Teaching the Faith in the Family

Some guidelines from Blessed Josemaria Escriva

Michele Dolz
Doctor in Theology and Education

Parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their own children. This is a recurrent teaching in the Church's magisterium from *Divini Illius Magistri* of Pope Pius XI in 1929 to the documents of Pope John Paul II. The Second Vatican Council summarizes this teaching: "As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the gravest obligation of educating their family. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. It is therefore the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and their fellow-men which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children." [1]

I would like to consider here some of Blessed Josemaria Escriva's insights into this truth, which he placed in the context of the baptismal call to holiness and apostolate. Hopefully this brief consideration of a few key texts will serve to show the richness of his teaching on this topic and give rise to further studies.[2]

The family in God's plans

Among the ancient people of Israel, the family was the firm foundation stone of society. For the Semitic peoples families took precedence over the individual,

1. Second Vatican Council, Decl. *Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 3. See also the Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11 and the Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 52; and, in the post-conciliar magisterium, John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Catechesi Tradendae*, October 16, 1979, nos. 68-69; Apost. Exhort.. *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 21; and *Letter to Families*, February 2, 1994, no. 16. In this last document, the Pope explains that the education of children is a continuation and development of conjugal love, and a participation in the paternal and maternal love of God. Cf. also: *Message to the participants in the Twelfth General Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family*, September 29, 1995, on the theme *The Transmission of the Faith in the Family*.

2. In regard to the high concept that Blessed Josemaria had of education as a human activity and as an apostolic expression, see Francisco Ponz, *La educación y la actividad educativa en la enseñanza de Monseñor Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1976.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

A Study

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

and were united in turn into clans and tribes, which accentuated the role of tradition and contributed towards stability and continuity in society. The patriarchal family was further reinforced among the chosen people by their determination to be faithful to Yahweh: "Fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life...These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." [3]

A Jewish father under the Old Covenant felt a moral duty to transmit to his children the deposit of faith that God had entrusted to him. This obligation gave meaning to his mission as head of the family and was essential for the family's prosperity and happiness.[4] Hence the intimate link between its members: "we are your bone and flesh." [5] This close union led at times to paradoxical results, such as the punishment of an entire family for the fault of the father.[6]

The Hebrew family is "the father's house" and God is "the God of our fathers." The mission of the father has religious features. The father carries out an almost priestly role.[7] The family is not only a social unit but also a religious group. Festivals and holy days are celebrated within the household with a truly liturgical spirit. Thus the religion of Yahweh, from a social point of view, is centered not on preachers and charismatic figures, nor even specifically on a priestly caste, but rather on the family unit. And although Israel never lacked prophets and leaders of the people, religion was transmitted through the family.

The New Testament shows us how this ancient model was initially replaced by the new faith in Jesus Christ. Entire families were converted through the father's conversion. After the cure of his son, the official from Capharnaum "believed, and all his household." [8] The jailer of Paul and Silas,[9] and the head of the synagogue at Corinth, Crispus,[10] are other examples.

With the expansion of Christianity throughout the empire, the patriarchal Hebrew family soon ceased to be the only model. But the sense of responsibility of parents to transmit the faith in the family did not disappear. The literature on this topic is very abundant.[11] Blessed Josemaria always had a great interest in reading

3. *Deut* 6:2-7.
4. Cf. *Deut* 6:10ff.
5. *2 Sam* 5:1.
6. Cf. *Josh* 7:16-26.
7. Cf. *Job* 1:5.
8. *Jn* 4:53.
9. Cf. *Act* 16:16-39.
10. Cf. *Act* 18:8.
11. Aside from the well known studies of A. Hamman (*La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens*) and of G. BARDY (*La vie spirituelle d'après les Pères des trois premiers siècles*), I will mention here: E. CAVALCANTI, "La vita familiare," in C. BURINI and E. CAVALCANTI, *La spiritualità della vita quotidiana negli scritti dei Padri della Chiesa*, Ed. Dehoniane, Bologna 1988, pp. 155-179.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

about the first Christians, not only because of the immediacy and freshness of the narratives, but also because of the high aspirations to holiness found there.

