

Woman in the Divine Economy: From the Church Fathers to St. Josemaría

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In a homily on the Blessed Virgin, St. Josemaría Escrivá speaks of the “logic of God” (la lógica de Dios). He says that when we meditate on Mary’s assent to God and the hidden and ordinary sacrifices of her day, we understand better the logic of God. As he uses the phrase, the logic of God has something to do with the paradox of our lives having supernatural value through small daily sacrifices. Sharing in the divine, being as like to God as a human being can be, comes about through sacrifices that are in worldly terms insignificant, mean or mundane, perhaps fraught with weakness or unattractive. St. Josemaría goes on to say, “To become God-like, to be divinized, we must begin by being very human, accepting from God our condition as ordinary men and sanctifying its apparent worthlessness.”² God’s logic thus is worked out through everyday life and is the route to our being like Him.

This passage, I will argue, is a particularly revealing example of a theme present throughout the writings of St. Josemaría and dependent on the early Fathers of the Church.³ This theme is the economy (*oikonomia*) of salvation (economía divina, in Escrivá’s words). This theme has acquired great general significance and wide connotation in Catholic theology. In contrast to this wide ocean of implication, it is the precision with which St. Josemaría characterizes the economy of salvation that traces a specific connection between his thought and the Church Fathers. Because of the role of Mary, *Theotokos*—the one who bore God—in the formulation of economy, a particularly good way to approach his thought on women is to begin with this theme in his writing. The exploration of this theme shows that Escrivá’s

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2. “The Blessed Virgin, Cause of Our Joy,” *Christ is Passing By* (Princeton: Scepter), 172. References to the homilies are by marginal numbers given in the text, not by page numbers of the edition consulted. For references within the text, *PB* = *Christ is Passing By* and *FG* = *Friends of God*.

3. In this paper, I will draw in particular on the Greek Fathers of Asia Minor and Alexandria: Ignatius of Antioch (1st century), Irenaeus (2nd) who traveled to Lyons from Asia Minor, Clement of Alexandria (2nd-3rd), and the Cappadocian brothers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa (3rd). I draw on ideas from different writers because this was the manner of St. Josemaría’s own recourse to the Fathers in the expression of his theology in his homilies. Because of the doctrinal centrality of *oikonomia*, there is a certain theological simplicity to its expression in different thinkers, and consistency in the development of the idea in the Greek writers. Among the Latin Fathers, Tertullian is notable for his development of the doctrine in relation to the Trinity. He uses the terms *oeconomia*, *dispensatio*, and *dispositio*. See his *Against Praxeas*, ch. 2 and 3.

thought on the subject of women is integrated into his theology and spirituality in general. It hinges on Mary's role in the divine economy, but she is an example not just for women but for all. The graced human nature of the woman is thus integral to his whole conception of the lay mentality. One implication of this is that his theology treats men and women very much alike, as children of God. We might think that this is not news. But given the tendency in present-day theology to highlight the differences in the psychology of men and women, it is important to note that this was not St. Josemaría's starting point.⁴ What I shall present is, I think, the background that should be brought to an evaluation of other things that Escrivá says about women. I will address two specific things he says concerning women as I conclude.

The economy of salvation according to the Greek Fathers

St. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and St. Irenaeus of Lyons were among the earliest Christian thinkers who used the term *oikonomia* to describe the dispensation—or distribution—of the persons of the Trinity in relation to the Son's salvific action in the world.⁵ *Oikonomia* has to do, not with the mystery of God's inner Trinitarian life, but with the ways that God reveals Himself to man.⁶ The word, *oikonomia*—from *oikos*, house or home, and *nomos*, usage, custom, or law—originally meant the art of household management. In the Hellenistic period, the term was applied variously to a man's management of his property, to a wife's management of a household, or to the good ordering of the cosmos. It also had a connotation of an environment in which the management of something complex could be successful.⁷ *Oikonomia* was used by Greek grammarians to refer to the organization of a poem or to the arrangement of a plot, so that the story is convincing or achieves its denouement.⁸ The use of the term by Christian thinkers in relation to God's intervention

4. Development of the theological significance of women's differences from men is an important topic. For a treatment of the range of feminist thought on this question and a Thomistic development of the epistemology of women's ways of knowing, see Pia Francesca de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas's Mens Through a Sexually Differentiated Epistemology* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2000).

