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Archbishop Myers' homily at St. Mary Major

John Myers, Archbishop of Newark, delivered the following homily at a Mass of Thanksgiving for the canonization of St. Josemaria at St. Mary Major in Rome.

10/31/2002

We have just heard the words of Jesus Christ summoning us to launch our boat into the deep and to lower our nets for the catch. *Duc in altum.*

It is the theme that the Holy Father has chosen for the new millennium. And it is the life story of the man whom the Church has just canonized: Saint Josemaria Escrivá.

Today we raise our hearts in thanksgiving for the gift of a saint who taught us to convert the trails of ordinary human work into paths of divine love, to make everyday work God's work, in imitation of the Carpenter of Nazareth.

Certainly, St. Josemaria would tell us that his message was not really his, that it may seem new, but it is as old as the Gospel. Christ clearly called all of His disciples to be saints. The first followers were ordinary working people with jobs and families, who lived in secular environments. But they knew they were called to holiness. "This is the will of God," St. Paul told them, "your sanctification."

But after the age of the apostles and martyrs had passed, it was not commonly appreciated by Christians that secular life, the life of the ordinary lay person, was a path to holiness. “For centuries,” St. Josemaria observed in 1932, when he was still all alone with the vision God had given to him two years earlier, “the majority of Christians did not understand it. You could not find the ascetical phenomenon of multitudes seeking sanctity without leaving their place in the world, sanctifying their profession and sanctifying themselves in their profession.” It was thought that holiness could only be found outside the parameters of everyday life and work. In fact, over the centuries, commerce and culture seemed to drift further and further from the world of faith. We call it the secularizing of the modern world. The world, the market place, and finally even the school and home, seemed to become less and less

conducive to prayer and faith. Inexorably, the sense of the sacred tended to disappear from temporal realities. The Church, seeking to reverse this trend, would never cease trying to bring its wealth of grace and truth into the secularized society where everybody worked and lived. Churchmen have always endeavored to implement new projects that would bring the Gospel into the world, but Western society seemed to grow ever more disinterested and ever more secularized. It was like trying to bring water into an expanding desert with small man-made irrigation ditches; a discouraging task.

Then suddenly there occurred an eruption of grace right in the heart of that desert. It was like the explosion of a geyser. This was no man-made irrigation. This was God's work, St. Josemaria insisted, not his. Everywhere there were more and

more people who responded to his call, who began to live lives of prayer and detachment in the midst of their ordinary occupations. As the Holy Father said in his address to the Congress for the Centennial of the Birth of St. Josemaria: “The spirit of prayer transfigures work and so it becomes possible to contemplate God while engaged in diverse occupations. For the baptized faithful who seeks to follow Christ faithfully, the factory, the library, the laboratory, the workshop and the home can be transformed into places where the Lord who chose to live thirty years of hidden life can be encountered.”

When he died in 1975 he had given the Church prodigiously fruitful service. When he lowered the nets, the catch was astonishing. Two days ago in St. Peter’s Square we had ample proof of that, but St. Josemaria would insist that this is only the

beginning, that this fruitfulness should only make us strive harder to put Christ at the peak of every human activity, however modest. All honest work can be sanctified, and God wants a handful of men and women in every activity, in every city and village, who sincerely try to love him in and through their daily occupations. They will be leaven, salt that disappears into the earth, bringing its vitalizing influence to every corner of society.

What St. Josemaria taught might have seemed extravagant to some in the 30's and 40's, but the Second Vatican Council left no doubt as to the truth and the critical importance of his message. In fact the title to the fifth chapter of the Council's core document, *Lumen Gentium*, bears the title "The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church".

When [Blessed] Pope John called the Council in 1961, he said its purpose was to heal the centuries-old rift between the Church and the secular world. It was, he wrote, “to bring the modern world into contact with the life-giving energies of the Gospel.” To achieve this purpose one would need more than programs, policies, organizations or campaigns. What the Council called for was a new consciousness among the laity “in all the secular professions and occupations...in the ordinary circumstances of family life...that they are called by God...to work for the sanctification of the world from within, as a leaven.” “Therefore,” the same constitution taught, “all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their proper state. Indeed, they have the obligation to so strive. Let all then take care that they guide aright the deepest sentiments of the soul. Let neither the use of the things of

this world nor attachment to riches... hinder them in their quest of perfect love.”

Notice the double emphasis. “They are invited to strive for holiness... Indeed, they are obliged to so strive.” Not, “they are invited, and wouldn't it be a good thing if they were to give it a go”, but rather, “they are obligated.”