"There is perhaps no better model for a Christian couple than that of the Christian families of apostolic times: the centurion Cornelius, who obeyed the will of God and in whose home the Church was made accessible to the gentiles; Aquila and Priscilla, who spread Christianity in Corinth and Ephesus, and who cooperated in the apostolate of Saint Paul; Tabitha, who out of charity attended to the needs of the Christians in Joppa. And so many other homes and families of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Romans in which the preaching of our Lord's first disciples began to bear fruit.

"Families who lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others. Small Christian communities which were centers for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what we have to be." [12]

Blessed Josemaria's admiration for the first Christians and his tireless reference to their example does not, of course, detract in any way from recognizing all the fruits of sanctity that the Church has produced throughout the two thousand years of her history, a sanctity often "cultivated" within Christian families. But the first Christian generations give very clear witness to three important truths:

a) the goal to which they aspired was holiness, understood as a full identification with Christ;

b) the mission of Christianizing society and culture (which means bringing people one by one to Christ) was the task of each Christian in his or her own environment, beginning with the family;

c) all of this has its origin in baptism, that is to say, in the very fact of being a Christian, and not in particular mandates from the hierarchy or added acts of consecration.

Blessed Josemaria always taught, not without some initial incomprehension, that marriage is a divine vocation and that its greatness, its obligations, and its efficacy are rooted in the sacrament itself.

"The purpose of marriage is to help married people sanctify themselves and others. For this they receive a special grace in the sacrament which Jesus Christ instituted. Those called to the married state will, with the grace of God, find within their state everything they need to be holy, to identify themselves each day more with Jesus Christ, and to lead those with whom they live to God.

12. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 30.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

"We must strive so that these cells of Christianity may be born and may develop with a desire for holiness, conscious of the fact that the Sacrament of Initiation—Baptism—confers on all Christians a divine mission that each must fulfill in his own walk of life. Christian couples should be aware that they are called to sanctify themselves and to sanctify others, that they are called to be apostles and that their first apostolate is in the home. They should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society are supernatural tasks. The effectiveness and the success of their life—their happiness—depends to a great extent on their awareness of their specific mission." [13]

The parents' mission to educate their children in the faith stems from the sacraments. When they teach the faith at home, it is the Church that is teaching. Their home is the domestic Church. Besides being a duty, it is a right, as the Code of Canon Law clearly recognizes.[14]

"Experience shows in all Christian environments what good effects come from this natural and supernatural introduction to the life of piety given in the warmth of the home. Children learn to place God first and foremost in their affections. They learn to see God as their Father and Mary as their Mother and they learn to pray following their parents' example. In this way one can easily see what a wonderful apostolate parents have and how it is their duty to live a fully Christian life of prayer, so they can communicate their love of God to their children, which is something more than just teaching them." [15]

Here he speaks with the assurance that stems from his deep interior life and his vast experience in guiding souls. Nevertheless, his intuition accords with much twentieth century research into child psychology. Alfred Baldwin, Pierre Bovet and Jean Piaget have all highlighted the central role of the child-parent relationship in the forming of a child's values and personality. [16]

The child readily "captures" what is transmitted to him through the irreplaceable affective bonds with his parents. While institutions outside the family, even when moved by the best of intentions, are must less effective. Many beneficent institutions, inspired by Christian charity, have educated parentless children in the faith as well as in secular subjects. God has even brought forth great saints from such environments. But in general it is precisely such institutions that show how indispensable Christian parents are. Even more, the history of Christian education over many centuries shows how difficult it is for the seed of supernatural life

13. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Conversations*, no. 91.

14. Cf. can. 1136.

15. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Conversations*, no. 103. "Parents, by transmitting life and receiving it in an atmosphere of love, have a unique educative potential. They know their own children better than anyone, in each one's irrepeatable singularity, and they possess, through their own experience, the secrets and resources of true love" (Pontifical Council for the Family, *Educational Guidelines on the Family*, December 8, 1995, no. 7).

16. An excellent philosophical reflection on love as the soul of education, amply inspired by the teachings of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, is found in Carlos Cardona, *Etica del quehacer educativo*, Rialp, Madrid 1990.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

to germinate without the parents' help. In contrast, the family-school synergy (or that of the family and Christian educators in general) is highly effective. Here we see another of Blessed Josemaria's pastoral intuitions that has now become widespread. All over the world educational centers have been started that work closely with the parents' own efforts to educate their children and in which the parents continue to exercise the role of principal educators.

