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70th Anniversary of "The Way"

2009 marks the 70th anniversary of the publication of St. Josemaría's spiritual masterpiece, "The Way." It has sold 5 million copies in 50 languages. Here is the introduction to "The Way" written by Bishop Javier Echevarría for the 2006 Doubleday edition.

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This year marks the 70th anniversary of the 1939 publication

of St. Josemaría's spiritual masterpiece, *The Way* . It has been and remains a source of inspiration and spiritual growth for millions of people all over the world, having sold over 5 million copies in 50 languages. In 2006, Bishop Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, wrote an introduction for the English edition of this book that is published by Random House/Doubleday in the United States (***click here for more information***). We present that introduction here.

INTRODUCTION TO *THE WAY* BY BISHOP JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA

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Before me as I write, sits an old book that the author of *The Way* gave as a present to a young architect named Ricardo Fernandez Vallespin in 1933. On the title page, one can make out in St. Josemaria's unmistakable

handwriting, a simple three-line dedication, which later became the inspiration for one of the points in *The Way*:

"When I made you a present of that *Life of Jesus*, I wrote in it this inscription: "May you seek Christ. May you find Christ. May you love Christ." These are three very distinct steps. Have you at least tried to live the first one?" (no. 382)

In the inscription, we can see clearly both how St. Josemaria viewed the Christian's life—as a journey in search of union with Jesus Christ—and why he not only gave away spiritual books but also wrote *The Way*: He wrote it to inspire others to seek Christ and to help them find Him.

In the author's foreword to *The Way*, he wrote, "I won't be telling you anything new." And yet there is something revolutionary about St.

Josemaria's message; as he himself liked to remark, what he had to say was "as old as the Gospel. . . and as new." Its originality, however, must be sought not so much in the text itself as in the striking combination of text and audience. In the point quoted above, for instance, the message is extremely familiar; its reception by a young architect, however, is something new under the sun

In 1934, St. Josemaria had written to the Vicar General of Madrid about a new book that he was writing—a book called *Spiritual Considerations*, that in 1939 would become, after expansion and revisions, *The Way*. He said that the "notes" he was putting together "are only useful to certain souls, who really *want* 1) to have interior life and 2) to excel in their professional work, because this is a serious obligation." That is the combination so characteristic of St.

Josemaria: the desire for genuine holiness, reflected in an intense life of prayer, and a serious commitment to work in the world. Needless to say, St. Josemaria understood "professional work" in a sense wide enough to include students and housewives and diocesan priests—anyone, in fact, who recognizes that God is calling them to the loving fulfillment of their daily duties in the world, not out of personal ambition, but rather as a way of offering glory to God and service to others.

The same striking juxtaposition of message and audience is present in another point in *The Way*.

"You ask me, 'Why that wooden cross?' And I quote from a letter: 'As I raise my eyes from the microscope, my sight comes to rest on the cross—black and empty. That cross without a corpus is a symbol; it has a meaning others won't see. And I,

tired out and on the point of abandoning my work, once again bring my eyes close to the lens and continue. For that lonely cross is calling for a pair of shoulders to bear it." (no. 277)

Again, it is not the cross of Christ and its meaning that are new; rather, it is the response of a young man with a microscope—in this case a medical doctor named Juan Jimenez Vargas—that is new.

The originality of St. Josemaría and the spirit of Opus Dei, which he founded in 1928, lies precisely in this combination of an ancient message—the call to heroic Christian holiness—and a new lay audience embracing it in the hustle and bustle of the workaday world. Between the lines of the book, we can discern a new culture of sanctity taking shape, a new breed of Christians striving to be apostles

and saints in the middle of the modern world.

That is the essence of St. Josemaría's teaching: this seeking, finding, and loving Christ, referred to in the book inscription in 1933, needs to take place in the context of everyday life. We are to look for Christ and find Him and love Him in ordinary daily life and work.

In his 1967 homily "Passionately Loving the World," St. Josemaría would sum up his message in this way:

"Everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians. Your daily encounter with Christ takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work, and your affections are. . . . God is calling you to serve him *in and from* the ordinary, secular, and civil activities of human life. He waits for us everyday, in the laboratory, in the

operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home, and in all the immense panorama of work.

Understand this well: there is *something* holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it. ... There is no other way, my daughters and sons: either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or we shall never find him."

St. Josemaría was aware that what he was saying could have a profound impact on many souls. Eight years before the publication of *The Way*, St. Josemaría had written, "I would like to write books of fire, which would run like wild-fire throughout the world." The reader, however, who opens *The Way* expecting a "book of fire" may well be surprised, for it is not a dramatic manifesto or a

rhetical tour-de-force designed to bring the masses to their feet. On the contrary, the author's own foreword sets a very subdued tone: "Meditate on these considerations slowly. They are things that I whisper in your ear, confiding in you as a friend, a brother, a father." Clearly, if *The Way* is, in some sense, a call to arms, it is above all a call to the quiet hidden battles of contemplative prayer and daily work.

At the same time, there is no mistaking the infectious passion behind this unassuming book, a passion for God and an apostolic passion for souls. Its powerful language is an important source of its appeal. St. Josemaria's style is both familiar—it is full of echoes of both the New Testament and of classical spiritual authors—and fresh, at times even colorful and colloquial. The tone is personal, pithy, and intimate. The author cuts straight to the chase:

"Don't let your life be sterile. Be useful. Blaze a trail. Shine forth with the light of your faith and of your love. With your apostolic life wipe out the slimy and filthy marks left by the impure sowers of hatred. And light up all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you carry in your heart" (no.1).

