

Contemplatives in the Midst of the World

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1. Blessed Josemaría, “a traveling contemplative”

In the decree on the heroic virtues of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, one reads: “From the late 1920’s onward, Josemaría Escrivá was a true pioneer of the ‘intrinsic unity of Christian life,’ striving to bring the fullness of contemplative life to all the pathways of the world.”¹ The decree continues: “The salient features of his personality are to be found not only in his extraordinary talents as a man of action, but above all in his life of prayer and constant union with God that made him truly a ‘traveling contemplative.’”²

The first text cited above shows how Blessed Josemaría, inspired by the foundational charism that he received on October 2, 1928, insisted that the unity of Christian life—one of the fundamental manifestations in the spirit of Opus Dei—is the fullness of contemplation in the midst of the world.³ Opus Dei’s founder repeated tirelessly that the path of sanctity that God let him “see” was a path for con-

1. *Pontifical decree on the heroic exercise of the virtues by the Servant of God Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, in *Romana* 6 (1990/91) 23: “Iam ergo ab exeunte tertia huius seculi decade, Iosephmaria Escrivá, tamquam verus praecursor arctissimae unitatis vitae christianae, plenitudinem contemplationis ‘in medias quoque mundi vias’ adducendam esse sensit.”

2. *Ibid.*, 24: “Praecipua vero eius lineamenta non in egregiis tantum animi dotibus, quibus ad agendum praeditus erat, sed in ipsius vita orationis, necnon in assidua illa experientia unitiva qua vere effectus est peragrans contemplativus, reponenda esse videntur.”

3. Since it’s not possible to fully analyze here the idea of “unity of life” intrinsically linked in Blessed Josemaría’s teachings with the concept of contemplation in the midst of the world, we will give here the following bibliography in alphabetical order: A. Aranda, *Perfiles teológicos de la espiritualidad del Opus Dei*, in *Scripta theologica* 22 (1990/1) 89-111; M. Belda, *El concepto de «unidad de vida» y su importancia en la espiritualidad laical*, in *Idem, Espiritualidad laical y oración*, ch. 3, Santafé de Bogotá 1994, pp. 49-74; I. De Celaya, *Unidad de vida y plenitud cristiana*, in *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá y el Opus Dei*, 2^a ed., Pamplona 1985, pp. 321-340; *Idem, Vocación cristiana y unidad de vida*, in the collection entitled, *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, Pamplona 1987, pp. 951-965; Bishop Julián Herranz, *Los laicos, testigos de Dios en el mundo*, in *Secularidad, laicado y teología de la Cruz*, Madrid 1987, pp. 23-55; Jose Luis Illanes, *Mundo y santidad*, Madrid 1984, pp. 80-90, 222-225; *Idem, La Iglesia en el mundo: la secularidad de los miembros del Opus Dei*, in Pedro Rodríguez-Fernando Ocariz-Jose Luis Illanes, *El Opus Dei en la Iglesia*, ch. 3, Madrid 1993, pp. 230-236; A. Quirós, *Vida laical y contemplación*, in *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, cit., pp. 975-989; Pedro Rodríguez, *Vocación. Trabajo. Contemplación*, Pamplona 1986, pp. 118-122 y 212-218; *Idem, Vivir santamente la vida ordinaria. Consideraciones sobre la homilía pronunciada por el Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer en el campus de la Universidad de Navarra (8-X-1967)*, in *Scripta theologica* 24 (1992/2) 397-418; Juan B. Torelló, *La santità dei laici*, in *Chi sono i laici. Una teologia della secolarità*, Milano 1987, pp. 81-109.

templative souls. He especially admired the expression: “contemplatives in the midst of the world.” “We live in the middle of the world; that’s where our cell is. We are contemplatives in the midst of the world.”⁴

The second text cited by the decree describes Opus Dei’s founder as “a traveling contemplative.” It testifies to the fact that the ideal he preached—becoming a contemplative in the midst of the world—was not a utopia or abstraction, but rather a reality he incarnated in his own life, which enabled him to demonstrate the possibility of reaching contemplation in the midst of the world by the witness of his own life and work. Later we will present some biographical episodes from the life of Blessed Josemaría, among the many that we could assemble, to corroborate this statement.

In his personal notes he records an experience from October 16, 1931: “The feast of St. Hedwig, 1931. I wanted to pray, after Mass, in the quiet of my Church. But I wasn’t able to. I bought a newspaper (the *ABC*) on Atocha street and took the tram. As I write this down, I still haven’t been able to read more than a paragraph of the paper. I felt prayer welling up in my heart filled with affections, copious and ardent. I was like this on the tram and all the way home.”⁵ Years later, recalling that event, he wrote: “The most elevated prayer I ever experienced was . . . while traveling on a tram, and then walking through the streets of Madrid, contemplating this marvelous reality: God is my Father. I couldn’t stop repeating out loud, *Abba, Pater!* People must have thought I was crazy.”⁶ And in a meditation he gave in 1954 he said: “It was perhaps the most elevated prayer that God has granted me. That was the origin of the divine filiation that we live in Opus Dei.”⁷

Of course, contemplation in the middle of the world does not consist only in praying on the street. It consists, above all, in contemplating God as we carry out our ordinary activities, in our work and in all the duties of our family and social life, as the founder of Opus Dei so often taught. But it is significant that the prayer Blessed Josemaría considered perhaps the most elevated in his life took place in the street. It was as though God wanted to make it very clear that one can attain contemplation in the midst of the world. As he wrote elsewhere: “I was out on the street, in a trolley car. The street doesn’t prevent our contemplative dialogue; the bustle of the world is, for us, a place of prayer.”⁸

His personal notes record another significant event, this one from the end of February 1932: “Last Saturday I spent an hour in Retiro Park, from 12:30 to

4. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, Letter of May 31, 1954, no. 7 §2. The founder of Opus Dei made numerous statements to the same effect using very similar terms. Since we will bring up some of them throughout this study, we will limit ourselves here to just one quotation: “The spirit of Opus Dei leads us to be contemplatives while working and while resting, in the street and in our family life” (Letter of July 29, 1965, no. 1, §2). From this point on, all quotes not otherwise cited are by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá.

5. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 334, October 17, 1931.

6. *Instruction of May, 1935/Sept. 14, 1950*, no. 22, note 28.

7. *Meditation*, April 15, 1954.

8. *Letter of January 9, 1959*, no. 60 §2.

1:30 PM . . . and I tried to read a newspaper. But I was so overcome by prayer that, against my will, I had to stop reading. And then, how many acts of love and abandonment Jesus poured into my heart and onto my lips!"⁹ Here once again we see God granting him elevated prayer in an ordinary situation, this time in the middle of a park. Finding himself caught up in prayer when trying to read the newspaper must have happened to him more than once, to judge by what he jotted down in a paragraph of his personal notes immediately before the one just cited: "I want to record something that seems strange to me: Jesus usually grants me prayer when I read the newspaper."¹⁰ Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, the first successor to the founder, testified: "I have no hesitation in affirming that God amply gave him the gift of infused contemplation. I have recalled how, very frequently, during breakfast, while both of us were paging through the newspapers, our Father had hardly begun to read, when he became absorbed, immersed in God; he rested his forehead on the palm of his hand and stopped reading the paper to pray. I was greatly moved when, after his death, I read in his personal notes this annotation from 1934, expressing with great simplicity his dialogue with God: 'Prayer—even if I do not give it to you . . . you make me feel it outside the fixed times. Sometimes when I'm reading the paper, I have to say to you, 'Let me read!' How good my Jesus is! And I, on the other hand. . .'"¹¹ Bishop del Portillo also recalls: "On May 17, 1970, he said: 'Let us struggle to be devout, to teach others with our lives to pray, to convince people that they must pray. We must lift up everything to God with unceasing prayer.' This was, in essence, his life: praying constantly, bringing everything back to the Lord, reaching the fullness of contemplation in the midst of the world. He prayed right up to his last moment, when God called him to himself."¹²

We can also cite here a point from *The Forge*, undoubtedly autobiographical, that admirably reflects the experience of the contemplation Blessed Josemaría attained in the middle of the world: "Jesus, let my distractions be the other way around. Instead of thinking of the world when I am engaged in conversation with you, let me rather think of you when I am engaged in the things of this world."¹³

9. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 619, February 29, 1932.

10. *Ibid.*, no. 618, February 26, 1932.

11. Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, Founder of Opus Dei, as seen by his successor, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo* (Interview by Cesare Cavalleri), Princeton, 1996, p. 107.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

13. *The Forge*, Scepter, New Rochelle, 1988, no. 1014. In addition to those already cited, we offer another specific example of these "distractions . . . the other way around," contained in the following episode: "In October of 1945, he was saying Mass in the oratory of the new Abando student residence in Bilbao—it was the first time that the Holy Sacrifice was celebrated there—while the workers were still working intensely in the other parts of the building to finish it. As the director of that residence, Federico Suárez recounts, before giving them communion, the Servant of God turned and said a few words: that he was celebrating Holy Mass with great devotion and joy, offering to our Lord the work of those laborers, and that the noise did not cause him the slightest distraction, because that situation was appropriate for the members of Opus Dei: to be contemplatives in the midst of the many different noises of the world." (*Romana Postulación de la Causa de Beatificación and Canonización del Siervo de Dios Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Artículos del Postulador*, Rome, 1979, no. 272, p. 95).

2. *Contemplative prayer*

Before looking closely at Blessed Josemaría's teachings on contemplation in the midst of the world, we can first consider some general points regarding contemplative prayer.

The subject of contemplation is one of the great chapters in spiritual theology.¹⁴ Although the history of spirituality offers many different descriptions of contemplation, the theological tradition agrees on the fundamental characteristics of all true Christian contemplation.

First of all, contemplation is seen to be the summit of prayer life. For example, about the year 1145 a medieval author summed up the patristic tradition on the life of prayer in the following way: "One day, while doing manual work, as I was considering the exercises of the spiritual man, I suddenly perceived four levels: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. . . . Reading is directing one's mind and spirit to Sacred Scripture. Meditation is the careful investigation of a hidden truth, with the help of reason. Prayer is the devout turning of one's heart toward God in order to flee from evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is the elevation of the soul to God, being inundated with a taste of eternal joy. The ineffable sweetness of the life of the blessed is sought in reading, found in meditation, asked for in prayer, and savored in contemplation. Our Lord himself said: 'Seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you' (*Mt* 7:7). Seek by reading and you will find by meditating; knock by praying and you will enter by contemplating. Reading draws in nourishment; meditation absorbs it; prayer captures the flavor; and contemplation is its very savor, giving joy and strength."¹⁵

In a classic definition of contemplation, we find highlighted another central characteristic: "Contemplation is the science of love, . . . it is an infused loving knowledge, that both illumines and enamors the soul, elevating it step by step unto God its Creator. For only love joins and unites the soul to God."¹⁶ The mystical doctor teaches here that contemplation is at once both knowledge and love of God, a fruit of the joint action of faith and charity, and also that it is a gift infused by God into the soul.¹⁷

St. Francis de Sales offers the following definition: "Contemplation . . . is a loving, simple and permanent attention by the spirit to divine things."¹⁸ Here,

14. Cf. the entry *Contemplation*, in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, col. 1643-2193.

15. Guigo II the Carthusian, *Scala claustralium*, 1, 3 (PL 184, 475).

16. St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, II, 18, 5, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington, D.C., 1979, p. 372.