Blessed Josemaria always gave parents some advice that at first might seem a pedagogical technique: become *friends* of your children, win their trust and confidence. The educator Victor Garcia Hoz, who first met Blessed Josemaria Escriva back in the thirties, has focused attention on the importance of this advice. He stressed that, in the long run, all true education is based on a relationship of friendship between the educator and the person being educated.[17] I said "might seem a pedagogical technique," because friendship and Christian love are charity, which can never be reduced to a "technique" but rather constitutes the very core of our new life in Christ.

Education in holiness

We mentioned above Blessed Josemaria's admiration for the example of the early Christians, who saw the faith, and taught those around them to see it, as the search for holiness, complete identification with Christ. In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul writes: "If I do what I do not want.... It is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."[18] We are presented here with the drama of our fallen nature, and the impossibility of carrying out holy actions without grace. In the context of forming others in the faith, it reminds us of the absurdity (and the dangers) of a moral education that covers over our weakness in doing the good (a weakness caused by sin) and that fails to take grace into account.[19] The true context for all Christian moral education is found in another passage from Saint Paul, in his letter to the Galatians (a passage frequently cited by Blessed Josemaria): "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."[20] A Christian's moral activity is the consequence of the life of Christ in his soul.

The entire letter to the Galatians can be read, in my opinion, as the "Magna Carta" for Christian educators. Concepts such as "life in Christ," "being children of God through faith in Christ," "being called to freedom," go far beyond a simple observance of precepts or moral codes and remind those involved in forming others that Christianity is not a morality or a philosophy of life. Rather it is a *life*, the life of Christ in us. This is why Paul exclaims in the same epistle: "My little chil-

17. Cf. Victor Garcia Hoz, "La pedagogia en Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Studi Cattolici* 182-183 (1976), pp. 260-266. Cf. also Tomas Alvira, *¿Cómo ayudar a nuestros hijos?*, Palabra, Madrid 1983.
18. *Rom* 7:16-18.
19. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 407.
20. *Gal* 2:20

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

dren, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." [21] This is what holiness consists in. Such a high goal, as Saint Paul also warns, is always in danger of being lowered or viewed in a worldly light: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." [22] The lowering of expectations in family education (a consequence of the logic of "sowing to the flesh") is what Blessed Josemaria used to call "the failure of Christ in Christian families." Such families neither recognize nor accept God's gifts, for example, the vocation of their children to a particular mission in the Church (such as the call to the ministerial priesthood) or simply the divine invitation to take up in a consistent way the vocation to sanctity and apostolate received in baptism.

But parents who aspire to holiness and desire holiness for their children understand very well those other words of Blessed Josemaria: "There is a special communion of the saints among members of the same family. If you are very holy, your children will find it easier to be so." [23] This very particular spiritual communion also stems from the sacrament of marriage, since Christ has taken up the natural family relationships, sanctified them, and made them into a vocation.

It is impossible to "teach" sanctity, in the sense of merely passing on some facts or theories. Parents can and should transmit the truths of the Catholic faith and guide their children towards the means of sanctification provided by the Church. Nevertheless, we should never forget that "parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time." [24]

Parents can certainly teach their children how to pray: "so that God is not regarded as a stranger whom we go to see in Church once a week on Sunday. He will be seen and treated as he really is, not only in church but also at home, because our Lord has told us, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them' (Mt 18:20)." [25]

Jesus teaches us on every page of the Gospel how important prayer is for attaining sanctity. And this is a constant theme in Blessed Josemaria's preaching. Referring to the formation of young people, he would always say: "If you don't make the boys men of prayer, you have wasted your time." [26] All the apostolates of

21. *Ibid.* 4:19.
22. *Ibid.* 6:7-8.
23. Notes taken during a get-together in Valencia, Spain, on November 19, 1972: AGP, P11, p. 101.
24. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 28.
25. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Conversations*, no. 103.
26. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Instruction*, January 9, 1935, no. 133.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

Opus Dei encourage people to set out on the paths of mental prayer and to undertake a full plan of spiritual life. At the same time, the founder always feared, as a disease of the soul, any kind of formalism or external "observance," the exterior practice of piety without an interior openness to Christ. He applied the same criteria to the family, with the due qualifications based on the age of the children and on the fact that parents are not spiritual directors. But he was no less demanding here, since he knew that almost all Catholics have learned their prayers in their own family, and yet few have truly become souls of prayer.

