

The Example of the Early Christians in Blessed Josemaría's Teachings

Domingo Ramos-Lissón
The University of Navarre

Introduction

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's high regard for the first Christians is found even in his earliest writings.¹ Already in his first book, *Consideraciones Espirituales*, he encouraged readers to become more deeply acquainted with the lives of the first faithful and to strive to adapt their conduct to those early models.² He also had great esteem for the Fathers of the Church, as is apparent when reading his homilies.³ What is especially striking is that this interest in the early Christians is maintained, as we will see, throughout his whole life.⁴

A first question to be clarified, although its answer might seem obvious, is the following: Who was Blessed Josemaría referring to when he spoke of "the early Christians"? From his writings we can see that he included in this term all those who lived in the period extending from the lifetime of "the Twelve," the first followers of our Lord,⁵ up to the beginning of the fourth century, when the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian took place.⁶ It can in fact be argued that the first three centuries of the Christian era represent a fairly clearly defined first stage

1. This is how he put it in 1933: "Our highest ambition has to be to live as Jesus our Lord lived; as the first faithful did, without any division on the basis of blood, nationality, language or opinion" (*Letter of July 16, 1933*, no. 19).

2. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Consideraciones Espirituales*, Imprenta Moderna, Cuenca 1934, p. 99. This point is repeated in its entirety in *The Way*, no. 925.

3. As an example we need only recall the many citations of St. Augustine found in his homilies (cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, "La presencia de San Agustín en las Homilias del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Scripta Theologica* 25 (1993) 901-902). Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón's "El uso de los 'loci' patristicos en las Homilias del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 2 (1993) 17-28.

4. The last written reference that we have found is in a homily, "Marriage, a Christian Vocation," given at Christmas, 1970 (in Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, Dublin 1985, nos. 29-30). Near the end of his earthly life, he once more reminded his children in *Opus Dei*: "They can say of you what was said of the first Christians: see how they love one another!" (Get-together, February 19, 1975 in Guatemala).

5. Cf. *Letter of October 24, 1965*, no. 13.

6. We can deduce the end-point of this period from the mention (cf. note 10 below) of St. Sebastian in the *Instruction of December 8, 1941*, no. 90, note 128. This saint suffered martyrdom during the persecution of Maximian, ca. 304.

in the life of the Church, which possessed specific characteristics of its own that changed significantly after the Edict of Milan in 313.⁷

Another question to clarify is the social and cultural background of the Christians of the first centuries, keeping in mind that Christianity was born in the heart of the “oikoumene,”⁸ at a moment in history when Roman society was made up of very clearly delineated social strata.⁹ For the Founder of Opus Dei the answer is clear: “The reality of Opus Dei calls to mind that of the early Christians... Each community of the faithful included people from all social levels and backgrounds: people converted to the faith of Christ, which was what joined them together. All the different professions were represented in those communities. There were doctors like Luke, lawyers like Zela, bankers like Erastus, teachers like Apollo, artisans like Alexander, large and small-scale merchants, prison guards and their families, soldiers and government officials, a proconsul, Sergius Paulus, etc. There were rich and poor, slaves and freemen, civilians and soldiers like Sebastian.”¹⁰

The methodology we have adopted starts with looking at writings of the Founder of Opus Dei in which he mentions the early Christians, whether employing this particular expression or a similar one, or where he uses specific names of early Christians. We have also tried to provide a brief historical context for the period, without attempting to be exhaustive. Bibliographic references and clarifications are included in the notes.

We will begin by considering the sanctification of ordinary life among Christians of the first generations, viewed in light of Blessed Josemaría’s teachings. Special attention will be given to the main features of the universal call to sanctity in the midst of the world, followed by a consideration of the ordinary life of a Christian in the context of sanctifying one’s family and social life. Then we will briefly examine the apostolic dimension this entails.

1. Main characteristics of the vocation to holiness in the midst of the world

One of the most frequently repeated teachings of Blessed Josemaría is the call to holiness in the midst of the world. When asked about the vocation to Opus Dei, he explained this message very clearly. In an interview with an American journalist, he compared the vocation to Opus Dei to that of the first faithful. “If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei

7. Some authors, such as A. Hamman, limit the term “early Christians” to those who lived during the first two centuries, as is shown by the title of a well-known book of his: *La vie quotidienne des premiers chrétiens* (95/197), Hachette, Paris, 1971.

8. This Greek term, source of our word “ecumenical,” refers to the extension of the Roman empire. Cf. K. Raiser, *Oikoumene*, in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, WCC, Grands Rapids, 1991, page 741.

9. Cf. A. D’Ors, *Derecho Privado Romano*, ninth edition, Eunsá, Pamplona 1997, pp. 48-53; 275-304.

10. Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, note 128, in Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Instruction*, December 8, 1941, no. 90.

is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens."¹¹

Of the many ideas this text suggests, we can focus our attention on the search for holiness.¹² But we have to understand this search as the response to God's call. Blessed Josemaría kept very much in mind that holiness is a gift to God's children,¹³ to which one must correspond with humility. "It is not our own forces that save us and give us life; it is the grace of God. This is a truth which can never be forgotten. If it were, the *divinization* of our life would be perverted and would become presumption, pride. And this would lead, sooner or later, to a breakdown of spiritual life, when the soul came face to face with its own weakness and wretchedness."¹⁴

Holiness is not viewed as an abstract ideal, but as a reality incarnated in particular persons, each with his or her own name and way of acting. This is shown even in the fraternal behavior of the early followers of Christianity: "Greet all the saints. All the saints send you greetings. To all the saints who are at Ephesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Phillippi." What a moving name — saints! — the early Christians used to address one another!