17. In another work, St. John of the Cross offers the following explanation of contemplative prayer: "In the contemplation we are discussing (by which God infuses Himself into the soul), particular knowledge as well as acts made by the soul are unnecessary, because God in one act is communicating light and love together, which is loving supernatural knowledge. We can assert that this knowledge is like light which transmits heat, for that light also enkindles love" (*Living Flame of Love* B, Song 3, 49, in op. cit., p. 629).

18. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, VI, 3.

in addition to the role of charity, one sees that contemplation consists essentially in an attentive gaze, marked by simplicity and constancy.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, basing itself on the Christian spiritual tradition, teaches that contemplation, together with vocal prayer and meditation, is one of the three principal expressions of the life of prayer,¹⁹ and the simplest of the three.²⁰ The *Catechism* also points out that contemplation is a steady “gaze” of faith,²¹ while highlighting its infused character²² and its relation to charity.²³

In Blessed Josemaría’s teachings on contemplative prayer, we find all of these basic characteristics. His homily *Towards Holiness* traces the path of the life of prayer, showing clearly that it necessarily leads to contemplative prayer. Vocal prayer, dealing with Jesus’ Sacred Humanity, and the passive purification of the soul are all seen as indispensable for progress in the life of prayer. But a moment comes when “our heart now needs to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons. The soul is, as it were, making a discovery in the supernatural life, like a little child opening his eyes to the world about him. The soul spends time lovingly with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and readily submits to the work of the life-giving Paraclete, who gives himself to us with no merit on our part, bestowing his gifts and the supernatural virtues!”²⁴ By “spending time lovingly” with each of the persons of the Blessed Trinity one has already entered into contemplative prayer, where “words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks!”²⁵ For Opus Dei’s founder, contemplative prayer is essentially “looking at God without needing rest or feeling tired,”²⁶ where the soul “feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”²⁷

Blessed Josemaría insists forcefully that contemplative prayer is not an extraordinary phenomenon in the spiritual life: “I am not talking about extraordinary situations. They are, very likely, ordinary happenings within our souls: a loving craziness which, without any fuss or extravagance, teaches us how to suffer and how to live, because God grants us his wisdom.”²⁸ He sees contemplation as a gift that God does not deny to those who truly strive to pray: “Asceticism? Mysticism?

19. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2699.

20. Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 2713.

21. *Ibid.*, no. 2715: “Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy curé about his prayer before the tabernacle.” Cf. no. 2716.

22. *Ibid.*, nos. 2713, 2716: “It is a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility. . . . It is the obedience of faith. . . .”

23. *Ibid.*, no. 2719: “Contemplative prayer is a communion of love bearing Life for the multitude. . . .” Cf. no. 2709.

24. Homily *Towards Holiness*, Nov. 26, 1967, in *Friends of God*, Scepter, Princeton, no. 306.

25. *Ibid.*, no. 307.

26. *Ibid.*, no. 296.

27. *Ibid.*, no. 307.

28. *Ibid.*, A little later he adds: “I would like to confirm once more that I am not talking about an extraordinary way of living as Christians” (*Ibid.*, no. 312).

I don't mind what you call it. Whichever it is, asceticism or mysticism, does not matter. Either way, it is a gift of God's mercy. If you try to meditate, our Lord will not deny you his assistance."²⁹ Thus contemplation is not reserved for a privileged few: "Faith and deeds of faith. . . . This is already contemplation and union. This is the way many Christians should live, each one forging ahead along his own spiritual path (there are countless paths) in the midst of the cares of the world, even though he may not even realize what is happening to him."³⁰

3. *Contemplation in the midst of the world*

In the history of spirituality it was thought for many centuries that contemplation was reserved exclusively for those in the religious life. So much was this the case that the term "contemplative life" was even used as an equivalent for "religious life." Living in the world was considered an insuperable obstacle for a Christian who wanted to become a contemplative. To do so, one first had to leave behind one's secular activities.³¹

One of the essential features of the spiritual message that God entrusted to Blessed Josemaría is the forceful proclamation of the possibility of attaining contemplation in the midst of the world: "Contemplation is not something for a privileged few. Some people with rather simple ideas of religion think that contemplatives spend their whole day in a state of ecstasy. That is very naive. Nuns, in their convents, are involved in many different tasks all day long. They clean the house and work to earn their living. Men and women members of contemplative religious orders often write to me with enthusiasm and affection for the Work, saying that they are praying a lot for us. They understand what many people do not understand: our secular life as contemplatives in the midst of the world, in the midst of temporal activities."³²

From the beginning of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría taught that the lay faithful should aspire to a contemplative life in and through their ordinary life, an undeniable novelty in the theological environment of the first half of the twentieth

29. *Ibid.*, no. 308. These words probably contain a veiled allusion to the theological controversy that took place in the first decades of the twentieth century over the nature of mysticism and Christian contemplation, which was undoubtedly not unknown to Opus Dei's founder. For a detailed study of this subject see: Manuel Belda and J. Sesé, *La "Cuestión Mística." Estudio histórico-teológico de una controversia*, Pamplona, 1998.