"The meaning of true piety should be taught first by example and then by word. False piety is a sad pseudo-spiritual caricature which generally results from a lack of doctrine and from a certain psychological defect. The logical result is that it is repellent to anyone who loves authenticity and sincerity.

"I am very glad to see how Christian piety takes root among young people today, as it did forty years ago:

"when they see it lived sincerely in the lives of others;

"when they understand that prayer is speaking with God, not anonymously, but personally, as with one's parent or with a friend, in a heart to heart conversation;

"when we try to make them hear deep in their souls the words with which Jesus Christ himself invites them to a confidential encounter: *vos autem dixi amicos* (*Jn* 15:15) 'I have called you friends';

"when a strong appeal is made to their Faith, so that they see that our Lord is the 'same yesterday and today and forever' (*Heb* 13:8).

"It is essential for them to realize that simple and heartfelt piety also calls for the exercise of human virtues and that it cannot be reduced to a few daily or weekly pious acts. It must penetrate our entire life and give meaning to our work, rest, friendships and entertainment, to everything that we do. We are children of God all day long, even though we do set aside special moments for considering it, so that we can fill ourselves with the awareness of our divine filiation that is the essence of true piety." [27]

He was convinced that because of the child's special affective bond with his parents, the piety learned in childhood would take deep root in the soul and never completely disappear, not even when there is an apparent distancing from the faith or from Catholic practice. Speaking of piety in the family, he told parents:

"Your refinement and your piety . . . remain in the depths of their soul. And if later the passions come and pull us down, and we have a bad period in our life, in

27. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Conversations*, no. 102.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

the end the good seed will blossom again. The piety that you mothers place in your children's hearts is never lost." [28]

He advised parents to teach their children a few prayers that they say regularly. Piety should never be a cause of boredom for young children. What is essential is that they learn they are children of God and act accordingly. To foster personal union with God, Blessed Josemaria saw that the only path was one based on freedom: "There is no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom." [29]

"It's important not to lose these wonderful traditions of family prayer, but don't impose them. Let your children see you preserving them with affection. They should know when the rosary is said each day; and they will end up joining you. But without being forced!

"If they leave themselves open—which they will do if you truly strive to be their friend—tell each one separately: 'Look, this custom of ours is centuries old and ought to be continued because it pleases our Lady very much, and God is very pleased by it and blesses us. But say it when you want, with complete freedom.' Then they will return." [30]

As they grow older and become more mature, children should gradually be given greater freedom. This is another central feature of Blessed Josemaria's pedagogy: don't fear freedom, because without it there is no true improvement. As he liked to say, Christ himself wished to take the risk of our freedom. At the same time he urged parents to be patient ("because God has a lot of patience with us)." One should never be in a hurry with souls, precisely because it is so important to form them well.

"You can't force your older children to fulfill their religious obligations. You shouldn't grab them by the ear and say: 'I'm taking you to Mass.' Because, even though they are physically at church, if they don't want to be there, they won't really be at Mass.

"They should be told that what they are doing is wrong and that it offends God; and that it is a grave offense if they fail to fulfill their obligations in a matter that is serious. But remain tranquil and pray. Remember Saint Monica's prayers for her son Augustine. If you pray for them, and explain their duties to them, be sure that in the end God will move their hearts and the Holy Spirit will lead them towards contrition and upright behavior." [31]

28. Notes taken in a get-together in São Paulo, Brazil, June 4, 1974: AGP, P11, p. 104.
29. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 27
30. Notes taken in a get-together in Madrid, October 28, 1972; AGP, P11, p. 109.
31. Notes taken in a get-together in São Paulo, Brazil, June 2, 1974: AGP, P11, p. 104.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

The primacy of grace

Good theologian that he was, Blessed Josemaria never fell into the classic trap of the Christian educator: trying to obtain with human means what can only be attained with the help of God's grace. His catechesis was always focused on the need to have recourse to the fonts of grace, to the sacraments. He always saw the ascetical struggle as a question of correspondence to grace.