"Learn how to treat your brothers."¹⁵

We know the names of some of those "saints" and a number are even recognized as such by the Church.¹⁶ But the immense majority are unknown to us, their fruitful lives having left no external mark in history.

a) *The newness of Christianity*

The newness of the Christian message was an important reality right from the start. It is not for nothing that the word "Gospel" (*Evangelium*), which has

11. *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, Scepter, Princeton, 1993, no. 24. For a similar view see *ibid.*, no. 62.

12. Cf. *Letter of March 11, 1940*, no. 21.

13. Cf. Fernando Ocariz, "La filiación divina, realidad central en la vida y en la enseñanza de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer," in *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, second edition, Eunsia, Pamplona 1985, p. 178 s.; S. Garofalo, "El valor perenne del Evangelio," in *Scripta Theologica* 24 (1992) 27; Jutta Burggraf, "Awareness of Divine Filiation," in M. Belda and others (eds.) *Holiness and the World: Studies in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría*, Scepter, Princeton 1997, pp. 107-125.

14. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 133. In his use of the term *divinization* we can see an echo of the terms "théosis," "théopoiesis" ("deification," "divinization"), which already appear in Clement of Alexandria (*Protréptico*, XI, 114,4 [SC 2,183]). This expression was much used by the Fathers of the Church in the East, and contains a rich diversity of meanings in expressing the Holy Spirit's action in the Christian (cf. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 2nd edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968, pp. 649f.; B.P.T. Bilaniuk, "The Mystery of Theosis or Divinization," in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 195 (1973) 337-359).

15. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, Scepter, New York, 1985, no. 469. He uses the word "saints" in the same sense in other works: *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 96; *The Forge*, Scepter, Princeton, 1988, no. 622.

16. *Acta Sanctorum*, Joannes Meursium, Antwerp-Brussels, 1643; *Martyrologium Romanum*, Marietti, Turin, 1922.

deep roots in primitive Christianity, has a connotation of newness.¹⁷ This new life, stemming from the reception of baptism, is recognized as such not only by the early converts to Christianity, but also by the Jews and pagans.¹⁸ The newness of Christianity can be understood better if we contrast it briefly with the contemporary religions of the first century. The religions of antiquity were closely attached to external cult, whether that of a particular ethnic group, as in the case of Israel, or that given to the gods of a *polis* (*civitas*), as was common in the Greek world. This cult entailed a close tie between the civil and the sacred.¹⁹ Therefore Christianity, which also superceded many other aspects of pagan religiosity,²⁰ appeared to many as truly a *nova religio* (new religion).

Blessed Josemaría had a clear awareness of the newness of Opus Dei, which he compared to the *novitas christiana* of the first centuries: "This *newness* of ours, my children, is as old as the Gospel.... Thus the authentic spirituality of the Gospel was producing abundant fruits of holiness, in all the Christian environments of the early times."²¹

On another occasion he did not hesitate to describe this newness, as an "old newness,"²² since it shares in the perennial vitality of the divine: "This newness of the Work," he wrote, "is not the newness of a mere human phenomenon. It is the newness of the things of God, who, like a good Father, provides his family with new things and old (cf. *Mt* 13:52). A newness, my daughters and sons, which does not grow old, because it is a participation in the only "good news" [*buena-nueva*], and because it entails a marvelous return by the Christian faithful to the spirit with which the first Christians lived the message of salvation."²³

For Blessed Josemaría, the newness of Christianity stems from following Christ: "Jesus said that he is *the Way and the Truth and the Life* (*Jn* 14:6), and invited everyone to follow him (cf. *Mt* 16:24). Thus there arose, from the earliest times of the Church, the desire to make a reality of the search for perfection traced out by the Gospel and practiced in an exemplary way by Jesus Christ himself: the life of personal holiness and of apostolic activity."²⁴

The above text shows clearly the close tie between following Christ and the pursuit of holiness. The early followers of our Lord carried this out in their lives,

17. Cf. G. Friedrich, "s. v. Evangelion," in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento* 3, 1060-1106.

18. Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, "La novità cristiana negli apologisti del II secolo," in *Studi e Ricerche sull'Oriente Cristiano* 15 (1992) 18f.

19. Cf. A. J. Festugière, *Le monde gréco-romain au temps de Notre Seigneur*, I, Bloud & Gay, Paris 1935, pp. 53f.

20. Cf. G. Bardy, *La conversión al cristianismo durante los primeros siglos*, Span. trans., Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao 1961, pp. 136-157.

21. *Letter of March 11, 1940*, no. 21.

22. *Letter of January 9, 1932*, no. 91.

23. *Letter of January 25, 1961*, no. 13.

