees. A parent is a parent 24-7.

Fourth, Opus Dei is a radical organisation in as much as it demands a fundamental change in one's understanding of the importance of God, and then the effort to live that belief. Most people do not use the word radical in this sense.

Fifth, people in the Work really do come from all walks of life. There are many families who manage to be elegant and well mannered. This has less to do with wealth than it does with good taste and managing the home well.

Sixth, the Work encourages women and men to live a responsible, balanced life with God, spouse, and children as the first priorities. This includes any working arrangement that benefits the spouse and family. With a popular cartoon strip devoted to the life of a stay at home husband, this arrangement is no longer a rarity. Wherever they work, men and women need to try to sanctify what they are doing.

Seventh, in the Work, one is very free to choose profession and state in life. There are women such as myself in traditionally male occupations as well as women who want to be wives and mothers. But in Opus Dei there is only one vocation – a universal call to sanctity. For those who wish to remain single, Opus Dei offers a tantalising possibility: An unmarried person can be completely dedicated to God while doing their professional work and maintaining their lay status. Without a spouse and children, they live a warm family life in the Centres of the Work.

Eighth, and finally, all vocations are demanding. There are no easy ways to get to heaven. Whether we live married life, or the celibate life, God always asks something of us. He also rewards us far beyond our small sacrifices. That is just here on this earth. What awaits us in heaven is rather delicious to think about but impossible to imagine.

In summary, becoming a member of Opus Dei has changed my world dramatically. What I was looking for, without realising it, was a greater meaning to my life. I have certainly found it. It has introduced me to the writings of the popes and saints of the church and given me a better understanding of my faith. It has enriched my marriage, helped to convert my husband to Catholicism, helped in the character development of my children through the various clubs and camps, and made me understand the beauty of my vocation to marriage. It has also made me appreciate the permanent value of family. As a result of the teachings of St. Josemaria, I try to be a more loyal friend and more grateful for the friendship that others extend to me. I have better respect for the freedom of others and view differences as just that, differences, and not barriers or arguments to be won.

This did not happen overnight. I am not a saint. My husband, children and family are here and they will attest to that. There are no saints on earth. However I am one hundred percent sure that if I persevere in Opus Dei, I will eventually get to heaven. In the meantime, life is happier and more meaningful than it was. Every aspect of life presents challenges. I don't know what lies ahead but I do know that whatever happens, there will always be joy. I feel privileged to be here to tell you about some of these things. Everyone's life is different but the grace and joy of God awaits us all.

THE HOMILY GIVEN BY POPE JOHN PAUL II AT THE MASS OF
CANONIZATION FOR ST. JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA, OCTOBER 6, 2002,
WITH A REPORT OF THE CEREMONY FROM
L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO

On Sunday, 6 October, in St Peter's Square, before one of the largest and most orderly groups of pilgrims, the Holy Father canonized St Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, founder of Opus Dei, and called his message of sanctifying daily life valid for all believers. Police said that at least 300,000 people were packed into St Peter's Square and nearby streets, where huge speakers and video screens allowed them to follow the Mass. The crowd was silent while the Pope read the Latin formula of canonization, but as soon as he finished the trumpets sounded, the choir sang a series of Alleluias and the crowd erupted in cheers that bounced off the buildings around the square. After the proclamation, the Pope received a relic of St Josemaria that was placed on a stand near the lectern for the singing of the Gospel. A huge portrait decorated with flowers adorned the facade of St Peter's and there were magnificent floral tapestries covering the steps in front of the main altar. The canonization came 27 years after St Josemaria's death in 1975. Beatified in 1992, the saint was approved for canonization after the Holy Father accepted a miracle attributed to his intercession. It involved the medically unexplainable 1992 cure of a Spanish physician, Manuel Nevado Rey, suffering from a progressive skin disease resulting from years of exposure to radiation from X-ray machines. High level government delegations from Spain, Italy, Kenya and more than a dozen South American countries were present at the Mass, as well as non-Catholic delegations and representatives of other ecclesial movements. Organizers said the canonization was attended by people from at least 84 countries. Pilgrims from Spain and Italy formed the largest groups followed by those from Mexico, South America, Germany, United States and France. Many Italian commentators remarked on the orderliness and prayerfulness of the pilgrims. Many pilgrims knelt on the cobblestones during the consecration. Young persons carrying white umbrellas accompanied the priests to their communion stations and kept the umbrellas over the priests while they distributed communion to the pilgrims. At the end of the Mass, before the Angelus, the Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in their own languages. After the blessing, to greet the pilgrims, the Holy Father traveled the length of the Via della Conciliazione in an open car.

THE HOMILY

1. "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8,14). These words of the Apostle Paul, which we have just heard, help us understand