Using terminology from the Fathers of the Church,[32] he spoke of the "divinization" of the Christian, both as an objective reality and as a goal. He took with complete seriousness, as something pertaining to ordinary life, Saint John's references to the communion (koinonía) between Christ and the faithful, with its prototype in the communion between Christ and the Father. Therefore he drew people's attention to Jesus' words: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be in us."[33] And also: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."[34] He taught people how to make a reality of this promise: "Our heart now needs to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons.... 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."[35]

Blessed Josemaria Escriva's writings revolve around the theme of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in our soul. Christian life is the life of "sons in the Son,"[36] made sons of God *in Christ* (as Saint Paul so often says) through the sending of the Holy Spirit.[37] Saint Paul sees the presence of the Spirit in the Christian as somehow prefigured by the *shekinah* of God in the Temple [38]: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... God's temple is holy, and that temple you are."[39]

Blessed Josemaria stressed that Christian formation should have as its aim the expression of this indwelling and divinization (and therefore the awareness of being children of God in Christ) in prayer and frequent recourse to the sacraments. Thus for him leading someone to prayer and to the sacraments was the core of all Christian education.

32. Cf., for example, J. Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères Grecs*, Gabalda, Paris 1938; also the article *"Divinisation,"* in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Beauchesne, Paris.
33. *Jn* 17:21.
34. *Jn* 14:23.
35. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God*, no. 306.
36. Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.
37. Gal 4:6
38. Cf. Louis Bouyer, *La Bible et l'Evangile*, Du Cerf, Paris 1952; Idem., *Mysterion. Du mystère à la mystique*, Oeil, Paris 1986.
39. *1 Cor* 3:16-17.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

"If the sacraments are abandoned, genuine Christian life disappears. Yet we should realize that particularly today there are many people who seem to forget about the sacraments and who even scorn this redeeming flow of Christ's grace. It is painful to have to speak of this sore in a so-called Christian society, but we must do so for it will encourage us to approach these sources of sanctification more gratefully and more lovingly." [40]

Throughout his life, and particularly between 1970 and 1975, the year in which he died, he carried out a broad catechesis on the sacraments. He was saddened by the widespread trend to delay the baptism of children under the pretext of a more conscious choice on the part of those being baptized. As the Church's magisterium has recently taught, baptism "not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte 'a new creature' (*2 Cor* 5:17), an adopted son of God who has become a 'partaker of the divine nature' (*2 Pet* 1:4), a member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Most Holy Trinity gives the baptized sanctifying grace, the grace of *justification*:

—enabling them to believe in God, to hope in him, and to love him through the theological virtues;

—giving them the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit;

—allowing them to grow in goodness through the moral virtues." [41]

As Blessed Josemaria lamented: "There are many people who seem to forget about the sacraments and who even scorn this redeeming flow of Christ's grace. . . . Without the slightest scruple people decide to postpone the baptism of newly born children. Yet by doing so they seriously go against justice and charity by depriving children of the grace of faith, of the incalculable treasure of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in a soul which comes into the world stained by original sin. They also try to change the true nature of the sacrament of confirmation, which tradition has unanimously seen as a strengthening of the spiritual life. By giving more supernatural strength to the soul, through a quiet and fruitful outpouring of the Holy Spirit, confirmation enables the Christian to fight as *milites Christi*, as a soldier of Christ, in his intimate battle against selfishness and lust of all sorts." [42]

He also made frequent reference to the confession of children, encouraging parents to bring their children to this sacrament without delay.

"What a joy it is to go to confession. I've heard the confessions of thousands and thousands of children. It's not a waste of time. One learns a lot from

40. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 78.
41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1265-1266.
42. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 78.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

these souls in whom the Holy Spirit is acting. Just as you mothers give your infants first your blood, and then the nectar of your breast; thus the Holy Spirit, in the souls of those little ones, who perhaps don't realize anything, is acting tirelessly. And the priest collaborates with him, with the Holy Spirit. Besides, they receive the grace of the sacrament, which is also the Holy Spirit in action."[43]