30. *Ibid.* In another homily, Blessed Josemaría pointed out the union of faith and charity in contemplative prayer: "The liturgy has offered us the nourishment of true piety by including among the readings a text from St. Paul. In it he proposes to us a whole program of contemplative life—knowledge and love, prayer and life—beginning with this devotion to the heart of Jesus. God himself invites us in the Apostle's words to follow this way: 'May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith; may you, being rooted and grounded in love, have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (*Eph* 3:17-19)." (Homily *Finding Peace in the Heart of Christ*, June 17, 1966, *Christ Is Passing By*, Third Printing, Scepter, New Rochelle, 1985, no. 163).

31. Some specific historical examples that illustrate this fact are found in: Jose Luis Illanes, *Mundo y santidad*, cited in note 3, pp. 44-53 and John B. Torelló, "La spiritualità dei laici," in *Studi Cattolici* 45 (1964), 21f.

32. *Get-together*, Oct. 30, 1964 (General Archives of the Prelature, ACP, P01 VII-67, p. 7).

century. A few weeks before being elected as successor to St. Peter, Cardinal Albino Luciani wrote: "God is calling you to paths of contemplation,' a young married man, Victor G. Hoz, was told by his confessor one day in 1941. He was amazed. He had always thought that 'to be a contemplative' was only for holy people with a mystical bent, attainable only by a chosen few, by those for the most part withdrawn from the world. 'But I,' he writes, 'was a married man, with three children, and expecting more—which was indeed what happened—and I had to work hard to support the family.' Who, then, was this revolutionary priest who was vaulting over traditional barriers, pointing out mystical goals even to married people? It was Josemaría Escrivá, a secular priest who died in Rome in 1975 at the age of seventy-three."³³

Let us now turn to some of the central features of contemplation in the midst of the world in Blessed Josemaría's teachings. First, he makes it very clear that contemplative prayer should not be limited to certain specific moments during the day: periods dedicated expressly to personal and liturgical prayer, participation in the holy Mass, etc. Rather it has to embrace the whole day, becoming continuous prayer. As early as 1930 he wrote: "We must turn our ordinary life into a continuous prayer, because we are contemplative souls in the midst of all the paths of the world."³⁴ And in 1940 he said: "Wherever we are amid the noise of the street and of human undertakings—in the factory, in the university, in the fields, in the office or at home—we always find ourselves engaged in simple filial contemplation, in a constant dialogue with God. Because everything in our life—people, things, tasks—offers us an opportunity and a topic for continuous conversation with our Lord."³⁵

Blessed Josemaría closely links the possibility of attaining continuous prayer to the core of the spiritual life of the faithful of Opus Dei: sanctification in the world through one's work. The spirit that God entrusted to him "hinges upon ordinary work, *professional work* carried out in the midst of the world. God's calling gives us a mission: it invites us to share in the unique task of the Church, to bear witness to Christ before our fellow men and so draw all things toward God."³⁶

Opus Dei's founder often synthesized his teachings about the sanctification of work in a three-part formula: *to sanctify one's work, to sanctify oneself in one's work,*

33. Albino Cardinal Luciani, "Cercare Dio nel lavoro quotidiano" (Seeking God through Everyday Work), in *Il Gazzettino*, Venice, Italy, July 25, 1978.

34. *Letter of March 24, 1930*, no. 17 §2.

35. *Letter of March 11, 1940*, no. 15 §2. In a homily given in 1955, he insisted on the same idea: "I would like us, in our meditation today, to make up our minds once and for all that we need to aspire to become contemplative souls, in the street, in the midst of our work, by maintaining a constant conversation with our God and not breaking it off at any time of the day. If we really want to be loyal followers of our Master, this is the only way" (Homily *A Life of Prayer*, April 4, 1955, in *Friends of God*, no. 238).

36. Homily *In Joseph's Workshop*, March 19, 1963, in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 45. In 1960 he had written: "Let us ask our Lord Jesus for light, and beg him to help us discover, at every moment, the divine meaning which transforms our professional work into the hinge on which our calling to sanctity rests and turns" (Homily *Working for God*, Feb. 6, 1960, in *Friends of God*, no. 62).

to sanctify others with one's work.³⁷ Or sometimes with an equivalent phrase such as: sanctify your profession, sanctify yourself in your profession, sanctify others with your profession.³⁸ When formulating this tri-part formula, he usually followed the order cited. This expressed his profound conviction that personal sanctity (*sanctifying oneself in one's work*) and apostolate (*sanctifying others with one's work*) are attained precisely through one's work, which has to be sanctified in itself (*sanctifying one's work*). By the central phrase, *sanctifying oneself in one's work*, he wants to make it clear that ordinary Christians, who by God's will find themselves fully immersed in temporal realities, should sanctify themselves not only *while* they are working, but also precisely *by means of* their work, which is thus converted into a means of holiness.

