

Dynamic Man: The Vibrant Personality of St. Josemaría Escrivá

"St. Escrivá offers us warm encouragement.... However, it is in his spirituality and theology of work that we find the practical mind of St. Josemaría Escrivá and his abiding contribution to the Church of today." An article by Mgr. Peter Elliott.

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When I first made contact with Opus Dei as a young priest, I soon noticed how the personality of Saint Josemaría pervaded the spirituality and activities of "the Work". But this was no mere personality cult as may be found in various groups or movements. After some years, I felt that I had actually met the man, that I knew him, although he died in 1975, two years after I was ordained.

This dynamic Spanish priest, St. Josemaría Escrivá, still lived on in his expanding spiritual family, Opus Dei. He lives on, not only in the vivid memories of those who knew him, but through the major themes of his teaching which have guided so many people.

An Open Personality

It was the *transparency* of the man that first broke down the mischievous myth of secrecy that everyone told me was associated

with those mysterious people in Opus Dei. But there was nothing secret about Saint Josemaría. One had only to see the openness of his vivacious personality in cherished films of him engaged in dialogue with crowds of people and individuals.

This diminutive figure in a cassock was always a priest, the man for others. He was the wise and gentle pastor whose eyes directly met anyone who asked a question or posed a problem. He was there for that person, available, open, transparent. He had answers, clear and challenging, but no clichés. Most importantly he spoke to each person as if that person alone mattered in all the world.

A Human Being

He was thoroughly human; no plaster saint this man. At the time of his beatification at which I was

present, some critic alighted on alleged weaknesses in that tempestuous personality he had sought to tame since childhood in a good Catholic home. As for St. Josemaría, he frankly confessed his weaknesses. He was the first to humble himself, once he believed he had caused offence to anyone. But if critics imagined that anecdotes about slamming doors would put me off they were wrong. Finding human weaknesses in a saint only encourages us to recognise our greater weaknesses and then to strive to overcome these through the grace of Christ. This is how we can all aspire to that holiness which the Second Vatican Council teaches is a universal Christian calling.

His dynamic personality also comes through in his writings and teachings. Fifteen years ago, at a time when I was meant to be reading (and writing) learned theological tomes, I

found it refreshing to be able to stop and pick up a small booklet packed with his simple wisdom. The directness of his teachings is relevant to our daily lives. It is epitomised in his compact major works, first in that well-known collection of spiritual aphorisms or maxims, *The Way*, then in a more developed form in works such as *Christ Is Passing By*, *Furrow* and *The Forge*.

But St. Josemaría never preaches at us. That was not his style. This wise spiritual director always encourages us -and that seems to have been the constant theme of his priestly ministry from the earliest days, a *ministry of encouragement*. In this uncertain and unsettled world we desperately need his holy encouragement.

Christ-Centred

Encouragement pervades some of the major Christ-centred themes of

his teachings. I first think of the vivid Gospel imagery telling me with urgency that "Christ is passing by", that this Jesus is calling *me* personally. I am Zaccheus, suddenly called down from the tree and invited to join the Lord, to dine with him, to follow him on his Way.

This loving Christ is always passing by, but *now* is the moment to join him on the journey. St Josemaría Escrivá lived the urgent Gospel encounter with Jesus Christ. In his own life he practised the "promptitude of the will" in prayer and work, available to God, not tomorrow or next week, but right *now*.

Another infectious dimension of his spirituality is a deep sense of *being a son of God*. Through our creation and redemption in baptism, each Christian can and should say, "I am a daughter or son of God." If we really

think and pray about this, these are profound words, with many implications. Reflecting on and absorbing the truths contained in these words is a great consolation, especially during very difficult phases in life. No matter what trials come, we are assured of our personal value, worth and dignity through divine filiation, through being daughters or sons of God. Again St. Escrivá offers us warm encouragement, obviously derived from his own life.

Prayer or Work?

However, it is in his spirituality and theology of work that we find the practical mind of St. Josemaría Escrivá and his abiding contribution to the Church of today.

I well remember a destructive confusion that can be traced back, at least, to the sixties, when some radical theologians told us that "work

is prayer" so there is no need to "waste time praying". This attitude penetrated the Catholic community. Clergy and religious were encouraged to throwaway the breviary and lose their beads. On the other hand, a traditional theology still seemed to define work as one of the effects of Original Sin, because alienation from work is a common human experience. Therefore, others told us that praying is preferable to working and some spiritual movements in the 'Seventies followed this trend.

It became quite confusing, the more so because these extremes muddled a major practical issue that faces all modern Christians: "How do I integrate my daily work and my prayer life?"

This basic question confronts busy people working at home and in the market place, students, workers,

professional people, old or young. St. Escrivá saw the issue clearly seventy years ago when the pace of urban life became more intense in his own land. Through his spiritual and pastoral experiences, first as a busy pastor then amidst the cruel events of the Spanish Civil War, he found a way through this dilemma.

We are called to "sanctify our work", we are called to integrate a disciplined life of prayer with our daily work. Through a prayer life, all work can be transformed into God's work. Here we find the explanation behind the Benedictine title "Opus Dei", the popular name of the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei. St. Josemaría avoids the dualism that separates worldly activities from the interior life or that divides the Church up into working and praying components. Here he anticipated the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the positive teachings about

work given by Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*.

St. Josemaría was a practical busy man who spent his priestly life of prayer and work in the service of others. Today, I can know him through what he achieved and the continuing guidance he has left us in his writings and teachings. But I look forward in Christian hope to the time when I will meet him face to face, there where we no longer need encouragement because we will be one with Jesus Christ, the true Way.

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