24. *Letter of March 11, 1940*, no. 21.

as can be seen in testimonies that have reached us, such as those of Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, among others.²⁵

b) *The radicalness of Christian life*

Following Christ is also something new owing to the radicalness it entails, as we have pointed out in another article.²⁶ No one in either classic antiquity or among the Jews had ever dared to ask of his followers what our Lord demanded. Jesus asked his followers for great renunciation, even requiring that they give up home, brothers and sisters, father, mother, wife, children, lands.²⁷

This radicality is pointed out by Blessed Josemaría, among other places, in his homily *The Great Unknown*: "In the Acts of the Apostles we find the early Christian community described in a single sentence, brief but full of meaning: 'and they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the communion of the breaking of bread and in prayers' (*Acts* 2:42)... This is a teaching that applies to any Christian, because we are all equally called to sanctity. There are no second-class Christians, obliged to practice only a 'simplified version' of the Gospel."²⁸ That is to say, the demands of the call to holiness affect every Christian; all are asked to strive for the perfection our Lord sets forth.²⁹ As he puts it in *The Way*: "You have the obligation to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you! Who thinks this is the exclusive concern of priests and religious?"

"To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: 'Be ye perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect.'"³⁰

To better understand the radical nature of the Christian vocation, we can consider the complete self-giving expressed by martyrdom. St. Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to Rome [to be martyred], wrote: "I am now beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible prevent me from reaching Jesus Christ.... Allow me to imitate the passion of my God."³¹ The Christians of the first centuries knew that the reception of baptism brought with it the duty of bearing witness, with their own lives, to the faith that they professed in Christ.³²

25. Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, *El seguimiento de Cristo*, in "Los orígenes de la espiritualidad de los primeros cristianos," in *Teología Espiritual* 30 (1986) 3-27.

26. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25; Id., "La radicalidad de la vida espiritual de los primeros cristianos," in *XX Siglos* 5 (1994) 42-57.

27. Cf. *Mt* 19:29 (*Mk* 10: 29; *Lk* 18:29). This renunciation even included one's own self (cf. *Mt* 10:39; 16:24; *Lk* 14, 25-33; *Jn* 12, 23-26).

28. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 134. A good commentary on this text can be found in J. M. Casciaro, "La santificación del cristiano en medio del mundo," in *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, pp. 117f.

29. Cf. *Mt* 5:48.

30. *The Way*, no. 291.

31. Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 5, 6 *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers*, CUA Press, 1947.

32. St. Ignatius of Antioch himself noted this disposition of the Christian: "Unless it is our choice to die, through him, unto his passion, his life is not in us" (*Magnesians*, 5 *ibid.* cf. *Ephesians*, 10 *Ibid.*).

The absolute self-giving of martyrdom helped foster, in turn, the ideal of a “spiritualized” or “unbloody” martyrdom, which also expresses the baptismal commitment lived to the full.³³ In this context, Blessed Josemaría, when asked about the vocation to Opus Dei, once said: “I can put it in very few words: to look for holiness in the middle of the world, *‘nel bel mezzo della strada’* as an Italian phrase has it. A person who receives from God the specific vocation to Opus Dei is convinced that he must achieve holiness in his own state in life, in his work, whether it be manual or intellectual, and he lives accordingly... His vocation is the same as that which those fishermen, peasants, merchants or soldiers received in their heart as they sat at Jesus’ feet in Galilee and heard him say: ‘You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (*Mt 5:48*).”³⁴

This radical Christian commitment can be seen as a “spiritual” martyrdom, since it means identifying oneself with Christ in his perfect obedience to the will of God the Father. This is the key to understanding some points in *The Way* that speak of martyrdom: “How well you understand obedience when you write: ‘Always to obey is to be a martyr without dying!’”³⁵ “You want to be a martyr. I’ll place a martyrdom within your reach: to be an apostle and not call yourself an apostle; to be a missionary — with a mission — and not call yourself a missionary, to be a man of God and to seem a man of the world: to pass unnoticed!”³⁶

c) *The central role of prayer*

The sanctity to which each Christian is called, identifying ourselves with Christ, is not an inaccessible goal.³⁷ We can all attain it by putting into practice certain specific means, just as the early faithful did. This is the central focus of Blessed Josemaría’s teachings:

“To be holy isn’t easy, but it isn’t difficult either. To be holy is to be a good Christian, to resemble Christ. The more closely a person resembles Christ, the more Christian he is, the more he belongs to Christ, the holier he is.

“And what means do we have? The same means the early faithful had, when they saw Jesus directly or caught a glimpse of him in the accounts the Apostles and Evangelists gave of him.”³⁸

33. This is how St. Clement of Alexandria expressed it in the second century: “If martyrdom consists in acknowledging God, the soul who lives purely in the knowledge of God, who obeys his commandments, is a martyr in life and in word... This man is blessed, because he does not undergo ordinary martyrdom, but a gnostic (spiritual) martyrdom, letting himself be guided in accord with the Gospel, for the love of the Lord” (*Stromata*, IV, 4, 15 [GCS 52,255]). We should explain that Clement uses the word “gnostic” here in the genuine sense of “Christian gnosis,” that is “authentic knowledge of God.” This is something totally different from the heterodox gnostics, whom Clement himself had to battle against in his own city of Alexandria.

34. *Conversations*, no. 62.

35. *The Way*, no. 622.

36. *Ibid.*, no. 848.

37. Cf. A. Aranda, *El cristiano, “alter Christus, ipse Christus,” en el pensamiento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, in M. Belda and others (eds.) *Holiness and the World: Studies in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría*, Scepter, Princeton 1997.

38. J. Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Forge*, no. 10. One could also cite here *The Way*, no. 470; *Letter March 19, 1967*, no. 139.