In June 1930 he described the faithful of Opus Dei as "simple Christians. A leavened mass. Ours is the ordinary, with naturalness. The means: professional work. Everyone a saint!"³⁹ And a few months earlier, he wrote: "We have come to say, with the humility of one who knows that he is a sinner and of little value—*homo peccator sum* (Lk 5:8), we say with Peter—but with the faith of someone who lets himself be led by God's hand, that sanctity is not only for the privileged few. Our Lord calls all of us, he expects Love from all of us; from everyone, no matter where they are; from everyone, no matter what their state, profession or job. Because that ordinary, apparently unimportant life can be a path to sanctity. There is no need to leave one's state in the world to seek God, if our Lord has not given one a vocation to the religious life. For all the paths of the earth can be an occasion for an encounter with Christ."⁴⁰ In his personal notes we find a parallel text: "... while being always in the world, in everyday work, in the duties of our own state, and there, in everything, saints!"⁴¹

The founder of Opus Dei taught clearly that a Christian has to sanctify himself in every moment of his ordinary life and not only while working. The work that he presents as a means of sanctification is not work in a generic, imprecise sense, but rather "professional" work, with a very specific meaning.⁴² By this term he "means ordinary life in its totality, life as a whole as seen from the angle of one

37. Cf. for example, *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer*, Scepter, Princeton, 1993, no. 55; *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 46.

38. Cf. for example, *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer*, No. 70; *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 122.

39. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 35. In another place, he wrote: "Since Christ took it into his hands, work has become for us a redeemed and redemptive reality. Not only is it the background of man's life, it is a means and path of holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies." (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 47). Cf. *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, nos. 10 and 234. John Paul II refers to this teaching of Opus Dei's founder: "With supernatural intuition, Blessed Josemaría untiringly preached the universal call to holiness and apostolate. Christ calls everyone to become holy in the realities of everyday life. Hence, *work too is a means of personal holiness and apostolate*, when it is done in union with Jesus Christ; for the Son of God, in the Incarnation, has united himself in a certain way with the whole reality of man and with the whole of creation" (Homily during the Mass for the Beatification of Josemaría Escrivá, May 17, 1992, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 18 and 19, 1992, p. 4f.).

40. *Letter of March 24, 1930*, no. 2.

41. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 154, February 2, 1931.

42. We note here another text of Blessed Josemaría where he calls professional work the "matter" of holiness: "Our professional work is the 'matter' that we have to sanctify, which sanctifies us and with which we have to sanctify others" (*Instruction of December 8, 1941*, no. 128).

of the factors or elements which, impacting strongly on the person (man grows and matures through work), in turn helps to shape and develop societies. Sanctifying ordinary life and sanctifying work ('professional' work) are things which go hand in hand: each has reference to the other. One cannot speak of sanctification of work except in the context of a decision to orient one's entire life so that one lives it with one's sights set on God. And one cannot conceive of a sanctification of ordinary life unless there is real, effective sanctification of work."⁴³

When Blessed Josemaría highlights professional work as a means of sanctification for the ordinary Christian, he is not teaching that work, considered as a human activity, sanctifies by itself—*ex opere operato*, so to speak—in the way that the sacraments sanctify. In his teachings the expression *sanctifying oneself in one's work* is inseparable from *sanctifying one's work*. Work "that sanctifies" is at the same time "sanctified" work. That is, it is humanly well done, raised to the plane of grace (and therefore carried out in the state of grace), done with a right intention: to give glory to God, for love of God and with love of God.⁴⁴ In short, work that sanctifies is work that is turned, with divine grace, into prayer. "Anyone who thinks that supernatural life is constructed outside the ambit of work would fail to understand our vocation: because work for us is a specific means of sanctity. What I want to tell you is that we have to convert work into prayer and become a contemplative soul."⁴⁵ Repeating the same idea with other words, he insisted: "I don't want any of you to forget that the weapon of Opus Dei is not work, but prayer. This is why we turn our work into prayer and have a contemplative soul."⁴⁶ In short, for the founder of Opus Dei, sanctified and sanctifying work is not *another means* of sanctification, juxtaposed to prayer and distinct from it, but rather work that has become prayer. "An hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer."⁴⁷

We pointed out above that work in Blessed Josemaría's teachings represents the entire daily life of a Christian immersed in secular reality. Therefore it is not surprising to find him saying that it is our ordinary, everyday life that has to become prayer: "What is extraordinary about us is the ordinary: the ordinary done with perfection. To always smile, overlooking, with human grace, the things that annoy us—being generous without measure. In a word, turning our ordinary life into a continuous prayer."⁴⁸

43. Jose L. Illanes, "Work, Charity and Justice" in *Holiness and the World: Studies in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, M. Belda, J. Escudero, Jose Luis Illanes, P. O'Callaghan (ed.), Princeton, 1997, p. 219.

44. There are many texts from Opus Dei's founder on this teaching of his and valuable theological reflections in the book: *La santificación del trabajo*, by Jose Luis Illanes, 9th ed., Madrid, 1981, pp. 94-105. Fernando Ocariz, *El concepto de santificación del trabajo*, in the collective work, *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, Pamplona 1987, pp. 881-891; Pedro Rodríguez, "Reflexión teológica sobre el trabajo," in *Vocación, Trabajo, Contemplación*, cited in note 3, ch. 3, pp. 59-84.

45. *Letter of Oct. 15, 1948*, no. 22 §1.

46. AGP, P01 VII-1967, p. 10. We find a parallel text in *Furrow, Scepter*, Princeton, 1988, no. 497: "Let us work. Let us work a lot and work well, without forgetting that prayer is our best weapon. That is why 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."

47. *The Way*, Scepter, New York 1985, no. 335.

48. *Letter of March 24, 1930*, no. 12. See above, note 34.

Some people have refused to accept the possibility of transforming one's work, and with it one's entire daily life, into prayer. They seem to equate prayer with "thinking about God," restricting it to the realm of intellectual acts.⁴⁹ On the contrary, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, reflecting on the teachings of Opus Dei's founder, strongly upholds this possibility and explains the theological basis for it: "But, is it really possible to transform one's whole existence, with its turbulence and trials, into true prayer? We must answer decidedly, yes. The contrary would be to say that the solemn proclamation of the universal call to holiness proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council is no more than a theoretical ideal, an aspiration incapable of becoming a living reality for the immense majority of Christians. The theological basis for the possibility of transforming any human activity, and therefore also one's work, into prayer, is explained by our Holy Father John Paul II in his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (no. 24). Speaking about a spirituality of work, he says: 'Since work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action, an *actus personae*, it follows that the whole person, body and spirit, takes part in it... It is also to the whole person that the word of the living God is directed.' We have to respond to God's call with our whole being, with our body and our spirit. This response is precisely prayer. Such a high goal might seem difficult to put into practice. Without God's help, it is certainly impossible. But grace enables us to rise above our limitations. St. Paul gives us a very specific program: do everything for the glory of God, with complete purity of intention, with a yearning to please God in everything (cf. *1 Cor 10:13*)."⁵⁰

As one can see in this text, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, basing himself on John Paul II's theological anthropology in its application to work, upholds a "personalist" view of prayer. It is the whole person, body and soul, who prays. Therefore, when a Christian carries out his work with human perfection, with a right intention, with and for the love of God, he is already praying. His whole activity, not only his thoughts, but also his bodily actions, expresses externally the communion of love with God existing in his heart. And this constitutes true prayer, which one might call "the prayer of deeds," since one prays *with and through* one's deeds and work.⁵¹

49. For example, H. Sanson writes: "Of course, if the spiritual life is reduced to the life of prayer, one must pray as much as possible and even try to pray continuously. Given this perspective, methods have been devised for raising one's soul to God with the greatest possible frequency, since in practice it is quite evident that one cannot think of Him all the time. . . . We observe, in addition, that this continuous prayer seems psychologically incompatible with profound intellectual work and with absorbing manual work; and, unless one has special graces, it does not seem compatible with those intense periods of work that entirely absorb a person" (*Espiritualidad de la vida activa*, Barcelona 1964, p. 63f.).

50. Álvaro del Portillo, "Il lavoro si trasforma in orazione," in *Il Sabato*, Milan, Dec. 7, 1984.

51. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* confirms this reality when it says: "Prayer and *Christian life* are inseparable because it is a matter of the same love and the same sacrifice that proceeds from love. . . . 'That person prays continuously who unites prayer to work, and work to prayer. Only thus do we find it possible to attain continuous prayer' (Origen, *De Oratione*, 12)" (no. 2745). As one can see here, the Catechism takes an idea of Origen in which he offers a solution to the problem of the possibility of praying always. In Patristic theology we find several authors who offer solutions to this problem, such as Clement of Alexandria, St. Augustine, St. Basil, Evagrius Ponticus, Cassian, among others. For a full view of continuous prayer in the Patristic tradition, see: F. Giardini, "La preghiera incessante," in *Vita Consacrata* 29 (1993/94) 400-423; I. Hausherr, "La oración perpetua del cristiano," in the collective work entitled *Santidad y vida en el siglo*,

Above all, it is the virtue of charity that ennobles work. Without ceasing to be true human work, our actions are elevated by love of God to the supernatural plane, where they become, at the same time, true prayer. This is explicitly affirmed by Blessed Josemaría: "Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love. We see the hand of God, not only in the wonders of nature, but also in our experience of work and effort. Work thus becomes prayer, and thanksgiving, because we know that we have been placed on earth by God, that we are loved by him, and made heirs to his promises. We have been rightly told, 'In eating, in drinking, in all that you do, do everything for God's glory' (1 Cor 10:31)." ⁵²

Returning to the tri-partite formula mentioned above, we can now better understand why the expression *sanctifying oneself in one's work* is not a mere harmonization, more or less successful, of temporal activities and supernatural life, of work and prayer. Actually, what is aimed at is not a juxtaposition of two realities, but rather the full union of both, to such an extent that the two concepts become fused. As Blessed Josemaría taught: "Our life is to work and to pray, and vice-versa, to pray and to work. Because a moment comes when one cannot distinguish between these two concepts, these two words, contemplation and action. They end up meaning the same thing." ⁵³

Here we see Opus Dei's founder insisting that work that is sanctified and sanctifying is not only prayer, but also *true contemplative prayer*. We will cite here two texts that further develop this insight. In 1945 he wrote: "When we respond generously to this spirit, we acquire a second nature: without realizing it, we are centered on God all day long, and we feel the need to 'involve' him in all our actions: without him, they seem insipid to us. The time comes when we can no longer distinguish where our prayer ends and work begins, because our work is also prayer, contemplation, true mystical life and union with God, without extraordinary things: divinization." ⁵⁴ And on another occasion he said: "We look toward heaven, although the earth, which has come forth from God's hands, is beautiful and we love it. We are not worldly, but we have to love the world, to love being in it. Nor do we separate contemplation from action: we contemplate be-

Barcelona 1969, pp. 125-190; Melchiorre di Santa Maria, "L'orazione perenne nella Tradizione Patristica," in *Rivista di Vita Spirituale* 15 (1961/62) 129-159.