5. Hippolytus (3rd century) uses the word 'persons' (*prosôpa*) for the Father and Son, describing the Holy Spirit as a "third economy" (*Contra Noetum* XIV [Migne, *PG*, vol. 10, 820-21]).

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.), 236. An extension of this basic meaning of economy is doctrinal leniency or ecclesiastical dispensation. This is because Christian *oikonomia* has to do with God giving assistance in overcoming human limitation. On this topic, see the articles in *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6, no. 1 (1987), in particular "'Oikonomia' as Doctrinal Leniency and Intercommunion in the Church Fathers," by Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain, pp. 15-19.

7. See Carlo Natali, "Oikonomia in Hellenistic Political Thought," in *Justice and Generosity: Studies in Hellenistic Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. André Laks and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 97-102. In political writing after Aristotle, the term had a wide connotation of management of political affairs, division of wealth, or the apportionment of any complex situation. *Oikonomia* was conceived as a craft, activity that involved design or planning, but it also came to have ethical connotations concerned with what constitutes wise use of resources or what should be sought at all as the end of practical action.

8. Robert Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 53-54. Grant traces Irenaeus' appropriation of the term to Greek rhetoric. Irenaeus uses the term *oikonomia* (in Latin versions, *dispositio*) very frequently in connection with his notion of Christ's recapitulation or summing up of human history. The word for recapitulation (*anakephalaïôsis*) is allied with *oikonomia* in Greek rhetoric. See also Adh mar d'Al mar, "Le Mot *oikonomia* dans la langue th ologique de Saint Ir n e," *Revue des  tudes grecques* 32 (1919): 1-9.

in human history originates with Paul. In *Ephesians* 1:10, Paul uses the term to refer to God's management of salvation history, the summing up (*anakephalaiôsis*) of all things in Christ, thing both in heaven and on the earth. In *Ephesians* 3:9, Paul speaks of this management of the mystery of salvation as being brought to light after having been for ages hidden in God.⁹ An important aspect of God's economy and a prominent theme of the Church Fathers, was that the full meaning of the Old Testament was unperceived until Christ entered the world. Now we see that, in accordance with God's management, Jesus the Christ is the second Adam. The Incarnation and Resurrection are thus God's scheme or device for redeeming man and nature. *Oikonomia* refers to a syntax or logic of redemption that reflects God's own voluntary observance of the rules of natural life He instituted at creation.

Mary and the reason for the Incarnation

A very early formulation of the economy of salvation is the following one from St. Ignatius, second bishop of Antioch after Peter and a martyr of the 1st century:

For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary, according to the economy of God, of the seed of David, but by the Holy Spirit.

*Ho gar Theos hêmôn Iêsous ho Christos ekuophorêthê hupo Marias kat'oikonomian Theou ek spermatis men Daveid, pneumatos de hagiou.*¹⁰

It might seem that only the presence of the word *oikonomia* in this passage distinguishes it from any cursory statement of the basic belief of Christians. What is important, however, is that this statement is a formula of how God performed or brought about the redemption of mankind. It states an action, the entrance into nature and history of the second Person of the Trinity, that implies an achievement, the redemption. There are parts to the plan of redemption, tasks, so to speak, that are apportioned to different persons, Jesus, Mary, David, and the Holy Spirit. Redemption is thus articulated into parts, and this formula makes sense of the relation of the parts. Lacking in this formula is a reference to the second Person of the Trinity as the *Logos*, Word. Following the Gospel of John, the Church Fathers used this term for the relation of the Son to the Father before or apart from the Incarnation. The *Logos* is appropriately one part of the formula of redemption. Ignatius' formulation does include the central role of Mary in the economy of salvation. God assumed flesh and entered history by being born not made—that is, in the way most fitting to human life. The significance given to Mary's role in this formula by the Fathers is clear in their discussions of the right preposition to use for her God-bearing. The Greek preposition, *hupo*, in St. Ignatius' formulation, can have a connotation of

9. *Oikonomia* is also used to refer to God's plan at I Timothy 1:4. Other uses of the word in the New Testament connote household management (Luke 16:2-4) or individual stewardship (I Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 3:2, Colossians 1:25).

10. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, XVIII (*The Epistles of St. Ignatius*, ed. T.W. Crafer [New York: MacMillan, 1919]). The formula itself goes back to Paul, Galatians 4:4.

causal or personal agency. It is combined with the word for being pregnant, *kuophoreô*, to describe Mary's conceiving. Christ was conceived and carried in the womb by Mary. St. Basil later insists that we should not say Christ was born *dia gunaikos*—by means of a woman—but rather *ek gunaikos*—of or out of a woman—so that it is clear He was indeed her son and did not simply pass through her body.¹¹ The point is, of course, to maintain with clarity that Christ is both God and fully human—as St. Josemaría repeatedly says, using the formulation of the Athanasian Creed, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*. Scholars point to the Christological controversies of the early Church as the context for this discussion of Mary, but emphasis should also be placed on the understanding, emerging during this period of time, of the reason for this manner of redemption. This reason is made precise in the Fathers' formulation of *oikonomia*.

Roughly put, God redeemed mankind in this way to preserve creation, which was itself good. In *The Great Catechism*, Gregory of Nyssa addresses the question of why God chose this form of redemption. Against those who say it is demeaning to God to take on the weakness and humiliation of the human state, Gregory says that

... in the whole nature of things, one thing only is disgraceful, and that is vicious weakness (*to kata kakian pathos*); while whatever has no connection with vice is a stranger to all disgrace; and whatever has no mixture in it of disgrace is certainly to be found on the side of the beautiful; and what is really beautiful has in it no mixture of its opposite. Now whatever is to be regarded as coming within the sphere of the beautiful becomes the character of God (*prepei tõi Theôi*). Either, then, let them show that there was viciousness in His birth, His bringing up, His growth, His progress to the perfection of His nature, His experience of death and return from death; or, if they allow that the aforesaid circumstances of His life remain outside the sphere of viciousness, they will perforce admit that there is nothing of disgrace in this that is foreign to viciousness.¹²

Notable in this passage is the catalogue of natural events in Christ's life. Such a catalogue appears in many formulations of divine economy among the Fathers. In this case, the catalogue highlights the fact that the circumstances of Christ's birth and life were among the goods of nature given to humans. Gregory says later in *The Great Catechism*,

If you take away from life the benefits that come to us from God, you would not be able to tell me what means you have of arriving at any knowledge of Deity. In the kindly treatment of us we recognize the benefactor;

11. *De Spiritu Sancto* 5, 12 (Migne, PG 32, 85B-C).

12. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co, 1893), vol.V., ch. IX (*Oratio catechetica*, Migne, vol. 45, 41A).

that is, from observation of that which happens to us, we conjecture the disposition of the person who operates it (ch. XV).

This is a description of a *posteriori* argument from the nature of things to God's nature. The clues to God's goodness present in nature are a favorite theme of Gregory, and this theme depends on the integrity and trustworthiness of human experience. Gregory begins his explanation of the reason for the Incarnation with a robust confidence in the goodness of the natural forms of human life.

In Gregory's understanding, Christ reunited the human soul and body separated by the first sin, restoring the good human nature. Just as Adam's sin had extended to all of humanity, the principle of the Resurrection extends from one man to the whole human race (ch. XVII). For Gregory, the Incarnation and the Passion had to be taken together to understand the manner of redemption. It is evidence of God's *oikonomia* and its revelation through nature and history that He did not prevent the dissolution of Christ's body in death. Instead, he brought soul and body back together in the resurrection, overcoming death. If it is asked why God did not redeem humankind by a simple fiat of will, Gregory replies that the sick cannot dictate to their physicians the measures for their healing (ch. XVII). God's economy is a regimen of healing. That Christ is our Physician was also a formulation of St. Ignatius. He uses this description of Christ to emphasize that He is "possessed both of flesh and spirit . . . both from Mary and from God (*kai ek Marias kai ek Theou*)."¹³ Thus, calling Christ physician emphasizes God's cooperation with nature and the humanity of Christ's origin. It also shows that God's *oikonomia* is known to us in the manner of *technê*, a craft like medicine or mechanics. A *technê* follows the contours of nature to overcome nature. A lever or pulley overcomes weight through a particular arrangement of forces. A physician draws on the healing power of the body to overcome sickness. In the case of God's economy, He accomplishes through nature what we could not achieve on our own, the overcoming of Adam's sin.

