

# Addresses and Conferences

## Chieti

### February 12, 2006

*Commemorative ceremony in honor of  
St. Josemaría*

From the day of his departure for heaven, on June 26, 1975, devotion to St. Josemaría has spread rapidly throughout the world, even to countries where no faithful of Opus Dei are living. The accounts of favors received, both spiritual (conversions, returns to the sacraments) and material (cures, etc.), amount to hundreds of thousands, both before and after his canonization. This is a tangible sign that the message of sanctifying one's ordinary life has taken root in the most varied and geographically distant environments, among persons of all ages and social and professional situations.

*Seeking God in daily life*

St. Josemaría was first of all a teacher of Christian life—a priest who taught by his word and example, by his daily conduct. He was called “the saint of the ordinary” by the unforgettable John Paul II (address on the day following his canonization, October 7, 2002). St. Josemaría's teaching anticipated, as early as 1928, some of the central teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

First of all, the proclamation of the universal call to holiness: “all

Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love” says the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (no. 40). St. Josemaría wrote: “Your duty is to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you. Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, our Lord said: ‘Be ye perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect’” (*The Way*, no. 291).

St. Josemaría insisted that, if all are called to the fullness of love, we can't consider only certain human activities as privileged channels, special paths to holiness. If we did that, the religious sphere would be separated from everyday life. No, all earthly activities are a path to encounter God, the place and material for our sanctification. It is our daily life that should be filled with God: “A Christian is no Tartarin of Tarascon, a literary character bent on hunting lions in the corridors of his home, where they were not to be found. I always speak about real daily life, about the sanctification of work, of family bonds, of friendships. If we aren't Christian in these things, where will we be Christian? The pleasant smell of incense comes from some small, hidden grains of incense placed upon the burning charcoal. Likewise is the ‘aroma of Christ’ noticed among men—not in a sudden burst of flame, but in the constant red-hot embers of virtues such as justice, loyalty, faithfulness, understanding, generosity and

cheerfulness" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 36).

He saw each of the faithful as having the duty to give testimony that daily life can be filled with God, with the living presence of God incarnate. "My Father is working still," says Jesus in St. John's Gospel (5:17). Commenting on the message of the Founder of Opus Dei, in an article published at the time of his canonization, the then Cardinal Ratzinger observed that still today "there are those who think that after creation, God 'withdrew' and took no further interest in our daily affairs. To this way of thinking, God can no longer enter the fabric of our daily lives. But we have a denial of this in Jesus' words. A man open to God's presence realizes that God is always working and is still working today" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, October 6, 2002).

Here is the core of the spirit of Opus Dei: leaving space for God, who wants to fill our lives and all our days with himself, with the charity of Christ. Letting him work in us, assisting his action. Here we find a synthesis of the message that St. Josemaría preached. "It is a message," emphasized Cardinal Ratzinger in the article just cited, "that helps to overcome what can be considered the great temptation of our time: the claim that after the 'big bang' God withdrew from history. God's action did not stop with the 'big bang' but continues in time, both in the world of nature and in the human world" (*Ibid.*). A Christian, in other words, is responsible for reminding the world, through his

daily work, that Christ has not separated himself from the world. He does not live in a far off dimension in glory, completely separate from, indifferent to human events.

### *Crossing the Abruzzi region*

St. Josemaría's reflections and conversations converged on these themes also during the many apostolic trips that I had the privilege to accompany him on. There come to my mind now so many trips by car across the Abruzzi region. And in particular some stops in Chieti, for example, when returning to Rome from Loreto.

His desire to see a stable presence of the spirit of the Work in the Abruzzi region and to guarantee its fruitfulness and its expansion from here to other places led him, helped by the insistence of some co-operators of Opus Dei from this area, to begin in the village of San Felice d'Ocre, near L'Aquila, an international conference center for teachers and university students, both men and women, from all over the world. The center, called Tor d'Aveia, began its activities in the summer of 1967. That year he spent the whole month of August in the nearby town of Gagliano Aterno, so that he could frequently visit those taking part in the study seminars and encourage them to make Christ present in and through their professional activity. He returned to San Felice the following year to consecrate an altar, and also later, in 1971.

I have a very vivid memory of those frequent "incursions" during

the summer of 1967—those conversations in the shade of the pines during which St. Josemaría shared with us his own spiritual experience and taught us to live on earth a life rich in human significance and in divine perspectives. A group of women of Opus Dei was also living in San Felice d'Ocre who dedicated themselves to the domestic administration of the center. St. Josemaría advised them to develop friendships with the people of the village and other nearby towns, bringing them the Christian witness of their own work: "With your charity, with your service, with your availability to all, you will leave a lasting impression on souls."

And while he traveled around the region, he sowed the highways with Hail Mary's, praying for everyone he passed on the road and entrusting to our Lady's intercession the fruit of the apostolic work that his sons and daughters were carrying out there, or would carry out in the future.

Speaking of this wonderful Abruzzi region, there comes to mind the image of Don Renato Mariani. I met him in 1950 when he was still an engineering student at the University of Rome. He was one of the very first young men to decide to give his life to God in Opus Dei after meeting the Founder, who had just arrived in Italy. Renato was from Chieti and had all the qualities of the people of this land of Abruzzi. He was a hard worker, simple, generous, prudent and responsible, capable of untiring and, at the same time, calm work, without hurrying or slowing

down, and never seeking any reward for himself. He was somewhat short of stature, like myself, but that is not necessarily a defect. St. Josemaría loved him very much. I recall that frequently, when looking at him, he would raise two fingers of his right hand, as though to tell us that Renato was worth two people. Because he really was an untiring worker.

After finishing his university studies with outstanding marks, he spread the spirit of Opus Dei in various cities of Italy: in Rome, Naples, Milan, Genoa, and then once again back in Rome. This was a clear contribution of the Abruzzi region to the growth of Opus Dei in Italy. Later, as a priest, he carried out a wide-ranging pastoral activity, blessed by God with abundant fruit.

I remember the pride and enthusiasm with which Renato, as St. Josemaría called him, spoke to me about the positive aspects of Chieti that I too have learned to sincerely appreciate.

#### *Sanctification of work and unity of life*

In addition to reminding the lay faithful of their baptismal call to holiness, St. Josemaría dedicated himself to showing specific ways to attain this goal. He taught people to seek God *nel bel mezzo della strada*, in the midst of the busy streets, to transform into prayer and sacrifice—the gift of self to God—the apparently most insignificant actions, to see every circumstance in one's day as an opportunity to love God and to serve souls.

The awareness of being children of God in Christ, thanks to our incorporation into our Lord in Baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in our soul, is an essential element of our Catholic faith, very present in the soul of St. Josemaría. Divine filiation should be a fundamental source of inspiration in the spiritual life of every Christian, a constant reference point in any situation they encounter. This teaching had been deeply developed by St. Josemaría, revealing the authenticity with which he lived it in his own person, specifically in the context of ordinary life.

The holiness that a Christian strives to attain with the confidence and simplicity of one who knows himself to be a child of God, and therefore that is based not on one's own qualities or efforts but above all on God the Father's benevolence and mercy, is hinged on the activities that make up the fabric of our life in the world. Therefore it requires that we sanctify our work. In this regard, it seems especially appropriate to emphasize a point that St. Josemaría frequently stressed: "It's not enough to want to do what is good; rather we have to know how to do it." In *The Forge* (no. 698), a book of spiritual counsels and reflections, we read: "If we really want to sanctify our work, we have inescapably to fulfill the first condition: that of working, and working well, with human and supernatural seriousness."

We need to work diligently and intently, with technical and professional competence, without mediocrity, fulfilling our duties down to the

last detail, certain that thus we are contributing to the development of the human community. But we have to work with a Christian perspective, which leads us to see others as God's children, to esteem them as such, and to serve them. As St. Josemaría says succinctly in one of his homilies: "the dignity of work is based on Love" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 48).

This message and spirit foster what the Founder of Opus Dei called unity of life, that is, the fusion in one's life between action and contemplation, between work, prayer and apostolate, in the fulfillment of professional and family duties, in social relations and in civic commitments in general. Unity of life is not simply consistency, nor the result merely of mental order or organizational efficiency. A Christian is always a Christian; he is a child of God in everything he does, and prays at every moment and in every place. Faith, hope and charity always give shape to his life. There can be no rupture between human activities and one's relationship with God. Unity of life, therefore, is a sign by which one recognizes holiness. This is precisely the lesson that one learned from living alongside St. Josemaría, because one saw him continually turned towards God in every gesture, in every word, in all his endeavors. At his side we became aware of one of the principal consequences of the Incarnation: if God took on a created nature, then earthly, human realities, our everyday lives, in some way share in the divinity of Christ, perfect God and perfect Man.

Besides what we have already mentioned, unity of life leads to other evident consequences, all of which are very relevant today: consistency between one's faith and actions, and full respect for the moral law, without any compromises, in all the temporal concerns that a Christian is called upon to confront. The contribution of the lay faithful to the building up of the Kingdom of God depends in large measure on the witness they give to their faith.

#### *Responsibility of the lay faithful*

In the context of unity of life, the Second Vatican Council, in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, calls upon the laity to overcome the rupture between faith and conduct, guided always by the spirit of the Gospel in the fulfillment of their earthly duties. And in recent years the magisterium of the Church has not ceased reaffirming the laity's role in the mission of evangelization. In the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, John Paul II set forth the challenges that await the Church in the new century in this regard. The Pope asked the laity to commit themselves with apostolic zeal, fraternal friendship, and solidarity imbued with charity to the goal of transforming their daily social relationships into an opportunity to awaken in their peers a thirst for truth, the first condition for a salvific meeting with Christ (cf. ch. III).

In addition, Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*,

stressed the role of the laity in the service of charity, in accord with the immense reach that this fundamental virtue is destined to have in the society of every epoch.

The lay faithful, as members of civil society, have the right and duty to participate personally in public life. It is their task to work for a just order in society. As Christians, their mission is to configure social life in accord with the spirit of the Gospel, "respecting the nature and rightful autonomy of that order, and cooperating with other citizens according to their particular competence and responsibility" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life, November 24, 2002, 1, 3). Therefore, charity should animate the lay faithful's entire life. Let us return to the central point of our reflections: as St. Josemaría used to say, each Christian's contribution to the bettering of society is the consequence, first of all, of the authenticity of one's own struggle for personal sanctity.

#### *Primacy of the family*

In the great catechesis of Christian life carried out by St. Josemaría, particular attention was focused on the family, the basic cell of society. One will contribute to imbuing human realities with a Christian meaning only if, at the same time, one fosters the formation of truly Christian families.

Undoubtedly, in recent years the family and marriage have been the target of open and sustained attacks, to the point that in some countries the laws that once protected the family have now become inoperative, and have even been replaced by unjust laws that undermine society's foundation and accelerate its decomposition. Pope Benedict XVI, following in the footsteps of John Paul II, who did so much to strengthen the family, insists on the importance of a deep understanding of the meaning of marriage and the family in the divine plan, in contrast to those who insist on seeing them as mere human institutions, open to arbitrary modifications with the passage of time.

As responsible citizens and consistent Christians, we have to do all we can to defend and foster the essential values in this area that hold a fundamental importance for the life of the Church and civil society. This task, one of the most urgent components of the new evangelization, falls to each one of us. St. Josemaría was greatly concerned about the good of families. When he spoke with young couples or parents, he reminded them that marriage is a specific path of Christian life, and that happiness is not simply the consequence of attaining material goals (a comfortable life, a home, work), but of the sincere search for holiness through mutual dealings within the family. He suggested that they imitate the Holy Family of Nazareth, so as to learn from Mary, Jesus and Joseph to love, to suffer, and to give themselves for the benefit of their spouse and children, putting themselves joyfully at

their service. This is the principal way of imbuing society with a Christian spirit.

## Rome April 10, 2006

*In the audience granted by Pope Benedict XVI to the youth participating in the UNIV Congress*

Holy Father:

I would like to thank Your Holiness for having consented to receive the participants in the UNIV International Congress this morning—a Congress which has been held in Rome each year since 1968. The aim of this meeting is to help university students to be aware of the challenges presented by today's society and to help them to collaborate—each in his or her own place of study or work—in the task of bringing Christ to all environments. Thus so many people who are awaiting him, perhaps without knowing it, and who need him, can find him and get to know him.

Since the 1930's, St. Josemaría Escrivá dedicated himself passionately to the university. He invited students, one by one, personally, to the task of "spreading goodness, light, enthusiasm, generosity, a spirit of sacrifice, constancy in work, deep study" (*Furrow*, no. 937).

To meet the Holy Father is always, for a son or daughter of the Church, a source of deep joy. It is also