52. Homily "In Joseph's Workshop" given on March 19, 1963, in *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48. Together with charity, he also makes reference in other places to the role of faith and hope in the elevation of work to the supernatural plane: "In our work carried out in God's sight, in his presence, we pray without interruption, because by working as our spirit asks us, we exercise the theological virtues that contain the summit of Christian life. We exercise faith, with our contemplative life, in a constant dialogue with the Blessed Trinity present in the center of our soul. We exercise hope, as we persevere in our work, *semper scientes quod labor vester non est inanis in Domino* (1 Cor 15:58), knowing that our effort is not useless before God. We live charity, trying to fill all our actions with love for God, giving ourselves in a generous service to our fellow men, to all souls" (*Letter of Oct. 15, 1948*, no. 24 §2).

53. *Letter of January 9, 1932*, no. 14 §2. A parallel text is found in the *Letter of May 31, 1954*, no. 20 §4: "It is this unity that unites both hands in prayer and work: work which, by being Opus Dei, is also prayer. Therefore we cannot say that a person who lives the spirit of Opus Dei is either active or contemplative, for action is contemplation and contemplation is action in a unity of life."

54. *Letter of May 6, 1945*, no. 25 §2.

cause we work, and we work because we contemplate. Our interior life infuses new strength into our task: it makes it more perfect, more noble, more worthy, more lovable. It doesn't distance us from our temporal occupations, but rather leads us to live them better."⁵⁵

Thus, for Blessed Josemaría noble human activities were not an obstacle to contemplation, as though one had to separate oneself from the world in order to attain it. Even more, since work should provide the material for one's contemplative life, the more an ordinary Christian is immersed in temporal realities, the more contemplative spirit he can and should possess. In 1935 he wrote that a vocation to Opus Dei "has to lead us to attain a contemplative life in the midst of all human activities. . . , turning into a reality this great desire: the more immersed we are in the world, the more we must be God's."⁵⁶

What is proposed, then, is not a watered down or second-class contemplation, but *true contemplative prayer*. And since he defines contemplation in accord with the Christian spiritual tradition, as in essence "looking at God,"⁵⁷ it is not surprising to find him insisting that this is possible while working and carrying out one's daily duties. He wrote in *The Forge*: "I will never share the opinion—though I respect it—of those who separate prayer from active life, as if they were incompatible. We children of God have to be contemplatives: people who, in the midst of the din of the crowd, know how to find silence of soul in a lasting conversation with our Lord, people who know how to look at him as they look at a Father, as they look at a Friend, as they look at someone with whom they are madly in love."⁵⁸ And this "looking at God" is carried out precisely in the events and circumstances that make up the tapestry of one's ordinary life: "Discover our Lord behind each event and in every circumstance, and then, from everything that happens, you will be able to draw more love for God and a greater desire to respond to him. He is always waiting for us, offering us the possibility to fulfill at all times that resolution we made: *Serviam!* I will serve you."⁵⁹

In a homily given on the campus of the University of Navarre, the founder of Opus Dei insisted that God can be found in secular realities: "God is calling you to serve Him *in and from* the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theater, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and

55. AGP, P01 VII-1967, p. 9.

56. *Instruction, May-1935/Sept. 14, 1950*, no. 45. A parallel text is found in *The Forge*, no. 740: "Our being children of God, I insist, leads us to have a contemplative spirit in the midst of all human activities; to be light, salt, and leaven through our prayer, through our mortification, through our knowledge of religion and of our profession. We will carry out this aim: the more within the world we are, the more we must be God's."

57. See above, notes 25, 26 and 27.

58. *The Forge*, no. 738.

59. *Ibid.*, no. 96.

it is up to each one of you to discover it. . . . Carry out your tasks as well as you can, put love into the little duties of each day. I insist: you have to discover that 'divine something' contained there."⁶⁰ And he continued: "There where your yearnings, your work and your affections are, there you have your daily encounter with Christ. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind."⁶¹

In a theological study of this homily, Pedro Rodríguez highlights one of its central teachings. After carrying out a theological analysis of the expression "Christian materialism" in Blessed Josemaría's works, he wrote: "The unity between one's relationship with God and one's ordinary life—one's work, profession, family—does not come from without but exists within the very bosom of the latter. For there, in one's ordinary life, one finds an ineffable 'epiphany' of God, which is special and personal for each Christian: that 'something holy' which each one has to discover."⁶²

4. Conclusion

"'Contemplatives in the midst of the world,' united to God and recognizing his reality in and through the manifold occupations and situations in the world, this, in summary, is the ideal that Blessed Josemaría proposes as the goal of the life of prayer."⁶³ By the foundational charism that he received in 1928, the Holy Spirit inspired him to open up a path of sanctity in the midst of the world, whose core is the sanctification of one's work and daily life. The spiritual daughters and sons of Blessed Josemaría, who share in this charism through a specific vocation to Opus Dei, all strive to attain the fullness of contemplation in the midst of the world, which is an essential characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei.⁶⁴ This contemplation is sought in and through the activities of one's ordinary life, and constitutes a specifically secular way of living contemplative prayer. At the same time, the contemplation the faithful of Opus Dei seek is also specified by the particular way in which they share in the Church's mission, that is, striving for the sanctification of all men and women and imparting Christian life to the world by means of the sanctification of their professional work and their entire secular Christian

60. Homily *Passionately Loving the World*, October 8, 1967, in *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, nos. 114 and 121. Cf. also no. 116.