Thus we arrive at what Blessed Josemaria saw as the foundation of all Christian formation: divine filiation. God created us to freely give us a higher, strictly supernatural dignity: to be his adoptive sons, sons in the Son, members of the family of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *domestici Dei.* [44] "The way in which God makes us members of his family," writes Fernando Ocariz, commenting on Blessed Josemaria's teachings, "is very specific: filiation. This divine familiarity is not simply a 'moral question,' a matter of personal behavior. Rather it is based on a real transformation in our being—elevation, adoption. For 'our faith teaches us that man, in the state of grace, is divinized' (*Christ Is Passing By,* no. 103), that is to say, truly placed in God, made a sharer in the divine life: in the Life that is the eternal Processions of the Blessed Trinity...God, in his extravagant goodness, has not only wanted us to treat him *like* a father. Rather, in an incomparably greater extravagance of love, he has adopted us as his children." [45] Saint John writes: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." [46] Blessed Josemaria saw divine filiation as the foundation of a Christian's spiritual life. This is not just one more aspect of his teaching, but the all-encompassing framework.

"The piety which is born of divine filiation is a profound attitude of the soul which eventually permeates one's entire existence. It is there in every thought, every desire, every affection. Haven't you noticed in families how children, even without realizing it, imitate their parents? They imitate their gestures, their habits; much of their behavior is the same as that of their parents.

"Well, the same kind of thing happens to a good son of God. One finds oneself acquiring—without knowing how, or by what means—a marvelous godliness, which enables us to focus events from the supernatural viewpoint of faith; we come to love all men as our Father in heaven loves them and, what is more important, we become more fervent in our daily efforts to come closer to God. Our wretchedness, I insist, doesn't matter, because we have the loving arms of our Father God to lift us up."[47]

43. Notes taken during a get-together in Santiago, Chile, on July 2, 1974: AGP, P11, p. 106.
44. *Eph* 2:19.
45. Fernando Ocariz, *Naturaleza, Gracia y Gloria,* Eunsa, Pamplona 2000, pp. 183-184 (chapter "Filiacion divina, realidad central en la vida y en la enseñanza de Mons. Escriva de Balaguer"). "Our relationship with the three divine Persons is based on our participation in the filiation of Christ, by the initiative of the Father, who wishes to make us sons in the Son, and by the infusion of the Spirit, who assimilates us to Christ as Son" (J.A. Sayes, *La gracia de Cristo,* BAC, Madrid 1993, p. 283.).
46. *1 Jn* 3:1.
47. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God,* no. 146.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

When speaking to parents, he always stressed that the focal point of the Christian formation they imparted to their children had to be the knowledge that God is their Father. And since their children truly love them, it should be easy for parents to teach their children to transfer this natural filiation to the supernatural level.

Human virtues

Another central feature of Blessed Josemaria's approach to Christian education is the importance given to human virtues. He liked to use the adjective 'human' to emphasize that these habits enhance the dignity of the person who possesses them. These virtues, which "some possess even without knowing Christ," provide the grounding for free actions.[48]

"In this world of ours there are many people who neglect God. It may be that they have not had an opportunity to listen to his words, or that they have forgotten them. Yet their human dispositions are honest, loyal, compassionate, and sincere. I would go so far as to say that anyone possessing such qualities is ready to be generous with God, because human virtues constitute the foundation for the supernatural virtues."[49] It is hard, for example, to exercise supernatural fortitude if humanly one lacks habits of self-control, or Christian prudence if one is naturally scatter-brained.

In a Christian, the human virtues are converted into supernatural ones when they are vivified by charity and strengthened by the help of divine grace.[50] When trying to teach the virtues in one's family, these words of the Pope should be kept in mind: "By a kind of osmosis, children incorporate into their own lives and personality what they breathe in the atmosphere of their home, as the fruit of the virtues parents have cultivated in their own lives. The best way to sculpt the virtues in the heart of children is for them to see these virtues engraved in the life of their parents. Human and Christian virtues, in a harmonious and strong unity, make the ideal seen in their parents attractive and spur the children to undertake its conquest."[51]

A virtuous life is always attractive. But Blessed Josemaria recognized that Christians can fail to give good example here:

"You may perhaps have noticed . . . so many people who call themselves Christians because they have been baptized and have received other sacraments, but

