

Meeting the Challenge: How the Life and Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá Have Helped my Marriage

W. Bradford Wilcox

Research Fellow at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion at Yale University. He is currently writing a book on men, religion, and family life. He has been married for six years and has two children under the age of two.

I must begin with a confession. I have a doctorate in the sociology of the family and frequently offer my professional opinion on the family in the United States to friends, family, and audiences such as this. Of course, as many of you may know, doctors are legendary for giving advice to their patients that they don't follow themselves. And I must admit that I've been known to give advice that I don't follow. So it is with some trepidation that I now speak about how the life and message of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá have influenced my family life.

I begin by noting the perilous state of marriage and family life in the United States, since this is the environment in which I live and work, and this is the environment that necessarily colors my approach to family life. A few statistics tell the story: almost 50% of marriages will end in divorce; 32% of children are born outside of wedlock; and more than 50% of all marriages are preceded by cohabitation. Clearly, the U.S. is far from living the vision of married life — centered around spousal unity and children — offered to the world by the Catholic Church.

So what is going on in the U.S.? At the most obvious level, we have severed the moral ties between sex, procreation, and lifelong marriage that once bound our families together. But I think there are deeper cultural and spiritual sources of the problems that families in the U.S. confront. Two issues, in particular, come to mind:

- a sentimental view of marriage; and
- an androgynous approach to the sexes.

In recent years, a number of keen observers of the American scene have pointed out that Americans have an overly sentimental view of marriage. This sentimental view sees marriage as an opportunity for persons to focus on fun and intimacy — to share, explore, and nurture their deepest psychological and sexual desires. Hence, little room is left in marriage for children, virtue, and for the small and large struggles that mark the average marriage. In this view, marriage is punctuated by many ‘peak moments’ and very few ‘valleys of hardship’. In a word, the search for transcendence — a search that preoccupies all of us — is shifted from God to the marital relationship. And because no marriage can bear the burden of such high hopes, many men and women in the U.S. abandon their spouses when they discover that their spouses cannot meet their overly sentimental desires for meaning and intimacy in marriage.

As a married man and as an American, I admit that I have been and continue to be tempted by this sentimental vision of marriage. Left to my own devices, I’d prefer to spend time with my wife enjoying a fine meal out, speaking about weighty issues, and travelling to exotic locales. But the example and teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá have helped me to struggle against this sentimental vision by embracing the more pedestrian dimensions of married life in a supernatural spirit of service.

The founder of Opus Dei stressed over and over again that we find true meaning in life by seeking God in the very ordinariness of everyday life. In *The Way*, he writes, “Do everything for love. In that way there will be no little things: everything will be big. Perseverance in the little things for love is heroism”¹.

Of course, family life presents many opportunities to offer ordinary details of service in this spirit of love for God and spouse. One example makes the point. After we adopted our first son, my wife, Danielle, usually groomed our son before we went out in the morning. But there were numerous occasions when she wasn’t available to get him ready and I had to dress and wash him. Initially, I did not take great care with his appearance: I often neglected to comb his hair and tuck in his shirt, for instance. I didn’t see the point to dedicating so much care to grooming him: it took an extra five minutes when we were rushed in the morning and I was sure that no one noticed his hair at the morning Mass.

But Danielle did not take kindly to my failure to groom our son. She chided me on three or four occasions for not paying sufficient attention to Alexander’s appearance. At first, I didn’t take her correction too seriously. But after praying about it I realized that this was very important to her, that it reflected on our family’s reputation, and that this was a good opportunity to live out the

¹ *The Way*, 813.

supernatural spirit of service taught by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá in a small detail of family life. For all these reasons, I have since made it a habit to comb Alexander's hair and dress him appropriately whenever it's my turn to groom him in the morning. Needless to say, whenever I attend to family details in this supernatural spirit, I bring a measure of genuine happiness to my wife that no number of romantic dinners could equal. And I also gain a renewed appreciation of the concern that God has for the ordinary details of our lives.

Another challenge facing marriage in America is the androgynous spirit that, all too often, guides the relations between the sexes in the U.S. Men and women don't know how to act towards one another in and outside of marriage. We fear falling into a kind of retrograde sexism or simply have no practical knowledge of authentic masculinity or femininity. So nothing choreographs the age-old dance between men and women, and confusion ensues.

One indication of this androgynous confusion is that many men and women think that they can have close personal or professional friendships with members of the opposite sex even after they marry. After all, the thinking goes, men and women are equal, they are adults, and, accordingly, they are quite capable of handling themselves responsibly. In the U.S., it is quite common, for instance, for married professionals to go out for dinner and drinks with members of the opposite sex when on business. In these settings, conversations can and often do get quite personal. What these professionals don't realize is that such friendships can do serious harm to their marriages. I'm not speaking here only of adultery but also of the more subtle ways that men and women can fall into the habit of focusing their hearts and minds on persons who are not their spouses.

Sociological research, for instance, tells us that one significant risk factor for divorce is working with a large number of members of the opposite sex in one's work place. Of course, such workplaces do not present a problem if one maintains a proper distance with colleagues of the opposite sex and always strives to keep one's love for one's spouse very much alive.

"If a marriage is to preserve its initial charm and beauty, both husband and wife should try to renew their love day after day [...] A married woman's attention should be centred on her husband and children as a married man's should be centred on his wife and children. Much time and effort is required to succeed in this, and anything which militates against it is bad and shouldn't be tolerated. There is no excuse for not fulfilling this lovable duty. Work outside the home is not an excuse. Not even one's life of piety can be an excuse because if it is incompatible with one's daily obligations it is not good nor pleasing to God"².

² *Conversations*, 107.

But too often Americans don't take care to respect the deep, powerful, and natural attractions between men and women — and disaster ensues.

I must admit that I had fallen under the spell of this androgynous spirit when I first married Danielle. I had a number of close, personal female friendships, and I had no intention of breaking those ties. But, soon after we married, I learned more and more about Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's ethic of discretion when dealing with members of the opposite sex.

Thus, early in my marriage, Blessed Escrivá's message and example inspired me to break off close female friendships for the sake of my vocation to marriage. I did so knowing that I would be guarding my heart against any threats to purity. More importantly, I did so knowing that I was now free to give myself — my thoughts, my hopes, and my deeds — more completely to my wife. And this, of course, is one of the most central purposes of the vocation to marriage.

Of course, there are other challenges facing marriage in America. Our excessive preoccupation with work, our consumerism, our ceaseless desire to be entertained — all these factors and more impinge on my marriage and the marriages of my fellow citizens in the U.S. But the life and teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá have helped me meet these challenges by approaching marriage in a new spirit — a spirit that is not captive to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. Among other things, Blessed Escrivá has shown me how to overcome the androgynous and sentimental spirits of this age. His words and deeds have helped give men like me a vision of what marriage can and should look like in a world that has lost a supernatural vision of what the vocation of marriage is.