

## “Ut videam” as a painter’s aspiration

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I am an artist, a painter. I have lived most of my life in Vancouver, on the mountainous west coast of Canada. In my youth I was a climber and mountains and wilderness continue to inspire my art. (*Table 4*). The influence of Blessed Josemaría’s message is as simple as it is profound: He has opened up to me the panorama and the great adventure of apostolate and prayer in the middle of my own concrete situation..

It was through those wilderness experiences that God gave me an intuition of the “holy mountain”. Blessed Josemaría brought me — and continues to bring me — to the realization that the “holy mountain” is to be found in the midst of the ordinary, in the midst of my professional and family life. And Blessed Josemaría’s successor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo on a 1993 trip to Kenya took note of a local proverb: «When a friend is at the top of the mountain, it is easier to climb». He used it to illustrate a Christian’s ascent with Christ and to Christ.

In 1972 I was received into the Catholic Church. I became aware that Christ is the fullness of truth and experienced that this awareness was a grace. Another great blessing was my marriage to Sue. We have been married for 21 years. Besides being my helpmate and the mother of our five children, she also shares with me the same ideals that we have both learned from Blessed Josemaría.

Until I came in contact with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, my work tended to be rather separate from my devotional practices and I got the impression that sanctity would be more easily attained if the subjects of my art were identifiably religious. Instinctively I felt that this was an incomplete understanding both of art and of religion. (*Table 5*). The question, really, is whether I am coming closer to God in my studio activities and in my ordinary life. Certainly nobody in Opus Dei ever suggested that it would be better if I dealt with religious subjects.

I became a Catholic at a time of turmoil. Thankfully I understood that doubts about faith and morals are resolved by looking to the Magisterium. An attraction to orthodoxy, however, can easily devolve into stiff traditionalism. By the mid 1980's I was moving in that direction. Traditionalism and clericalism are a kind of swamp, and for a contemporary artist, a notably unhealthy swamp. By the influence of the people of Opus Dei the swamp was left behind, and through the mountain fastness a path opened up. I learned that my work becomes, in Blessed Josemaría's words, «the hinge of our sanctification», through the unclouded and growing awareness of divine filiation. Flawed though I am, I am also a son of God.

One of the favorite aspirations of Blessed Josemaría was the blind man's «Domine, ut videam!»: Lord that I may see. Beauty is a gift, a gift of God. (*Table 6*). Until one can see, how is it possible to understand beauty? How can I be an artist and not want to see, to truly see? *Domine, ut videam!* It is my hope that a purely human view is gradually supplanted by a supernatural perspective.

Blessed Josemaría entitled one of his homilies *Passionately Loving the World*. Optimism with a supernatural underpinning is infectious. I've been infected, as it were, and I'd like to infect others! This well-founded cheerfulness compels me to get involved. Realizing more and more that Christ is at the top of the mountain and makes my climbing easier, has encouraged me to accentuate and nurture the positive.

I found Blessed Josemaría's teaching regarding work and personal freedom invigorating. He eschewed what he incisively called «mystical wishful thinking». He assisted me in marrying practice with theory. I came to see the importance of thoroughness and constancy in the life-long process of formation. Who cannot be attracted to Blessed Josemaría's emphasis on the struggle to acquire human virtues? «If we truly got to know Mary our Mother, how quickly the supernatural virtues would grow in us! Let us not be shy about repeating short prayers and aspirations to her throughout the day». (*Friends of God*, 293). So Blessed Escrivá's fervent love for the Mother of God, taught me how to try what our Lord asks us in the Gospel: «to pray always».

This struggle, having as its ultimate aim the acquisition of the theological virtues, is humanized: it begins and ends with a sporting spirit. I learned to make frequent use of aspirations; one of Blessed Josemaría's favorites was «nunc coepi», I begin now! With the humble attitude that I begin and begin again, I steadily make progress up the inclined plane of the interior life. Escrivá's apt image of the inclined plane points to the necessity of perseverance—and perseverance not just in our life of piety but in all aspects of our life. According to Monsignor Escrivá, striving for excellence is firmly anchored in filial love of God. Without the ballast of love of God, I fall victim to the insinuating temptation of self affirmation.

I am grateful to Blessed Josemaría for giving me a true understanding of professional prestige—and of its capital importance for lay people. Professional prestige is lifted out of the corrosive atmosphere of vainglory and put completely in the service of God's glory and the apostolate. Through Blessed Josemaría, too, I have learned how to see professional setbacks, whether self-caused or caused by others: to perhaps see the need for improvement, but above all, to see the caress of Jesus where before I would have found it difficult to see anything more than failure and contradiction.

Art should challenge us. When Blessed Josemaría so emphatically warns us against “bourgeois mentality” he certainly catches my attention. Most people in my field would regard “bourgeois mentality” as anathema. «Épater la bourgeoisie!» has been the rallying cry of modern artists. We have our own travails, we workers in the vineyards of art, but the locus of our struggles against mediocrity should not be society, should not be external, it should be our own conscience. I was brought to a deeper understanding of the sacrament of confession—and that the artistic/creative endeavor should be in tandem with the interior struggle of the soul to love God, and hence the Church, above all else. He has helped me to see that Christians have no enemies, only friends. The people with whom I come in contact in my professional milieu are souls redeemed by Christ: I moreover have some responsibility to draw them closer to God.