Imitating and following Christ is the core of Christian asceticism. Therefore, the life of prayer holds a unique position among ascetical practices.³⁹ The Founder of Opus Dei once more directs our attention to our Lord himself and his early followers:

“Remember what the Gospels tell us about Jesus. At times he spent the whole night in an intimate conversation with his Father. The apostles were filled with love when they saw Christ pray;⁴⁰ and, after seeing this constant attitude in their master, they asked him: ‘Lord, teach us to pray’ (*Lk* 11:1) in this way. St. Paul spreads the living example of Christ everywhere when he urges the faithful to ‘be constant in prayer’ (*Rom* 12:12). And St. Luke portrays the behavior of the first Christians with a phrase that is like the touch of an artist’s brush: ‘they all, with one mind, continued steadfastly in prayer.’”⁴¹

Blessed Josemaría wanted the example of the early Christians to be presented to young people. “Take special care to show them the life of prayer of the early Christians. The Acts are a delightful arsenal of anecdotes.”⁴²

In his homily, “A Life of Prayer,” he says:

“The Acts of the Apostles describe a scene I love to contemplate because it gives us a clear, abiding example of prayer: ‘They persevered, all of them, in the apostles’ teaching, in their fellowship in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.’ We are told this time and again in the passage narrating the lives of the first followers of Christ. ‘All these, with one mind, gave themselves up to prayer’ (*Acts* 1:14). Again, when Peter was imprisoned because he had boldly preached the truth, they decided to pray. ‘There was a continual stream of prayer going up to God from the Church on his behalf’ (*Acts* 12:5).

“Prayer was then, as it is today, the only weapon, the most powerful means, for winning the battles of our interior struggle. ‘Is one of you sad?’ asks St. James. ‘Let him pray’ (*Jas* 5:13). St. Paul sums it up by saying, ‘Pray without ceasing’ (*1 Thess* 5:17). Never get tired of praying.”⁴³

39. On prayer in the early centuries of Christianity see: A. Hamman, *La oracion*, Herder, Barcelona 1967, pp. 439-776. The life of prayer and contemplation holds a prominent position in the writings of Blessed Josemaría: see, for example, Josemaría Escrivá, “Life of Prayer,” in *Friends of God*, Scepter, London – New York, 1981, nos. 238-255. On this aspect of his life and teachings: cf. J.M. Casciaro, “La santificación del cristiano en medio del mundo,” pp. 150-157; F. Ocáriz, “La filiación divina, realidad central en la vida y en la enseñanza de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer,” in *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, pp. 200-203; Georges Cottier, “Prayer and the basic structures of faith” in *Holiness and the World*, pp. 89-106; Manuel Belda, “Contemplatives in the Midst of the World,” in *Romana* 27, (1998) 326-340.

40. The iconographic representation of Christ at prayer had an enormous influence on Christian art of the early centuries (cf. H. Leclercq, s.v., “orante,” in *Dictionnaire D’Archeologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, 12, 2291-2322).

41. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 119.

42. *Instruction*, January 9, 1935, no. 258.

43. *Friends of God*, no. 242.

This emphasis on the importance of a "life of prayer" is sometimes expressed as the need for "constant prayer,"⁴⁴ or "prayer that becomes continual."⁴⁵ We are urged to strive for an uninterrupted conversation with God that leads a Christian to divine contemplation.⁴⁶ Or as he also says: "Prayer then becomes continuous, like the beating of our heart, like our pulse. Without this presence of God, there is no contemplative life. And without contemplative life, our working for Christ is worth very little, for vain is the builder's toil if the house is not of the Lord's building."⁴⁷

2. Ordinary life as the sphere of sanctification

There are many references to the sanctification of a Christian's ordinary life in the writings and preaching of Blessed Josemaría.⁴⁸ It is there, in the midst of one's ordinary occupations, that one is called to strive for holiness. In his homily "Working for God," he cites a well-known passage from the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus*: "Savor these words of an anonymous author of those times, who sums up the grandeur of our vocation as follows: Christians, he writes, 'are for the world what the soul is for the body. They live in the world, but they are not worldly, like the soul is in the body, but is not corporeal. They live among all peoples, like the soul is in all parts of the body... And it is not lawful for Christians to abandon their mission in the world, just as the soul may not separate itself voluntarily from the body.'"⁴⁹ Thus it is in the sphere of one's ordinary life that a Christian has to put into practice the means that will enable him to carry out his sanctifying task.⁵⁰

a) Sanctification in family life

The early Christian families are seen by Blessed Josemaría as a model for families today.⁵¹ "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

44. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 116.

45. *Ibid.*, no. 8.

46. *Ibid.*, no. 107.

47. *Ibid.*, no. 8.

48. A quick glance at his homilies published in *Christ Is Passing By* and *Friends of God* is sufficient to reach this conclusion.

49. *Friends of God*, no. 63. The quotation reproduced in the text is taken from the *Epistle to Diognetus*, 6 (*The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 362.).

50. Cf. M. A. Tabet, "La santificación en la propia situación de vida. Comentario exegético a 1 Cor 7, 17-24," in *Romana* (1988/1) 169-176; Giuseppe Dalla Torre, "Christians, the life of the world," in *Holiness and the World*, op. cit., pp. 191-210.

51. Cf. Josemaría Escrivá, "Marriage, a Christian Vocation," in *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 22-38. See also Cormac Burke, "El Beato Josemaría Escrivá y el matrimonio: Camino humano y vocación sobrenatural," in *Romana* 19 (1994/2) 374-384; F. Gil Hellín, "La vida familiar, camino de santidad," in *Romana* 20 (1995/1) 224-236; B. Castilla Cortázar, "Consideraciones sobre la antropología 'varón-mujer' en las enseñanzas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá," in *Romana* 21 (1995/2) 434-447. On the concept of the family in this period see

and who cooperated in the apostolate of St. 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."⁵²

When asked in an interview about the importance of teaching children to lead a life of piety, Blessed Josemaría answered: "I think it is precisely the best way to give children a truly Christian upbringing. Scripture tells us about those early Christian families which drew new strength and new life from the light of the Gospel. St. Paul calls them 'the church in the household' (1 Cor 16:19)."⁵³

He inculcated in his children the essential need for Opus Dei's family spirit. "All of us who belong to Opus Dei, my children, form a single home. The reason that we constitute a single family is not based on the fact of living beneath a single roof. Like the early Christians, we are *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32). No one in the Work should ever feel the bitterness of indifference."⁵⁴ This strong sense of unity is closely linked to understanding the Work as a part of the Church,⁵⁵ which tries to be faithful to its specific vocation.⁵⁶

But at the same time that he vigorously stresses the unity of the Work, Blessed Josemaría points to the need to establish small Christian communities — the "church in the household" or "domestic churches" of St. Paul — around a few families. "In this way," he wrote, "we will form small Christian communities at all levels of society, which are a true source of fraternal life and charity, of evangelical love."⁵⁷

Virginity embraced as a state of life *propter regnum caelorum*.⁵⁸ was also found

A. de Mier Vélez, "Aspectos relativos al término 'familia' en el cristianismo antiguo," in *Religión y Cultura* 30 (1994) 437-463.

52. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 30. In another place he quotes a text from Tertullian (*Ad uxorem*, II, 8, 6 [CCL 1, 393-394]) that describes the excellence of Christian marriage (*Ibid.*, no. 29).

53. *Conversations*, no. 103. In the New Testament we find references to several "churches in the household" or "domestic churches": the one that gathered in the house of Stephen (1 Cor 1:16); in the house of Philemon (*Philem* 2); in the house of Cornelius (*Acts* 16:15); that of Lydia (*Acts* 16:31); that of Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:16). The activity of St. Ignatius of Antioch also must have been carried out house by house (cf. *Smyrneans*, XIII, 1 [Fpatr 1, 178-180]). This situation lasted throughout the second century, as Justin testifies. In the Acts of his martyrdom, when questioned by the Prefect Rusticus about the place where Christians gather, Justin answered "Wherever each one prefers and is able to" (*Acta Justiniani et soc*, III, 1 [BAC 75,312]).

54. *Letter May 6, 1945*, no. 23.

55. The specific expression that the Founder of Opus Dei used to define the Work was: "Opus Dei is a small portion of the Church." Pedro Rodríguez, "The Place of Opus Dei in the Church," in Pedro Rodríguez, Fernando Ocariz, and Jose Luis Illanes, *Opus Dei in the Church*, (Scepter, Princeton, 1994), p. 1.

56. Cf. *Instruction, May-1935*, no. 1.

57. *Ibid.*, no. 85. This passage of the *Instruction* is supplemented by note 155 written by Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, which explains its meaning: "This is a question, really, of a return to the early times of Christianity, when the faithful were *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32). Embued with this *evangelical affection*, they gathered in each others' homes, to give praise and thanksgiving to God; to receive instruction, listening to the word of God, explained in a manner appropriate to each *little community*; and to make plans for apostolate and proselytism. These are precisely the purposes of the gatherings in the homes of our Supernumerary brothers, a *true fountain of fraternal life and charity*."

58. On virginity and asceticism in the early centuries, see T. Camelot, *Virgines Christi: La virginité aux*

in the Christian families of the first centuries.⁵⁹ The early Christians who lived as virgins did so in their own home surroundings, without separating themselves from the world.⁶⁰ The Founder of Opus Dei referred to this precedent in an *Instruction* addressed to his children:

“Before they place us,” he said, “in this juridical mold, they have to realize, and we must too, that the first Christian faithful, including those ascetics and virgins who personally dedicated their lives to the service of the Church, did not close themselves up in a convent. They remained in the midst of the world like their fellow men and women. This is our case, since there is no reason to differentiate ourselves in anything from our companions and fellow citizens.”⁶¹

And a little further on, in the same *Instruction*, he explains why some members of Opus Dei live celibacy: “Always remember that it is Love, the Love of loves, that is the reason for our celibacy. We are not bachelors, because the confirmed bachelor is a sad creature who knows nothing about love.”⁶² Celibacy, he says elsewhere, provides “greater freedom of heart and of movement, to dedicate oneself permanently to conducting and supporting apostolic undertakings. This is also true in the lay apostolate.”⁶³

There is abundant testimony that in the first centuries of Christianity the ordinary faithful undertook a life of celibacy and virginity for the same reasons that Blessed Josemaría mentions here.⁶⁴

b) Holiness in social life

Blessed Josemaría saw in the varied make-up of society rich possibilities of sanctity for Christians living in all epochs, beginning with the first Christians. He wrote in one of his *Letters*: “Just as among the first followers of Christ, all of current-day society is present in our Supernumeraries, and always will be. There are intellectuals and businessmen; professional people and craftsmen; entrepreneurs and workers; diplomats and people engaged in commerce, finance, journalism,

premiers siècles de l'église. Paris, 1944; J. Joubert, “La virginité ou les vrais noces” in Revue de Droit Canonique 40 (1990) 117-133.

59. Cf. Mt 19:12. Virginity and celibacy were very much esteemed in the early Church. We could mention some statements by Clement of Rome, *Epístola Corintios*, I, 38, 2 (Fpatr 4,120); Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrneans*, XIII, 1 (Fpatr 1,176-180); Hermas, *Pastor*, *Visiones* I, 2, 4, II, 3, 2 (Fpatr. 6,66,78); *Semblances*, IX, 29, 1; IX, 31, 3 (Fpatr 6,274; 276-278); (CSEL 2,44-45); Cyprian, *On the attire of virgins*, 3-6 (CSEL 3/1, 189-192); Methodius of Olympus, *The Banquet*, *The Hymn* (SC 95, 310-321).

60. The birth of monasticism, with its consequent separation from the world, is a later phenomenon which had its origin at the end of the 3rd century. (cf. L. Bouyer, *La spiritualité du Nouveau Testament et des Pères*, Aubier, Paris, 1966, p. 369).

61. *Instruction*, December 8, 1941, no. 81.

62. *Ibid.*, no. 84.

63. *Conversations*, no. 92.

64. As a sample we could cite what Athenagoras wrote in the second century: “It is even easy to find

agriculture, entertainment and sports. There are young and old, healthy and sick. It is a marvelous "unorganized" organization, like life itself. There is also true and authentic specialization in apostolate because all honest and noble human occupations can become apostolic and divine."⁶⁵

Those familiar with the writings of the Founder of Opus Dei will see in these words the central reality that has to be sanctified according to the spirit of Opus Dei: ordinary work.⁶⁶ As we read in *Furrow*: "You say it helps you a lot to wonder how many businessmen have become saints since the time of the early Christians. And you want to show that it is also possible today. Our Lord will not abandon you in that effort."⁶⁷

We see here, as in many other areas, that Blessed Josemaría, after pointing to the example of the early Christians, immediately relates it to men and women of today. His interest in the first followers of Christ, much more than purely "theoretical," is driven by his apostolic eagerness to reach as many souls as possible. "The man of faith sees life, in all its dimensions, from a new perspective: that which is given us by God... That is the reason why you must strive for holiness... contributing at the same time to the sanctification of others, your fellow men; sanctifying your work and your environment."⁶⁸

Although we have already alluded to it, it is perhaps useful here to recall the immense difficulties the early faithful had to overcome in the cultural and political atmosphere of the Roman empire. These included persecution⁶⁹ and martyrdom⁷⁰ throughout a period of three centuries; attacks by the intellectual élite, especially by Fronton of Cirta, Celsus and Porphyry;⁷¹ ridicule by authors such as Lucian;⁷² condemnation by

many men and women among us who have reached old age as celibates, in the hope of attaining a greater intimacy with God" (*Legation*, 33).

65. *Letter of January 9, 1959*, no. 11.

66. On the sanctification of work in the teaching of Blessed Josemaría, see: Jose Luis Illanes, *The Sanctification of Work*, Four Courts, Dublin, 1983; Id. "Work, Justice, Charity" in *Holiness and the World*, pp. 211-242; J. M. Aubert, "La Santificación del trabajo" in *Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, pp. 215-224; P.P. Donati, "El significado del trabajo en la investigación sociológica actual y el espíritu del Opus Dei," in *Romana* 22 (1996/1) 122-134. On work and the spirituality of the early Christians: S. Felici (Ed.), *Spiritualità del lavoro nella catechesi dei Padri del III-IV secolo*, (Biblioteca de Scienze Religiose 75), LAS, Rome 1986; A. Quacquarelli, "L'educazione al lavoro: dall'antica comunità cristiana al monachesimo primitivo" in *Vetera Christianorum* 25 (1988) 149-163.

67. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, Scepter, New York, 1988, no. 490.

68. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 46. The entire homily "In Joseph's Workshop" summarizes concisely the teaching of Opus Dei's founder on the sanctification of work: cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 39-56.

69. Cf. P. Allard, *Histoire des persécutions pendant les deux premiers siècles*, 2 vols., 3rd ed., Gabalda, Paris 1903-1905; T. Baumeister, "Mártires y perseguidos en el cristianismo primitivo," in *Concilium* (E) 19 (1983) 312-320; J. Siat, "La persécution des chrétiens au début du IIe s. d'après la lettre de Plinie le Jeune et la réponse de Trajan en 112," in *Études Classiques* 63 (1995) 161-170.

70. Cf. L. Cignelli, "Significato del martirio: Pensieri dei Padri della Chiesa," in *Studi Francescani* 92 (1995) 19-41.

71. Cf. P. de Labriolle, *La réaction païenne. Étude sur la polemique antichrétienne du Ier au VIe siècle*, Artisan du livre, Paris 1948; D. Ramos-Lissón, "Alegorismo pagano y alegorismo cristiano en Orígenes. La polémica contra Celso," in A. González Blanco (Ed.), *Cristianismo y aculturación en tiempos del Imperio Romano*, in *Antigüedad y Cristianismo* (Murcia) 7 (1990) 125-136.

72. Lucian, *De morte Peregrini*, Loeb Classical, Harvard University Press-William Heinemann, Cambridge Mass. and London, 1962, Lucian, V, pp. 1-51.

public opinion;⁷³ accusations of atheism, foreign cults, charlatanism, magic, cannibalism, etc.⁷⁴ The Christian response, although varied in its details, is unequivocal: to proclaim the truth, fulfilling Christ's command,⁷⁵ even if this leads to death.

3. Apostolic expansion

Proclaiming Christ's truth was the early Christians' great mission. Therefore it was also one of the great attractions that Blessed Josemaría found in them. For him this apostolic zeal was an example for those of our time as well: "To follow in Christ's footsteps, today's apostle does not need to reform anything, but even less has he to take no part in the contemporary affairs going on around him. He has only to act as the first Christians did, and give life to his environment."⁷⁶

The Founder of Opus Dei, as did the early Christians, saw in religious ignorance one of the greatest obstacles confronting the spread of the faith.⁷⁷ "In our life we are repeating the life of the early Christians. We too will often find on our way the most dismal religious ignorance, which demands of us a deep and constant apostolate of doctrine. And this not only among the pagans of our time, but also among more than a few who would be upset if we did not call them Catholics."⁷⁸

The apostolic efforts of the first Christians was based on the personal apostolate of each of our first brothers and sisters in the faith.⁷⁹

"This is how the first Christians acted. Their supernatural vocation did not provide them with social or human programs to carry out. But they were penetrated by a spirit, by a conception of life and the world, that could not fail to have consequences in regard to the society in which they moved.

"With a personal apostolate similar to our own, they went about making converts. During his captivity, Paul was already sending greetings to the churches from the Christians who lived in *Caesar's household* (Phil 4:22). Doesn't St. Paul's letter to Philemon move you? It is a living testimony of how the heaven of Christ,

73. An echo of this condemnation is found in Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, III, 1 (CCL 1,91).

74. Cf. H. Leclercq, "Accusations contre les chrétiens," in *Dictionnaire D'Archeologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* 1, 265 and ff.

75. Mk 16: 15. We also have the witness of the Christian apologists of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. As an example of this we can cite a text from Aristides: "[The Christians] are ready to give their lives for Christ because they keep his commandments firmly, living justly and in a holy way according to what they were commanded by the Lord God, always giving thanks for food and drink and for all other goods.... This is indeed the way of truth which leads those who travel it to the eternal kingdom promised by Christ in the life to come." (*Apología*, XV, 10-11 [BAC 116, 131]).

76. Furrow, no. 320. The same idea is expressed in *The Way*, no. 376.

77. St. Clement of Alexandria already realized in his epoch that "the only evil is ignorance" (*Stromata*, VI, 113, 3 [GCS 52,488]).

78. *Letter of August 1953*, no. 19. The need to teach doctrine also led him to consider the field of public opinion in this regard (*Letter of April 30, 1946*, no. 73).

79. Cf. G. Bardy, *Conversion to Christianity During the First Centuries*, cit., pp. 294-307.

without directly intending it, had given a new meaning, through the influence of charity, to the structures of that society based on slavery? (cf. *Philem* 8-12; *Eph* 6:5ff; *Col* 3:22-25; *1 Tim* 6:1 and 2; *1 Pet* 2:18ff).

"Tertullian, a little more than a century later, wrote: *We are of yesterday and already we fill the world and all your places: the cities, the islands, the towns, the municipalities, the councils, the very army camps, the tribunals, the assemblies, the palace, the senate, the forum. We have left you only your temples* (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 37)." ⁸⁰

Although these words of Tertullian have to be taken with some caution, given the African writer's *vehementia cordis*, it is beyond doubt that the expansion of Christianity by the end of the second and the beginning of the third century was very extensive, within the confines of the Roman Empire.⁸¹ Blessed Josemaría sees in Tertullian's words an example of the efficacy of the personal apostolate practiced by our first brothers and sisters in the faith.

Personal apostolate means giving witness with one's own life to the faith that one professes. This subject has deep biblical⁸² and patristic roots,⁸³ and touches upon a capital point of the Christian message: the consistency between faith and practice in the life of Christ's follower. As Blessed Josemaría wrote about his married children: "Thus, with a silent and almost invisible personal apostolate, they bring to all social sectors, public and private, the witness of a life similar to that of the first Christian faithful."⁸⁴

But we must not forget that Christian witness is nourished and fostered by charity. This is how Blessed Josemaría put it in his 1967 homily, *The Strength of Love*: "How well the early Christians practiced this ardent charity which went far beyond the limits of mere human solidarity or natural kindness. They loved one another, through the heart of Christ, with a love both tender and strong. Tertullian, writing in the second century, tells us how impressed the pagans were by the behavior of the faithful at that time. So attractive was it both supernaturally and humanly that they often remarked; 'See how they love one another' (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 39, 7 (PL 1,471))."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, witness has to be accompanied by words, as we see in the life of Christ himself. Inspired by his example, the first Christian generations learned to carry out a personal apostolate of dialogue.⁸⁶ As the Founder of Opus Dei told his children:

80. Letter of January 9, 1959, no. 22.

81. Cf. K. Baus, *Manual de Historia de la Iglesia*, directed by H. Jedin, I, (Sp. trans.), Herder, Barcelona 1966, pp. 311-319.

82. Cf. *Mt* 5: 16; *Jas* 2:17.

83. Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Magnesianis*, 4, *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 97-98; *Ephesians* 10, *Ibid.*, p. 92.

84. *Instruction for the Work of St. Gabriel*, May, 1935, no. 94.