Redemption and the events of everyday life

Most crafts have a workshop, a place where the material task is acted out and accomplished. St. Basil says that the workshop (*ergastêrion*) of this healing *oikonomia* was the body (*sôma*) of Mary.¹⁴ St. Irenaeus explains vividly what it was that Christ needed from the Virgin Mary:

And if he had received nothing from Mary, he would never have taken foods derived from the earth; after fasting forty days like Moses and Elijah he would not have felt hunger because his body needed food; John his dis-

13. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, ch. VII.

14. Basil, *In sanctam Christi generationem* 3 (Migne, PG 31, 1464A).

ciple would not have written of him: “Jesus sat, wearied from the journey” (John 4:6); . . . He would not have wept over Lazarus (John 11:35); he would not have sweated drops of blood (Luke 22:44); he would not have said “My soul grieves” (Matthew 26:38), nor would blood and water have come forth from his pierced side (John 19:34). All these are signs of flesh taken from the earth, which he recapitulated in himself, saving what he had formed.¹⁵

We see once more, in Irenaeus’ account, the catalogue of natural events in a life, understood now in terms of their purpose of redemption. In this connection, Irenaeus refers to Mary as the one who untied the “knot” (*nodus*) of Eve’s disobedience.¹⁶ The image of untying a knot bespeaks the order necessary for redemption by means of nature and the very specific steps that must be taken to accomplish it: “For what has been tied cannot be loosed unless one reverses the ties of the knot so that the first ties are undone by the second, and the second free the first”¹⁷ Christ had to recapitulate human history begun by Adam to bring about our salvation, St. Irenaeus says, but Mary had to *reverse* the disobedience of Eve. Thus, there is an inner logic to the redemption discernible to us as how the job would be done by a supernatural physician working with the materials of nature. Mary’s humanity, her flesh (*sarx*), is indispensable to the Physician’s plan, because he means to preserve the material and spiritual nature of the human being as a unitary whole.

In sum, God saved humankind through an economy appropriate to man’s material nature. For this reason, the forms into which human life by nature falls are significant for salvation. Gregory specifically mentions, in catalogue form, Jesus’ birth, growth from infancy to maturity, eating and drinking, fatigue and sleep, sorrow and tears, as well as the events of his Passion—to insist that God’s contact with human nature is not demeaning. God not only restored human nature, however. The second person of the Trinity perfected human nature by being free of the passions that tend toward vice while taking on the natural experiences that constitute the full goodness of human beings as human.¹⁸ This means that not only are the ordinary forms of life significant for salvation but because God lived them as a human being, they are ennobled and made more valuable in themselves. This is a splendid scheme indeed because, subsequent to the Son’s entrance into history, this bettered human condition is available to every person. To produce a catalogue parallel to Gregory’s—being born, living by belief, perception, and knowledge, creating, achiev-

15. *Adversus haereses* 3.22 (trans. by Grant [note 8], p. 139-40).

16. “Sic autem et Evae inobedientiae nodus solutionem accepit per obedientiam Mariae. Quod enim alligavit virgo Eva per incredulitatem, hoc virgo Maria solvit per fidem.” *Adversus haereses* 3, ch.22 (Migne, *PG* 7, 959D-60A).

17. Irenaeus 3.22 (Grant, p. 140).

18. Gregory addresses this topic in *Contra Eunomium* III.4. For a discussion, see J-R Bouchet, “La vision de l’économie du salut selon S. Grégoire de Nysse,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 52 (1968): p. 635-37.

ing, experiencing pain, loving, marrying, having children, ageing and expecting death—these are all activities suitable to be graced by God.¹⁹

In this connection, we should note Gregory's theme of God's great love for man, *philanthrôpia*, on account of which He assumed the fragility and humiliation of human limitation. The two themes of *oikonomia* and *philanthrôpia* are closely related for Gregory. The Greek word *phileô* means to cleave to or cherish something or someone, to hold a person dear. Prefixed to the word for human being (*anthrôpos*), *philo-* connotes God's holding human beings so dear that He took on flesh to lift human nature out of sin.²⁰ The Incarnation constitutes a new regime in which this merciful love for humans remains in the world. One of the Latin words used to translate *oikonomia* is *dispositio*, a word that acquired in later philosophical Latin the meaning of settled condition or state. Something of this connotation is present in its use to translate *oikonomia*. The sharing of God's nature by the three Divine Persons, the Son and Holy Spirit themselves, and the new condition prevailing after the Incarnation were all referred to by the word *oikonomia* or *dispositio*. They are all stable conditions defining the real. Adopting a modern scientific metaphor, we could say that, for Gregory, we now live in an *atmosphere* of God's loving condescension and mercy that has re-valued human life. As an atmosphere, God's redemptive love surrounds and saturates human beings. Gregory describes the Incarnation as precisely the philanthropic economy (*oikonomia philanthrôpos*).

The philanthropic economy in St. Josemaría's thought

In the theology of St. Josemaría, *oikonomia* and *philanthrôpia* are closely allied. One of the most striking themes in the homilies is the value imparted to human life by God's great love for humankind. Escrivá focuses on the expressions of this love materially and in the terms to which humans are receptive. He writes of how wonderful it is "for God to love with a man's heart" (*PB*, 108). Describing Jesus' "refinement and affection" in his care of his friends—in this case, providing a meal for his friends along the seashore, St. Josemaría says, "All this human behavior is the behavior of God" (*PB*, 109). Recalling it, "we are doing much more than describing a pattern of human behavior; we are discovering God." Echoing one of Gregory's themes, he says:

If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things—good, noble or indifferent—which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked

19. The Church understands the seven sacraments in relation to the stages of natural life. On this topic, see *Catechism*, 1115, 1210-12, 1420-21.

20. See, for instance, Gregory, *Adversus Apollinarem* (Migne PG 45), 1180B-C.

with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death (*PB*, 112).

Twice Escrivá refers to St. Ignatius of Antioch's call "Come to the Father," which he takes as the anticipation of Ignatius' martyrdom.²¹ St. Josemaría says in this context that in the love of God are found "all the noble loves which you had on earth" (*FG*, 221). In this comment on Ignatius, we see the economic Trinity, the relation of Father and Son under the aspect of the intimacy between God and creatures. Loves in the order of nature are noble, because created and because redeemed. Furthermore, they are the means of God's drawing us, like a magnet, to Himself.

In *The Great Catechism*, Gregory emphasizes Christ being our priest and healer. It is because Christ lived an ordinary human life that we have salvation. He goes on to say, however, that whoever desires the good as Christ did must also imitate Him (ch. XXXV). The theme of imitation of Christ and instruction by Him is even stronger in St. Clement of Alexandria, who links both imitation and instruction to God's *philanthropia*. In his *Paedagogus*, Clement says, "The Lord ministers all good and all help, both as man and as God: as God, forgiving our sins, and as man, training us not to sin."²² In this context, Clement says that man is an object desirable in himself. "But what is loveable, and is not also loved by Him? And man has been proved to be loveable; consequently man is loved by God" (I, ch. 3). He develops at length the theme of instruction in relation to being children of God. He insists that being children of God does not imply that our instruction is elementary or childish. Speaking of Christ, Clement says:

But He is perfected by the washing—of baptism—alone, and is sanctified by the descent of the Spirit? Such is the case. The same also takes place in our case, whose exemplar Christ became. Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal. "I," says He, "have said that ye are gods, and all sons of the Highest."²³ This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing . . . (I, ch. 6).

Christ is our teacher precisely by our being now capable of imitating him because of baptism. In the formula of redemption given by St. Ignatius that we considered at the very beginning, another sentence follows concerned with baptism. Ignatius says: "He was born and baptized, that by his Passion he might purify the

21. *Friends of God* (Princeton: Scepter), 221; *Passing By*, 66.

22. *Paedagogus*, I, ch. 3 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905], vol. II).

23. Irenaeus also refers to this passage from *Psalms* (82:6-7), including the last part of it, ". . . You are all gods and sons of the Most High, but you die like men." With Clement, Irenaeus understands the verse as describing the divinization that comes with the new regime of the Incarnation. Those who die have not accepted the gift of adoption (*Adversus haereses* 3.19 [Grant, p. 137]).

water.”²⁴ Baptism is integral to participating in the economy of God’s love. As St. Clement says, “Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons . . .” Referring specifically to St. Clement, St. Josemaría draws on this pattern twice to explain his own injunction to engage in continual prayer. He asks, “Isn’t it true that you have seen the need to become a soul of prayer, to reach an intimacy with God that leads to divinization?” (*PB*, 17), and he quotes St. Clement on imitation, “A man becomes God because he loves whatever God loves.” Quoting St. Clement in another place, St. Josemaría invokes what I have called the atmosphere of God’s *philanthrôpia*. Clement says we are “to praise and honor the Word whom we know to be savior and king; and, through him, the Father, not on special days as some people do, but continually, right through all our life and in every kind of way” (*PB*, 116). As St. Josemaría understands this passage, continual prayer incorporates everything a person does into his imitation of or instruction by Christ, so that the person lives continually in God’s presence. On the Feast of Corpus Christi, Escrivá speaks of Christ’s establishment of the “new covenant.” He says, “Jesus dissolves the old economy of the law and reveals to us that he himself will be the content of our prayer and life.” (*PB*, 152). Here, *philanthrôpia* and the theme of imitation of Christ become indistinguishable.²⁵

The “logic of God” of which St. Josemaría speaks, the way in which ordinary things have supernatural value, follows from the manner of our redemption. God respected the naturalness of human life and established a regime of mercy so beyond expectation as to allow human beings to share in His life. *Oikonomia*, the plan of redemption, is thus both the ordering of a road or path and the logic of a meaningful proposition. The road is the route to the Father through the Son. The meaningful proposition is the sense or internal coherence of God’s redemption of mankind by means of our own nature.

Ordinary life and interior life

Returning to the quote with which we began—to be divinized, we must accept the ordinariness of our lives and sanctify their apparent worthlessness—we notice how St. Josemaría continues: “Thus did Mary live” (*PB*, 172). Escrivá says that, in the “school of intimacy with Christ,” Mary is the best teacher (*PB*, 174). This is because of her mastery of the divine economy. That mastery consists in her “supernatural vision” of the ordinary. He makes this point explicitly: “Behold the mystery of the divine economy. Our Lady, a full participant in the work of our salvation, follows in the footsteps of her Son . . .” (176). He then presents a catalogue of events

24. *To the Ephesians* XVIII. Purifying the waters may be a reference to the Lord’s own baptism instituting the sacrament of baptism. Compare *Catechism*, 1223-24.

25. Both God’s merciful love and the Christian’s identification with Christ figure importantly in Escrivá’s theology of divine filiation. See Francis Fernandez-Carvajal and Peter Beteta, *Children of God: The Life of Spiritual Childhood Preached by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, trans. Dennis J. Helming (Scepter: Princeton, 1997).

in her life with Christ, not unlike the catalogue given by Gregory of Nyssa: the poverty of Bethlehem, an everyday life in Nazareth, the manifestation at Cana, the passion and cross. In another homily, St. Josemaría specifically enjoins us to run through the catalogue of Mary's life. He said, "One of the Fathers of the early Church said that we should try to keep in our minds and in our memories a clear summary of the life of the Mother of God" (*FG*, 279). He recommends the same thoughtful recapitulation of the life of Jesus with Mary and Joseph (*FG*, 281).

It should be clear by now that the list of events in any individual's life is, by extension, one meaning of *oikonomia*, since these are the events, possessed of their own order and internal coherence, in which God's providential plan is worked out. Thus, from the themes of *oikonomia* and *philanthrôpia*, in the Greek Fathers, flows quite directly St. Josemaría's conclusion about what Mary understands best: "God is interested in everything we do, because Christ wishes to become incarnate in our things, to vivify from within even our most insignificant actions. This thought is a clear, objective, supernatural reality" (*PB*, 174). The supernatural reality to which St. Josemaría refers is the philanthropic economy delineated by the Fathers, accessible to the baptized through the divine plot hidden in the details of their own lives. Mary's life demonstrates how any believer's attention to the details of ordinary life is important for his or her salvation. To this extent, Mary's life models the lay mentality.

That Mary understands the supernatural reality of the ordinary does not become, for St. Josemaría, the basis either of a claim for women's spiritual superiority or for women's specialized role in Christian life. Rather, it makes her the model for interior life for all, male and female. The formulation of St. Ignatius makes it clear: Jesus was born from Mary. In the terms of the Fathers, she is *Theotokos*, the one who bore God as a mother. This means that all the ordinary details of her motherly care were acted out in a dimension of heightened significance, her relationship with and love for God. St. Josemaría writes about the Virgin's example, "If interior life doesn't involve personal encounter with God, it doesn't exist . . ." (*PB*, 174). Mary's own personal encounter had the characteristics of femininity—receptivity, motherhood, nurturing, prompting and encouraging, ultimately suffering at the fate of her Child. Yet, what St. Josemaría highlights is the possibility for divinisation belonging to her in an original way. The theme of *philanthrôpia* animates his references to Mary's ordinary life. He describes her as "the object of God's pleasure (objeto de las complacencias de Dios)" (*PB*, 172) and a "loving target for the delights of the Trinity (el centro amoroso en el que convergen las complacencias de la Trinidad)" (*PB*, 171). He says that although her being raised to such heights is a "divine secret," we ourselves understand it better than some other truths of the faith (*PB*, 171). We understand it because it is our own human nature that is targeted. It is not just that Escrivá means for Mary's example to be universal. Mary brings to reality, personifies, God's overcoming the distance between Himself and every human being. St. Josemaría's evocation of God's love for Mary highlights the preservation of human nature in redemption. We should note that this preservation of human nature entails a re-

private life, and she pursues a secular career. Her co-workers may not be aware of her state of life. St. Josemaría always says that the lay person chooses celibacy for the love of God and for the sake of the kingdom.³¹ This can be explicated in terms of a statement of St. Irenaeus about the new economy—that one virgin (Mary) had to reverse the disobedience of another (Eve). The point is that the work of redemption has actually to be done by God, and this is accomplished in individual lives. The lay celibate vocation testifies especially to this fact.

That redemption is worked out in ordinary deeds and personal histories is a point made forcefully in a response by St. Josemaría to a journalist's question concerning "the role of women in the life of the Church." He says, in effect, that the question runs the risk of assuming the standpoint of clericalism, understanding the Church as what is proper to the clergy or Church hierarchy. His answer continues with particular intensity, not denigrating the greater participation of women in positions of responsibility but rather developing the meaning of Church in the world. The laity must resist clericalization, he says, "and carry on being secular and ordinary, that is people who live in the world and take part in the affairs and interests of the world."³² He continues:

It is very moving to think of so many Christian men and women who, perhaps without any specific resolve, are living simple, ordinary lives and trying to make them a living embodiment of the Will of God. There is an urgent need in the Church to make these people conscious of the sublime value of their lives, to reveal to them that what they are doing, unimportant though it appears, has an eternal value, to urge them, to teach them to listen more attentively to the voice of God who speaks to them through everyday events and situations.³³

He then characterizes all he has said in terms of Mary's *fiat*, 'be it done unto me according to your word.' He says that on these words "depends the faithfulness to one's personal vocation—which is always unique and non-transferable in each case. . . ."³⁴ This answer illustrates very well how integral to Escrivá's whole point of view is his thought about women. Mary's role in the divine economy is central to the significance of the secular life of the Christian, and women like men are called to lay vocation. Indeed, women's calling brings home most forcefully the meaning of lay mentality, because they are so close to Mary in nature and also because they occupy a strategic position in modern life. His answer in this case also illustrates a reversal

31. For a treatment of the motives for celibacy, received as a gift from God, see Jutta Burggraf, "Living Celibacy in the Twenty-First Century," *Catholic Position Papers*, no. 317 (April, 2002).

32. "Women in social life and in the life of the Church," *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer* (Shannon, Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1968), 112.

33. "Women," *Conversations*, 112.

34. "Women," *Conversations*, 112.

or change of key that often characterizes his answers to questions arising from contemporary concerns. He interprets the question in relation to what he takes to be a more fundamental and important concern.

Another such reversal appears in his discussion of the importance of domestic work, most of which is done by women. The emphasis on domestic work has been taken by some to show that St. Josemaría thought women's apostolic life should be limited to the traditional roles of home and kitchen. This criticism is belied by his insistence upon the same formation and education for men and women in Opus Dei, by his encouraging women to take advanced degrees in theology, and by his insistence on each person choosing her path in life with complete freedom. He says explicitly that there need not be "any conflict between one's family and social life," and further that there is no reason to exclude women from "any worthwhile employment available in the society in which she lives."³⁵ But the role of Mary in the divine economy and her consequent status as exemplar of the lay mentality show why domestic labor is so important. It is the work that Mary did in welcoming Christ and preparing his ministry. In domestic labor—ordering and maintaining a home, cleaning, preparing meals, and ministering to the weary, sick or discouraged—the worker serves others, who are Christ, in an immediate and vital way. Setting up schools for the professionalization of this work testifies to its natural integrity and its high value in the order of grace. More fundamentally, professionalization signifies the importance of order in rendering domestic activities sanctified. Order means not business-like efficiency but serenity, confidence, and attentive love. It means *oikonomia* in its connotation of a climate or condition in which persons can flourish in accordance with the plan of redemption. Those who question the commitment to domestic labor reveal their own prejudice against it, which St. Josemaría did not share. He said, "We must not forget that there are people who have wanted to present this work as something humiliating, but it is not."³⁶ Only the conditions in which it has been done have sometimes been humiliating. Another reason for professionalization of this labor is to regularize the obligations of others, employers and those served, toward the domestic worker.³⁷ Here again, Escrivá's answer to a doubt recasts the issue in more fundamental terms.

Woman in the divine economy

We have seen how St. Josemaría's thought on the materialization of redemption in Mary lays the foundation for his thinking about women. Let me summarize briefly how Mary's being a woman, and therefore how each woman's gender, is important in God's economy. We learn from the Church Fathers that Mary's humanity, even her body, is indispensable to the Divine Physician's plan. This is

35. "Women," *Conversations*, 87.

36. "Women," *Conversations*, 109.

37. "Women," *Conversations*, 109.

because human life was meant by God to be sanctified and redeemed within nature. Because of the way God redeemed humankind, the natural forms of life are significant for salvation. In the way that this was true first for Mary, it remains true for every woman. God needed Mary not just to bear Christ but to assist the redemption that achieved the most for human nature. Thus, as it comes to us from Mary, the woman's task is to reduce the distance between divine and human, to promote intimacy between God and creatures. The woman's directedness toward individual persons and her attention to detail are natural characteristics. But in the divine economy, her attention to the ordinary does not amount simply to being immersed in a wealth of ephemeral detail. Understanding Mary's role in the divine economy, we see that woman in fact *makes* individual life significant; she connects it to the divine plan, rendering history, whether personal or collective, meaningful.

The woman does not raise the individual toward God on her own initiative, however. Her promoting intimacy with God is possible because of her role in the Incarnation economy. The Incarnation is the ultimate relation of her womanhood, the context from which her actions are inseparable. Another point can be made about the Incarnation context. To accomplish His redemption, God had to rely on a free human being, Mary. She is thus emblematic of human freedom. It is hard to imagine another time in history than the present when women have shared to a greater extent in Mary's freedom. In our own age, it matters very much how women exercise personal freedom in just those areas of life where Mary excelled. The importance of a woman's freedom is evident to us in the areas of sexual and reproductive ethics, in the day-to-day care of children, and in the preservation of a humane culture.³⁸ These are domains that God entrusted to women at the Incarnation and for which women are specially responsible.

St. Josemaría said that the Feast of the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin was his favorite Marian feast. In a homily on this day, he addresses the topic with which this paper began, the reason for the Incarnation. He says that God could have chosen many ways of redeeming us but chose the one that makes indisputable our own salvation and glorification. Thus he emphasizes that the Incarnation raises us up. Then he quotes St. Basil's contrast of Adam and Christ and the Virgin's role in making Christ flesh (*FG*, 276). This is a final example of one of my central themes—that the connection of Escrivá's thought to the Church Fathers is specific and precise. It is a connection he made intentionally and by an unerring Christian sensibility. The investigation of *oikonomia* has shown that the Church Fathers believed salvation makes sense in worldly, human terms. This reasoning of the Fathers is a source for St. Josemaría's vivid insights concerning the materialization of piety. The theological grounding for his lay spirituality is, in part, his understanding of Mary derived from the Fathers.

38. St. Josemaría highlights the contributions women can make to civic life in these areas in "Women," *Conversations*, 90.