It is then, indeed, a book of fire . . . but a quiet fire of words whispered as if in prayer, its points like scattered embers waiting to be cracked open to reveal the jewel-like fire within.

Its unique tone stems, in part, from the manner in which it was composed, for *The Way* is a book that was not so much written as assembled. Its 999 points were not written in chapters; they were written one at a time, in notebooks and diaries and on loose slips of paper; they might draw upon a

snippet from a homily, a phrase of advice in spiritual direction, an inscription in a book, a piece of a letter—all later grouped together to form the chapters and, ultimately, the book.

In short, no one would mistake *The Way* for a systematic treatise of speculative theology—much less an "Opus Dei handbook." St. Josemaria had a much wider audience in mind, and he referred to what he had written as simply "considerations" or "notes." The points of *The Way* are not even, properly speaking, aphorisms or maxims. They refer too obviously to the particular circumstances of concrete individual lives; they are too personal, too "occasional." They often read like the interior musings of a soul at prayer or overhead snatches of a private conversation. In fact, in his foreword, the author describes the book in precisely these terms: as a

"confidential conversation." While the names and dates have been deliberately left out, the reader can easily hear, in the background, the thousand-and-one details of real daily lives: jobs, friendships, social life, sickness, war, suffering, studies, family matters. . . . These considerations are addressed to people in the thick of professional and social life, and the reader, listening in, is invited to discover for himself the way in which the points may apply to him personally.

Without question, this book is meant to be a challenge, a reminder of the practical consequences of every Christian's high calling, received at baptism, to be both a saint and an apostle. It is written, says the author in his foreword, "so that some thought may come to you that will strike you: and that way you will improve your life."

Above all, however, *The Way* is meant to inspire the reader to speak directly to God; it is a springboard for personal prayer—that dialogue in which Christ is sought, found, and loved. This is why St. Josemaría reminds us that reader and author are not alone: "our confidential conversation is being listened to by God." In the loving, fatherly presence of God, the experience of reading gives way, quite naturally, to prayer.

One of the marks of a spiritual classic is its ability to transcend the time and place in which it was written, and now, sixty-seven years after their original publication, we can see that St. Josemaría's quiet words of fire have truly circled the globe. From 1930s Spain to third-millennium Manhattan is a long distance, but the book has made the journey without apparent difficulty.

Along the way, it has changed countless lives. For many, reading *The Way* has marked, as its author intended, the beginning of a lifelong conversation with God. For others—like the young architect in 1933—it has been the first step toward their divine vocation in the middle of the world. For others it has become a lifelong companion, to be read and reread—a bedtime favorite.

Its powerful impact has not been restricted to particular countries, languages, cultures or classes: the professor in Berlin, the housewife in the Philippines, the businessman in Lagos, the ballerina in Boston, a priest in the mountains of Peru, the farmer in Dubuque ... all find something in the words of a young Spanish priest from the foothills of the Pyrenees that speaks to them across the growing gulf of years and cultures. Surprisingly, by speaking sincerely to himself and the

particular people around him in the 1930s, St. Josemaría Escrivá continues speaking to us all.

Perhaps, in *The Way*, we are hearing the voice of a friend we all can recognize: the voice, as the author puts it, of "a friend, a brother, a father"—the voice, we might now add, of a saint. For our friend and father from the 1930s is now a saint in heaven; these confidences whispered in our ear are being whispered by a man whom Pope John Paul II, at the ceremony of his canonization in 2002, hailed as "the saint of the ordinary."

St. Josemaría loved to speak in terms of roads and paths and journeys, perhaps because, as he once wrote, echoing Jesus's words in St. John's Gospel, "For us to reach God, Christ is the way" [*The Way of the Cross*, X]. Indeed, in the end, there is only one way: Jesus Christ—the Way, the

Truth, and the Life. Yet this one Way can take an infinite number of shapes, as vast as the number of men and women in history.

Cada caminante siga su camino —"Let each wayfarer follow his way." These words from a socialist propaganda poster left over from the Spanish Civil War became a slogan for St. Josemaria. In them, he saw an expression of God's mysteriously intimate call, which is unique for each person, for He calls each of us *by name*, inviting us to follow Him. For every single person on earth, there is a way that is, in God's providence, uniquely his or her own.

In his foreword, St. Josemaría says that *The Way* was written so that the reader may enter upon ways of prayer and of Love, and the very first point speaks of setting aflame "the ways of the earth." The closing prayer of the Mass for the feast of St.

Josemaría speaks of "walking joyfully in the way of holiness." What St. Josemaría insisted upon was that these pathways of prayer and love and holiness are the very avenues, highways, streets, lanes, and sidewalks of today's society. When we truly follow the footsteps of Christ, all the pathways of this earth become divine.

The Christian's life in this world, then, is a journey in search of the love of Christ. St. Josemaría's book is an open invitation to set out on that journey, and its final stage—quite literally, the end of *The Way*, its last point—speaks to us of the love that comes, as a result of seeking and finding Christ, as the fulfillment of that arduous journey, a love that, in fact, was there all along, seeking *us* out: "And what is the secret of perseverance? Love. Fall in Love, and you will not leave him" (no. 999).

Christ's love is both the way and the ultimate destination— where we are headed and how we get there. For today's reader, there can be no better introduction to *The Way* than those concise phrases of St. Josemaría on the title page of that other spiritual classic that he gave to the young architect in Madrid in 1933: "May you seek Christ, may you find Christ, may you love Christ."

Bishop Javier Echevarria, Prelate of Opus Dei, Rome, January 9, 2006

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