48. *Ibid.*, no. 75.
49. *Ibid.*, no. 74.
50. "Such personal qualities are not enough, for no one is saved without the grace of Christ" (*Ibid.*, no. 75).
51. Pope John Paul II, "Address to the participants in the Fourth General Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family," on the theme: "The Sacrament of Marriage and the Educational Mission," October 10, 1986, no. 5: AAS 79 (1987) 286-290.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

then prove to be disloyal and deceitful, insincere and proud, and... they fail to achieve anything. They are like shooting stars, lighting up the sky for an instant and then falling away to nothing. If we accept the responsibility of being children of God, we will realize that God wants us to be very human. Our heads should indeed be touching heaven, but our feet should be firmly on the ground. The price of living as Christians is not that of ceasing to be human or of abandoning the effort to acquire those virtues which some have even without knowing Christ. The price paid for each Christian is the redeeming blood of our Lord and he, I insist, want us to be both very human and very divine, struggling each day to imitate him who is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo.*"[52]

A Christian who does not make an effort to practice the virtues, who does not struggle to fulfill his family, professional and social duties, and also to exercise his own rights, cannot be a good disciple of Christ and damages the Church. Blessed Josemaria wanted children to receive, both in the family and in educational centers, a thorough education on their rights and duties as free citizens. He urged educators to instill in children a strong awareness of their responsibility to contribute to the common good and to the development of society. In this context, he warned of two positions that might seem contradictory, but both of which lead to robbing the human person of his humanity in the end.

"There is a certain type of secularist outlook that one comes across, and also another approach which one might call 'pietistic,' both of which share the view that Christians somehow are not fully and entirely human. According to the former, the demands of the Gospel are such as to stifle our human qualities; whereas for the later, human nature is so fallen that it threatens and endangers the purity of the faith. The result, either way, is the same. They both fail to grasp the full significance of Christ's Incarnation; they do not see that the *Word was made flesh*, became man, *and dwelt amongst us.*"[53]

It is here that he finds the focus for Christian asceticism.[54] And here he is very demanding, first with himself, and afterwards with others. Always counting on God's grace, he encouraged all men and women to develop their own potentialities with the tenacity and optimism of someone who practices a sport seriously, and with the toughness of an ascetic. In Christian homes, he said, one must strive to create a climate of sincerity, generosity, loyalty. In schools and centers of formation, one must do everything possible to foster these virtues in young people, precisely because we want them to be saints.

"Once a person is striving to improve in the human virtues, his heart is already very close to Christ. If he is a Christian, he will realize that the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity) and all the other virtues which God's grace brings with

52. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God,* no. 75.
53. *Ibid.*, no. 74.
54. Cf. Victor Garcia Hoz, *Pedagogia de la lucha ascetica,* Council for Advanced Scientific Research, Madrid 1946, especially pp. 387-411.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

it are an encouragement never to neglect the good qualities he shares with so many of his fellowmen.

"The human virtues are, I insist, the foundation for the supernatural ones. These in turn provide us with constant encouragement to behave as good human beings. In either case, it is not sufficient merely to want to have these virtues. We have to learn how to practice them. *Discite benefacere* ("learn to do good"). We need to make a habit of exercising each virtue, by actually being sincere, truthful, balanced, calm, and patient... for love is proved by deeds and we cannot love God only by word, but 'with deeds and in truth.'

"When a Christian fights to acquire these virtues, his soul is preparing to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit fruitfully. In this way his good human qualities are strengthened by the motions of the Paraclete in his soul. The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the soul's sweet guest, pours out his gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, know1edge, piety, and the fear of the Lord...

"Our faith brings out the full meaning of these human virtues, which no one should ever neglect. Christians should be second to none as human beings. Those who follow Christ are able (not by their own merit but by the grace of God) to communicate to those around them what they at times suspect but cannot quite grasp: that true happiness, a genuine spirit of serving our neighbor, can only come by passing through the Heart of our Redeemer, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo.*" [55]

Among the holy educators with whom the history of the Church has been blessed, the founder of Opus Dei certainly has a rightful place. He was a tireless promoter of Christian formation, not only through the educational institutions inspired by his teachings but also, and above all, through all of Opus Dei's apostolic activity, which he liked to define as "a great catechesis." It seeks to foster, in the midst of the world, the formation of men and women who are ready to take up, in all its radical demands, the baptismal call to life in Christ.

55. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God,* nos. 91-93.

Biblioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei