

# Addresses, Messages, and Interviews

## Bilbao, Spain (March 21, 2009)

*Address at the Fourth Conference on  
Catholics and Public Life*

“Conversion to Christ” –  
“Conversion into Christ”

### Conversion to Christ through the Sanctification of Work

Conversion can be understood as either “conversion to” or “conversion into” a new belief or substance, with a different meaning depending on the preposition used.

To “convert to” means to change one’s interior dispositions, especially one’s religious convictions. In broader terms, it implies directing one’s attention towards a new and different person or goal. This meaning is very close to what Scripture calls *metanoia*: the invitation to begin a new life in response to the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God, with which John the Baptist and later Jesus himself began their preaching.<sup>1</sup> Christian tradition, as early as the apostolic era, spoke of conversion in the same sense, emphasizing that God’s kingdom, power and love have become present in Christ. To convert, therefore, means to turn one’s eyes towards Jesus, to have faith in him, to

direct one’s actions in accord with his word and person.

The other expression mentioned above, “conversion into,” also refers to a change of life, but connotes, in an explicit way, not only a new outlook and a new way of acting, but also a true transformation of the subject, which becomes something different from what it was before. In a Christian context, it indicates that conversion entails much more than just the acceptance of a message related to Jesus or a simple adjustment in one’s way of behaving based on the ideals Christ proclaimed. Christian conversion has a person as its goal: the real and living person of Jesus Christ. To convert means to identify oneself with Jesus, to become one single reality with him.

The distinction between “conversion to” and “conversion into” makes clear that every Christian is called to identify him or herself more and more deeply with the Master, to strive to make fully one’s own the sentiments of Christ,<sup>2</sup> and thus be able to say with St. Paul: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.<sup>3</sup>

The Pauline statement just cited and, like it, so many other expressions of the Apostle to the Gentiles, can be interpreted in an experiential

1. Cf. Mt 3:2 and 4, 17.

2. Cf. Phil 2:5.

3. Gal 2:20.

and mystical sense. At least this is what numerous spiritual authors have held, beginning with that great figure of the early Church, Origen,<sup>4</sup> although contemporary exegetes are often more cautious.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intention to go into this debate. Rather I want to stress that Christian spiritual experience does not close us up within ourselves, but rather, by identifying us with Christ, it impels us—with Christ and in Christ—to open ourselves to all humanity.

Moreover (and it is worth emphasizing this in a conference such as the one we are taking part in), our faith in Christ strongly spurs us to feel responsible for all that surrounds us, for the society to which we belong, for the progress of the world and the future of history. Indeed, it is there that the union with Christ to which every Christian is called should make itself felt. As St. Josemaría Escrivá wrote: “A secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of men ‘of his own’ in every human activity. And then....*pax Christi in regno Christi*—the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

The process of identification with Christ finds its origin and foundation in Christ himself. It is he who attracts us towards himself, through the sending of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the

Church. He draws us through the preaching of the Gospel, which transmits to us the teachings of Jesus, and through the sacraments, where our Lord makes himself present with his sanctifying power. Nevertheless, this divine initiative does not exclude our human cooperation; it demands our free response at the same time as it makes this possible for us. “Christ’s life is our life,” said St. Josemaría Escrivá, “just as he promised his Apostles at the Last Supper: If anyone love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (*Jn* 14:23). That is why a Christian should live as Christ lived, making the affections of Christ his own, so that he can exclaim with St Paul: It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me (*Gal* 2:20).”<sup>7</sup>

The life of each person, with all the incidents that make it up, thus becomes part of the process of identification with our Lord. Each Christian, with one’s qualities and limitations, with one’s way of being and acting, is called to that identification, and thus to give witness to Christ, to make him present in our surroundings. “Those who will save this world of ours,” St. Josemaría insisted, “are not those who try to drug the life of the spirit, reducing everything to financial questions or material well-being, but those who have faith in

4. Cf. Origen, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Luke, 22 (PG 13:1857).

5. On the Pauline doctrine regarding the presence of Christ in the Christian one can consult, among many other writings, Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul*, New York, 1959, and more recently, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Paolo. *Vita, viaggi, teologia*, Brescia 2008.

6. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 301. For the background to this point see *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition* prepared by Pedro Rodríguez, London 2009, pp. 480-482.

7. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 103.

God and in the eternal destiny of man, and who receive Christ's truth as a guiding light for their action and behavior."<sup>8</sup> At every moment, as the Roman Pontiff reminds us, we have "to be touched by the reconciliation which God has given us in Christ, by God's 'foolish' love for us."<sup>9</sup> Then, as St. Paul writes, nothing and no one will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>10</sup> And the Holy Father concludes: "We live in this certainty. It is this certainty that gives us the strength to live concretely the faith that works in love."<sup>11</sup>

### Identification with Christ and Sanctification of Work

I have been invited to speak about conversion to Christ, about identification with him, not in general, but precisely in reference to the sanctification of work. This was—and is—a central point of the message of St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, who insistently reminded us of the need to place Christ at the summit of all human activities.<sup>12</sup>

I will consider work in the context of professional work, the committed dedication to a stable task thanks to which one supports oneself, maintains one's family and contributes to social progress. Therefore, this also includes the indispensable work of the housewife and home-

maker, and those who help to care for families. Thus understood, work implies for the person a decision to undertake seriously and responsibly the duties that life brings with it. It also leads to a deeper awareness of the questions being debated in the society to which each one belongs and to seek solutions for its problems and future needs.

Work is thus a decisive element in the process of each person's human maturing; and a determining factor in one's development as a follower of Christ and in bringing one's Christian ideals to bear on society. This requires working in such a way that one's faith fully informs one's professional work.

St. Josemaría expressed this untiringly with this phrase: Christians not only have to seek sanctity in their work and sanctify others through their work, but also, and inseparably, they have to sanctify the work itself.<sup>13</sup> In other words, they are called, certainly, to sanctify themselves in carrying out their daily tasks, and to take advantage of these tasks to open up to those around them horizons of Christian life; but also, and I repeat, inseparably, they have to sanctify those tasks themselves, giving them life from within, in accord with the proper nature of each one, with the light and impetus that comes from the Gospel.<sup>14</sup>

8. St. Josemaría Escrivá, Address on the occasion of the awarding of honorary doctorates at the University of Navarra, May 9, 1974.

9. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, November 26, 2008.

10. *Rom* 8:39.

11. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, November 26, 2008.

12. Cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 105 and 134; *Conversations*, no. 59.

13. Cf. *Conversations*, nos. 10, 24, 70; *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 46; *Friends of God*, no. 120, etc.

14. On the notion of "sanctification of work," see Fernando Ocáriz, "*El concepto de santificación*

### Work as an act of dominion, freedom and love

Identifying oneself with Christ in work requires first grasping deeply what any professional occupation entails and, with that as a foundation, confronting it and living it in accord with and in Christ, in a unity of life. Let us look at this in more detail and consider some of the fundamental features of the activity of work in order to suggest, although briefly, how they can be the occasion for an ever deeper conversion to Christ, with the help of grace.

The creation narrative in the Bible presents work as a capacity granted to man by God to have dominion over and possess the earth.<sup>15</sup> Especially in recent centuries, the development of the experimental sciences and technology have made it possible for this dominion to grow, a growth that, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, is in full consistency with the Biblical command. Even more, it can be considered as a fruit or effect of that command.<sup>16</sup> It is also true that some modern currents of thought have gone to the extreme of viewing technology as the only force on which mankind's prosperity and future depend.<sup>17</sup> The human person's ethical and religious dimensions are thus relegated to a second tier, and can even disappear entirely.

By contemplating the mystery of

God's love for us revealed in Christ, we will overcome every false divinization of science and the world, and break free from the closed circle in which part of modern culture has become imprisoned. Benedict XVI expressed this with singular beauty in a homily given on the past feast of the Epiphany. In Christ, God incarnate, we have come to know that "the divine and universal law of creation is divine love." "This," he continued, "should not be understood in a poetic but in a real sense. . . This means that the stars, planets and the whole universe are not governed by a blind force, they do not obey the dynamics of matter alone. Therefore, it is not the cosmic elements that should be divinized. Indeed, on the contrary, within everything and at the same time above everything there is a personal will, the Spirit of God, who in Christ has revealed himself as Love." Thus men are not slaves of the elemental spirits of the universe (Col 2:8), but are free, "capable of relating to the creative freedom of God."<sup>18</sup>

Christ—who brought us light, truth and peace—frees us from fear and selfishness. Aware of our condition as children of God in Christ, we can confront the material world with dignity and rise above ourselves, opening our eyes and heart to the reality of infinite Love. We can come to share in that love, bringing to bear in our work the freedom that Christ has won for us.<sup>19</sup>

*del trabajo*," in *Naturaleza, gracia y gloria*, Pamplona 2000, ch. 12, and Jose Luis Illanes, "Que significa 'santificar el trabajo?' in *Existencia cristiana y mundo*, Pamplona, 2003, ch. 8.

15. Cf. *Gen* 1:28.

16. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, September 14, 1981, no. 4.

17. Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, nos. 16ff.

18. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Epiphany, January 6, 2009.

19. Cf. *Gal* 5:1.

My Father is working still, and I am working, said Jesus, replying to those who criticized him for having performed a miracle on the Sabbath.<sup>20</sup> We can apply these words as well to the work Jesus carried out during his hidden years in Nazareth. Our Lord spent his days in obedience to the Father, corresponding with his free human will to the Father's love—an infinite love that, in Him, was manifested to all humanity.

We should never tire of telling those around us that work, every honorable human task, offers the possibility of uniting ourselves with Christ, sharing in the fullness of freedom and love with which Jesus carried out his own work. United to Christ, Christians should carry out their daily tasks with the awareness of God's nearness, which will spur them to make each of their actions—even the smallest and most commonplace—an act of worship of God and service to mankind. We will recognize in other men and women, brothers and sisters whom we are called to love with a love that is an echo of—even more, a participation in—Christ's own love.

### Work as an act of service

This leads us to a further consideration: work as a service to others, and therefore as a means for identifying ourselves with the Master. Human work is marked by its social character, especially in the

division of labor. This is a reality that has been present throughout all of history, from simple primitive societies to today's complex world that is the result of the growth of technology, rapid communications and commercial interchange—in a word: the result of globalization.

The division of labor entails two basic attitudes: solidarity and trust. People hope to meet their personal needs, not only through their own strength alone, but relying on the contribution of others, while doing all they can to meet others' needs. The effective growth of the common good, thanks to the division of labor, is not obtained automatically—nothing is automatic in regard to free human activity—but presupposes the exercise of virtue.

Work as an act of dominion requires the exercise of virtues such as industriousness, order, patience, striving to overcome tiredness and difficulties that arise, etc. The division of labor requires, in addition, honesty, loyalty, faithfulness to one's word, truth and sincerity in transactions; in a word, justice and all of the spiritual dispositions that foster it. If virtue gives place to selfishness, the proper division of work ceases to produce its fruits; injustice arises and even human exploitation and structures of sin, that is, structures or ways of acting which, having arisen from injustice, contribute to perpetuating it.<sup>21</sup>

20. *Jn* 5:17.

21. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, no. 36 and passim; *Cat-*

In the face of this all too real situation, Christians raise their eyes to the example of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.<sup>22</sup> And he gave us the commandment of love—a love that was to be a sharing in his own love—as the distinctive sign of his disciples.<sup>23</sup> Work in its concrete reality places Christians before a multitude of situations that invite them to look towards Christ, to convert to Christ, to let themselves be imbued by his word and his example. Specifically, his example of service to and care for those around him. Thus a Christian can identify himself or herself with Christ and make Him present among other men and women.

In carrying out the duties of each day, in our relationships with our companions or colleagues at work, the attitude of service always requires “getting out of oneself” and paying attention to others. Sometimes this will require acts of true heroism. As St. Josemaría wrote: “A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ’s heart.” And he added: “While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind. Otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus; it will be a fraud, a deception of God and man.”<sup>24</sup>

This is not the place to produce a list of the crucial questions of our times, nor to consider specific ways of confronting them. Nevertheless, I want to cite some words from a homily Benedict XVI gave at the beginning of 2009. After raising some of these great problems—situations of extreme poverty, the economic crisis, the inequalities that globalization has sometimes given rise to, war and terrorism—he invited his listeners to truly commit themselves to try to help solve them, pointing to the example of Christ’s life. “The poverty of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem,” he said, “as well as being the subject of adoration for Christians, is also a school of life for every man. It teaches us that to fight both material and spiritual poverty, the path to take is the path of solidarity that impelled Jesus to share our human condition.”<sup>25</sup>

Our daily work and activities offer many opportunities to practice forgetfulness of self, a zeal for service, the love shown in deeds that constantly marked, hour by hour, Jesus’ passage through our world. And, as a result, to identify ourselves with him. Let us never forget that Christ comes to meet us also through those around us: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”<sup>26</sup>

*echism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1869.

22. Cf. Mk 10:45.

23. Cf. Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10: 25-37; Jn 13:33-38 and 15:9-17.

24. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 167.

25. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, January 1, 2009. The homily includes part of the Message for the World Day of Peace which was celebrated that same day.

26. Mt 25:40.



## Work and the Cross

Often, when speaking about the reality of work, we tend to emphasize its unpleasant aspects, which are the consequence of sin. However, an over insistence on this factor can deform reality and overshadow crucial aspects of human experience: the value of work as a factor in human development, the experience of creativity and the joy that so often accompanies it, etc. In Sacred Scripture, work is spoken of before sin, as part of the gift to exercise dominion over the earth that God granted to mankind from the beginning of time. In the words of St. Josemaría, “in itself work is not a penalty or a curse or a punishment: those who speak of it that way have not understood Sacred Scripture properly.”<sup>27</sup>

It is true that the original order has been damaged and twisted by sin; but it is also clear that, in the words with which God announced the merited punishment, he did not take away mankind’s dominion over the earth. Rather, since the original harmony had been destroyed, the earth would produce “thorns and thistles,” and bread, a symbol of the goods necessary for life, would be obtained only through “the sweat of your face.”<sup>28</sup>

Certainly the reality of work often brings with it not only effort but also weariness, including the exhaustion of one’s physical or psychic strength. The succession of days—apparently the same—can produce a feeling of routine and open the door

to laziness. Our projects, although thought out carefully and put into practice with diligence, are not exempt from the risk of failure. We often face tasks that involve major difficulties. And one may encounter injustice, misunderstanding, calumny, or accidents, leading to anxiety and anger, anguish and discouragement.

In this situation, a person may need to muster all his human strength to confront these challenges with renewed determination. But a Christian can do much more: he can look to Christ, God made man, the Eternal Son of God the Father, who fully assumed our human condition except for sin, taking upon himself all the pain and suffering of human history, in order to transform it, through his love and self-giving, into salvation and life.

On hearing these words, our thoughts go directly towards eternal happiness, towards the new heavens and the new earth to which God is directing the whole of history, and where there will be neither death, nor suffering, nor sorrow, nor tears.<sup>29</sup> For we have been created for the fullness of life, and heaven places before our eyes the object of the absolute hope announced in the Gospel. At the same time, we should not forget—as Benedict XVI emphasizes in his Encyclical *Spe Salvi*—that this hope, precisely because it is absolute, gives meaning to all the moments of human history. “His Kingdom [the Kingdom of God which is mani-

27. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 47.

28. Cf. *Gen* 3:17-19.

29. Cf. *Rev* 21:1-4.

fested in Christ] is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us.”<sup>30</sup> The love manifested in Christ conquers selfishness and sin and is the guarantee that the fullness of life that every human being longs for, even though only unconsciously, actually does exist. And therefore, the Roman Pontiff continues, this love “gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect.”<sup>31</sup> It also gives us the “capacity to accept tribulation, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.”<sup>32</sup>

On the Cross, Christ gave himself up to death, showing that he loved us right to the end.<sup>33</sup> That supreme self-giving sheds light on the entire life of our Lord, including the times in his preaching when he experienced hunger,<sup>34</sup> sleep<sup>35</sup> or weariness;<sup>36</sup> and those other times which the Gospels do not mention but which were certainly present when, as a craftsman in Nazareth, he experienced the effort and fatigue of daily work.

In all the varied situations of human work, both those marked by creativity and joy, and those where failure or exhaustion enter in, a

Christian can and should be united to Christ and, in Christ, to God the Father, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This may involve an act of thanksgiving for the gifts we have received, or asking for light and help, or for forgiveness when we see our own faults. At other times, it will mean offering, in union with our Lord’s Cross, our own pain and suffering. We can always find in our work the four aims of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice: adoration, thanksgiving, petition, and reparation.<sup>37</sup> Thus our conversion to Christ will result in a real identification with him. And in every circumstance, even amid our own limitations and deficiencies, we Christians will be a witness to the love and hope that God has made present in history.

I would like to end my presentation with some words of St. Josemaría that can serve as a fitting conclusion. “What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfillment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God. While still on earth he has glimpses

30. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 31.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, no. 37.

33. Cf. *Jn* 13:1.

34. Cf. *Mk* 11:12-13.

35. Cf. *Mt* 8:24.

36. Cf. *Jn* 4:6.

37. Cf. Guillaume Derville, “La liturgia del trabajo. Levantado de la tierra, atraeré a todos hacia mí (*Jn* 12:32) en la experiencia de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer,” in *Scripta Theologica*, vol. XXXVIII, fasc. 2 (May-August 2006), pp. 841-849.



of God's love and comes to recognize it as the goal to which all men on earth are called."<sup>38</sup>

## Abruzzo, Italy (June 6, 2009)

*Message regarding  
the earthquake*

As soon as I received news this morning of the powerful earthquake that shook the Abruzzo region, I raised my heart to God, through the intercession of St. Josemaría, in petition for the souls of the dead and for the speedy recovery of the injured.

I am convinced that St. Josemaría, who passed through that beloved region so many times and who prayed so much for the men and women of Abruzzo, will intercede for them in a special way during these moments and gain from God the grace that the material and moral damage be as small as possible.

With all my heart I unite myself to the people affected by the tragedy and, together with my prayer, I send them my blessing, asking our Lord to grant them the strength and consolation that they need in these moments.

✠ Bishop Javier Echevarría  
Prelate of Opus Dei

## Poznan, Poland (June 7, 2009)

*An interview granted to Przewodnik  
Katolicki. By Aurelia Pawlak*

*Last year Opus Dei was 80 years old. Founded by a diocesan priest, the Work today is spread throughout the world and is opening up many new centers. Does this mean that in this world of ours so filled with turmoil, people still feel the need to draw close to God?*

Certainly, people need to be close to God, and when this contact is missing they live with a "nostalgia" for God, who is above all our Father. We shouldn't forget that God is the one who has sought this relationship, this closeness. When he created mankind, he is the one who takes the initiative, who seeks out his creatures, each man and woman.

It seems clear to me that it is this divine concern for us that has also led to the reality of Opus Dei in the Church, a reality of Christian life that is an expression of God's mercy towards the world and that is seen in the expansion of the Prelature throughout the world.

I am happy to tell you that during these days some faithful of the Prelature have begun the apostolic work in Indonesia. Those who have begun there know very well that the seed they are planting in that country will grow, as in other

38. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.