61. *Ibid.*, no. 113. Throughout the homily he insists on the same idea: "We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things. There is no other way. Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him" (no. 114). "I assure you, my sons and daughters, that when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God. . . . Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons and daughters, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives" (no. 116). Likewise we read in the *Artículos del Postulador*: "Make great, through love, the little things of each day, was one of the principal points of his teaching and his daily conduct. . . . He insisted, with supernatural stubbornness, on the importance of entrusting to our Lord the occupation that we had in hand, usually made up of everyday activities: *that is where God awaits us!*" (no. 280).

62. Pedro Rodríguez, *Vivir santamente la vida ordinaria*, art. cited in note 3, pp. 409 and 415. Another good theological commentary on this homily is found in: A. García Suárez, "Existencia secular cristiana. Notas a propósito de un libro reciente," in *Scripta Theologica* 2 (1970), 145-164.

existence. Thus the attainment of contemplation in the midst of the world is for them a *conditio sine qua non* for the carrying out of this specific mission. As Blessed Josemaría said, addressing his daughters and sons in Opus Dei: “But if you are not a contemplative, a soul of continuous prayer, then the light will be darkness; the salt will lose its savor and will be fit only to be trampled upon, if you are not immersed in God.”⁶⁵

Perhaps this will seem an ideal difficult to attain to some, but the founder of Opus Dei did not have the slightest doubt that it could be reached. Upon choosing him as his instrument to found Opus Dei, God himself deposited in his soul the profound theological conviction that this ideal was attainable. Blessed Josemaría used to say that God, when granting someone the grace of a vocation to Opus Dei, also pledged himself to grant that person all the graces needed to live his or her vocation fully, and specifically to reach contemplation in the midst of the world. “The marvelous reality of our vocation, which leads us to seek God through the perfect carrying out of our ordinary work, brings it about that we receive the graces necessary to convert our whole life into a continuous prayer. The spirit of the Work leads us to be contemplatives while working and while resting, in the street and in our family life.”⁶⁶

Contemplation in the midst of the world is not an imaginary utopia, but a reality lived by thousands of people. In the Special General Congress of Opus Dei that took place in Rome in 1969–70, a motion was approved stating that “one in fact reaches an *effective* and continuous contemplation in the midst of any activity carried out in the world, no matter how absorbing, as has been demonstrated by the universal experience of the members of the Work in every time and place. . . . By ‘contemplation,’ we are not referring to a utopia or seldom-attained goal;

63. Jose Luis Illanes, *Iglesia en el mundo: la secularidad de los miembros del Opus Dei*, cited in note 3, pp. 269–270.

64. This feature of the spirit of Opus Dei is so essential that the founder wrote: “We cannot persevere in our vocation if we are not contemplatives, if we do not convert our life into Love” (*Instruction*, Dec. 8, 1941); “A soul who is not contemplative in practice, would lack the foundation of the spiritual life of members of Opus Dei, and it would therefore be very difficult for him to persevere in the Work” (AGP, P06, V, p. 210).

65. Meditation *A Life of Prayer*, Apr. 4, 1955 (AGP, P09, p. 35). In this respect, the following event narrated by Bishop Julián Herranz is very significant: “Let me mention here a personal recollection from the early days of the Council: a conversation at which I was present in the central headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome, between the Servant of God, Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer, and some Council Fathers and ‘peritos,’ who were among the many who sought out a close and confident priestly friendship with the founder of Opus Dei. Someone (I seem to recall that it was the Archbishop of Rheims, Most Rev. François Marty, later Cardinal Archbishop of Paris and President of the French Bishops Conference) said, repeating a concept often expressed in the Conciliar halls, that it was the role of the laity to ‘impart Christian life to the structures of the temporal order in the world: thus they will transform them. . . .’ ‘If they have a contemplative soul, Your Excellency!’ said Msgr. Escrivá, smiling, ‘because otherwise they won’t transform anything; rather it will be they who are transformed; and instead of Christianizing the world, Christians will be secularized.’ All agreed. The same thing happened a few minutes later, when responding to the statement that the Christian laity should order the “res temporales” in accordance with God’s will, the Servant of God answered rapidly: “Yes, but first they themselves have to be well ordered within, being men and women of profound interior life, souls of prayer and sacrifice. If not, instead of ordering those structures, those family and social realities, they will bring to them their own personal disorder.” (Bishop Julián Herranz, *Los laicos, testigos de Dios en el mundo*, cited in note 3, p. 44f.)

66. *Letter of July 29, 1965*, no. 1 §2.

rather, we express by that term a reality lived in the midst of the world—‘in the middle of the street,’ as the Father often likes to say—and through any professional activity, for ‘the unity of life of each member of Opus Dei leads him to seek out God at all times and in all activities.’”⁶⁷

67. *Atti del Congresso Generale Speciale. Sezione maschile*, I, Sept. 11, 1969, text cited in Amadeo De Fuenmayor, V. Gómez-Iglesias and Jose Luis Illanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Scepter, Princeton, 1994 p. 375, note 65.