In terms of family life, my wife and I have derived a lot of benefit from the excellent literature written by faithful of Opus Dei concerning the family, and from the counsels and suggestions received in spiritual direction. The faithful of Opus Dei continue to do a great deal to assist parents in the noble task of forming their children in human virtues and Christian ideals. There's for me always the danger of getting a little too earnest about these things. My wife has remarked, however, that I've gotten much better at laughing at myself! She also notes approvingly that I'm getting pretty good at using humor to neutralize intense situations that tend to develop in a household with four teenagers. One of the vehicles for an upbeat orientation to this process of cultivating the next generation is

Family Enrichment, an apostolic initiative. What wonderful people we have met and what happy times we have enjoyed through Family Enrichment activities. Visits to different cities in Canada and the United States for Family Enrichment workshops have broadened our personal contacts and culture. Obviously, as an artist culture is important to me, but in Escrivá's understanding ongoing cultural development is not an extra, it's a norm: it is an important part of our apostolic way. I appreciate this very much. Obviously, too, cultural and educational enrichment go hand in hand with the enrichment of our family life. When my wife and I have the opportunity to travel, we do it with our children whenever possible. The very real fraternity we enjoyed wherever has been a treasure and a palpable and positive influence. I have had the good fortune to experience this fraternity on my travels: from San Jose, Costa Rica to Cambridge, Massachusetts; from Cologne to Torreciudad in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

Like any professional, I must organize my daily schedule. The universal call to sanctity has changed my life. Jesus in the Gospel speaks of his yoke being sweet. A yoke implies discipline. Before encountering the message of Blessed Josemaría, times of prayer expanded or contracted according to my convenience. Blessed Josemaría insists on a timetable for our scheduled meetings with God. Blessed Josemaría calls them «norms of piety» (*Forge*, 81). Both together, professional schedule and the timetable of the interior life, constitute what he calls the «plan of life» (cfr. *The Way*, 76; *Furrow*, 149, 381, 412, 512). To cite a concrete example of the effect of this beneficent orientation: before I got to know the teachings of Blessed Josemaría I had a tendency to «burn the candle at both ends», and I usually would get less than seven hours sleep a night. Now I get an hour more sleep, and according to a reliable source, my wife, I'm less cranky and a lot more cheerful! A part of any serious plan of life includes formation. We are students of Christ, students who are becoming teachers passing on to others what we ourselves have learned.

The Founder of Opus Dei wrote that «the Holy Mass is the center and root of the interior life» (*Christ is passing by*, 102). I have been influenced by this teaching. I try to orient my day to the Holy Mass, either in preparation or in thanksgiving. Through the daily practice of some standard practices of Christian life, I feel myself drawn to Christ. Of course I intersperse my working day with aspirations and spiritual communions and when I am doing such things as making or receiving a phone call I try to remember to enlist the assistance of the two guardian angels involved. I trust that as the years pass I will gradually become more marian and more eucharistic. And it is my desire that professional practice will become indistinguishable from «prayer, sacrifice and service».

There is the other side, too, of «passionately loving the world»: to try to correct ills that come within our professional scope. I would like to recount at this

point a campaign that took place in Vancouver in the early to mid '90's. "Rome" was a fond aspiration of Blessed Josemaría (*Furrow*, 344). The events I'll briefly describe concern the Eternal City, or to be more specific, our beloved Pope. Some of you may recall the furor generated about a decade ago by a notoriety-seeking U.S. artist with his photographs of individuals or objects sacred to Catholics immersed in urine. Pope John Paul II was the object of one of this artist's mocking photographic projects. There would have been little reaction in Canada to this egregious example of late twentieth century defamation, however, had not the director of the Vancouver Art Gallery chosen to buy the pair of offensive cibachrome prints.

I wrote the director. He wrote back inviting me to meet with him to view the photographs and discuss with him my concerns. The pictures were in the vault and if that is where they had remained that would have been the end of it. Within six months of my meeting with the director, however, they were on public display. All exhibitions eventually close, of course, and the photos were duly returned to the underground vault, and though the Gallery had received dozens of protest letters it was obvious that the message had not got through. The situation would probably have remained unresolved had not the Gallery, in a surprise move, chosen to exhibit the *corpus delicti* again, in March 1995, hardly a year later. It was this move that provoked my friends Dr. Michael Brear and Trevor Carolan to swing into action. They put together a committee and a coast to coast letter-writing campaign got underway. Various Catholic as well as non-Catholic groups and individuals joined in. We received media coverage from across the country and there were numerous radio, television and print media interviews. One last meeting with the director in October failed to resolve our concerns. Our committee thus chose to go public in a big way. On October 22, 1995 over 800 people, many bearing signs No To Hate Art, processed around the Vancouver Art Gallery. Some six or seven individuals representing different faith and racial communities gave short speeches. Unaware when we chose the date, October 22<sup>nd</sup> was the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inaugural Mass of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II! One month later the director, having lost the confidence of the Gallery board, was obliged to resign.

Looking back on those events I realize that what we had been involved in was an apostolate encouraged by Blessed Josemaría, the apostolate of public opinion. It is worth noting, too, that from the beginning to the end, our campaign was a lay initiative. It was an engagement with contemporary society in defense of art and culture. It involved the faithful and other honest people in defense of the Holy Father. Blessed Josemaría addresses the issue of responsible freedom: it is «a call to fulfill honorably your commitments as citizens in all fields....accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal inde-

pendence which corresponds to each of you. A Christian 'lay outlook' of this sort will enable you to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism». (*Conversations*, 117).

Recently I discovered that there is now a Mount Blessed Josemaría Escrivá in Bolivia. I would love to climb that mountain and paint it, too. I rather doubt, however, that the good God has at the present time such a project in mind for me — even taking into account the challenge of Blessed Josemaría's «dream and your dreams will fall short». What I do know is that the *sine qua non* for me is a youthful and sporting spirit; and surely as an artist I should be aware that this sporting spirit can never be far from the blind man's cry: Domine ut videam!