85. *Friends of God*, no. 225.

86. Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, "El diálogo entre el poder político romano y los cristianos, según la literatura martirial de los tres primeros siglos," in D. Ramos-Lissón (ed.), *El diálogo Fe-Cultura en la Antigüedad cristiana*, Eunat, Pamplona 1996, pp. 199-225.

"We could continue turning the pages of the Gospel and consider so many conversations that Jesus had with men and women: his whole life was a continual dialogue in search of souls. The first Twelve, in preaching the Gospel, carried on a marvelous conversation with all the people that they met, that they sought out, on their journeys and apostolic travels. There would be no Church today if the apostles had not undertaken this supernatural dialogue with all those souls. For Christian apostolate comes down to this: *ergo fides ex auditu, auditus autem per verbum Christi* (Rom 10:17); faith comes from hearing, and hearing from preaching the word of Christ.

"How well the first Christian generations understood this, whom I like to speak about so much, because they are a model for our vocation!"⁸⁷

Blessed Josemaría expresses his admiration for another example of the apostolic efforts of the first Christian generation in his homily *That All May be Saved*:

"This is a good moment to recall an event that shows the wonderful apostolic zeal of the early Christians. Scarcely a quarter of a century had passed since Jesus had gone up to heaven and his fame was already being spread in many cities and towns. In the city of Ephesus a man arrived, Apollo by name, 'an eloquent man, well grounded in the Scriptures. He had had instruction in the name of the Lord; and, with a spirit full of zeal, used to preach and teach about the life of Jesus accurately enough, although he knew of no baptism except that of John' (Acts 18:24-25).

"A glimmer of Christ's light had already filtered into the mind of this man. He had heard about our Lord and he passed the news on to others. But he still had some way to go. He needed to know more if he was to acquire the fullness of the faith and so come to love our Lord truly. A Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla, hear him speaking. They are not inactive or indifferent. They do not think: 'This man already knows enough; it's not our business to teach him.' They were souls who were really eager to do apostolate and so they approached Apollo and 'made friends with him, and gave him a fuller explanation of the way of the Lord' (Acts 18:26)."⁸⁸

The Founder of Opus Dei's commentary on this passage from the Acts of the Apostles shows his admiration for the vigorous and determined apostolic zeal of these two early Christians. The same determination is seen also in the martyrs, who take advantage of this ultimate moment to bring even their persecutors to Christ.⁸⁹

Personal apostolate, since it is based on love, will also be marked by the enthusiasm proper to one who has discovered the immense riches of the Christian message. In this regard Blessed Josemaría writes: "I think so highly of your devotion to the early Christians that I will do all I can to foster it, so that you — like

87. Letter of October 24, 1965, n. 13.

88. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, no 269.

89. As an example we can recall the martyr Potamiana, who won the conversion of Basilides, a soldier, on her way to martyrdom, as Eusebius of Caesarea relates. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia eclesiástica*, VI, 5. Cf. D. Ramos-Lissón, "La conversion personnelle dans la littérature des martyrs dans l'antiquité chrétienne (I-III siècles)," in *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997) 101-108

them — will put more enthusiasm each day into that effective apostolate of discretion and confidence.”⁹⁰

One final question is that of the results of all apostolic endeavors. Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá answers with great realism, based on the assurance of his own experience: “The effectiveness of our apostolate always depends on our effort to be saints. And sanctity today requires the same means as in the time of the early Christians: there are no others.”⁹¹

Concluding summary

A first impression that arises from reading the above texts from Blessed Josemaría is their almost direct contact with Christ’s earliest followers. One has the sensation of having overcome the barrier of time. The freshness and warmth of his references shows that the Founder of Opus Dei has found a deep affinity between his own spiritual experiences and the model they represent. The same is true of his commentaries on Scripture passages, especially those from the Acts of the Apostles, that feature the apostolic steps of Christ’s first followers.

The witness of the early faithful regarding the sanctification of ordinary work shows a Christian life that combines the attractiveness of something newly born with the total response our Lord required of his followers. Blessed Josemaría was fully convinced that the call to sanctity in the first century was the same as in our days, not only in regard to its intrinsic nature, but also in regard to the means needed to attain it. The same is true of the demands of Christian life. The holiness lived by our first brothers and sisters in the faith was based on baptism, which brought with it a radical dedication that led them even to the point of martyrdom. Blessed Josemaría also stresses that the first Christians were called to holiness in the midst of the world, that is to say, in their ordinary life and among people of all social states, and often amid serious political and social upheavals. It is this fullness of Christian life that Msgr. Escrivá sees reflected in the faithful of Opus Dei.

In the early Christians’ apostolic efforts, Blessed Josemaría found a clear model for our own times, validated by the positive results attained in the first three centuries. We see in our first brothers and sisters in the faith the marvelous witness of people who lived Christ’s message in all its demands, and who communicated it from person to person in their own family and social environment.

90. *The Way*, no. 971. An example of the zeal of the early Christians is that found in St. Luke’s story of Cleophas and his companion from Emmaus, which gave rise to point 917 of *The Way*: “*Nonne cor nostrum ardens erat in nobis, dum loqueretur in via?*” “Was not our heart burning within us, while he spoke to us on the way?”

“If you are an apostle, these words of the disciples of Emmaus should rise spontaneously to the lips of your professional companions when they meet you along the ways of their lives.”

91. *Letter of March 19, 1967*, no. 139.