My question today is this: how many people do you think are aware of this obligation? Not of the existence of such statements in Scripture, but that they are personally obliged to seek holiness? How many people know in their hearts that they must seek union with Christ, be friends of Christ, dedicated and generous with their possessions, determined to acquire virtue by long and patient struggle?

Of course, those who practice no religion cannot be expected to share

such convictions. But what about religious-minded people? Church-going, practicing Catholics, people with whom you may occasionally discuss such matters? How many of them know they have this obligation to seek sanctity. Still few, I suspect.

How many take Our Lord seriously when he says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”? He didn’t mean that unless we measure up to some very high standard of holiness, he was not interested in us. What he meant is that sanctity must ever remain our goal. He won’t settle for less. Nor should we. He is easy to please, but hard to satisfy. He sees a greatness in us that we are afraid to contemplate. He died on the Cross to make holiness possible. He stays with us in the Blessed Sacrament to make it feasible.

But how many take him seriously when he says, “Be perfect”?

The natural man, and I am afraid that means most of us, would prefer that God stay in his place - in heaven or in church. The attitude the natural man takes to religion is what most people take to taxes. They are resigned to paying them, but they hope they won't be very high, and that there will be enough left over for their enjoyment after the state takes its share.

The natural man is willing to pay God what he regards as his due: Sunday Mass and the commandments. But he is afraid God will keep asking for more: more time, more of his money, of his comfort, and that there won't be anything left over, just for him. That's why he would prefer that God stays in his place and not interfere. Somewhere he has heard that God wants your whole heart, your whole mind and all your energies-your very self. St. Josemaria used to say that Jesus

started out asking Simon Peter for a small thing, the temporary use of his boat, and he ended up asking him for everything. This is not something the natural man wants to think about.

Why not? Why won't he? For that matter, why am I reluctant to think about that summons to holiness? It is not the fault of teachers, or priests, or schools, or even of families.

Certainly, it is not the fault of the Council. The fault, very simply, is sin, a huge, elemental resistance to surrendering ourselves.

“Come to me,” says Jesus, but the simple fact is that the natural man is afraid to really go to him. No matter what Jesus says about his yoke being easy, the natural man is scared stiff of that yoke.

Preachers can preach themselves hoarse about sanctity. We shrug our shoulders and think, “Well, that's the usual religious line”, or “that's o.k.

for some people”, or “he’s exaggerating”, or “he asks too much”, or “I am too weak, why can’t I be like everyone else”...and like the young man whom Jesus invited to follow him, we go away sad.

How difficult it is for this consciousness of the call to holiness to sink into our minds and act upon our wills. I think that is why, among so many worthy institutions, old and new, God wanted Opus Dei, and why, twenty years ago next month, the Church made Opus Dei a personal Prelature.

I know that the words “personal Prelature” may sound like something very technical, but the reality is quite simple. The Sacred Congregation of Bishops, in its Declaration Concerning Opus Dei, called these prelatures “a proof of the sensitiveness with which the Church responds to the specific pastoral and

evangelizing needs of our times.” It is a portion of the people of God — scattered worldwide—with a Prelate, his clergy and lay faithful who have a special task to perform. In the case of Opus Dei the task is to spread the awareness of the universal call to holiness among ordinary lay people, through the sanctification of their work and other social and familial activities. That is the service the Church expects of the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

It is a service that may involve schools or hospitals or retreats or other organized activities, but such things are only means. The mission the Church asks of you is that in your everyday work you exemplify and spread to others the ideal of seeking holiness in secular life. To put it simply, you have a mandate to put the spirit of Opus Dei into practice, first in your lives, in all of your behavior, then in your surroundings.

We believe that personal holiness makes a difference, that it is the only thing that makes a difference. A parish that is led by holy priests is different, and all of its people experience that difference. A family whose parents are struggling to conquer their faults is going to be stronger than other families. The same can be said of law firms, of grocery stores, of newspapers and trade associations. If the leadership in those places is committed to virtue: to the natural virtues and to the great theological virtues, then that family and that law firm and that grocery store is going to be different. It will be the leaven that gives life to the mass.

This work of Opus Dei must be done personally, one soul at a time. Each of us needs a living example who shows us the way, with whom we can identify. Each of us needs to be taught personally how to pray, just as

a child must learn its prayers from its parents. It is through personal spiritual direction that we will learn to be kind and humble, to practice virtue. It is a painstaking work, but full of naturalness. It is what a mother does with her small child; the worker with his colleague or friend, or the student with his classmate. A ten year old little leaguer who encourages his teammate to go to Sunday Mass is already doing that work.

In all of this the role of Opus Dei is to act as a coach who gives individual instruction and who encourages us to keep trying and not to give up on our goal or slacken our effort no matter how clumsy the effort may seem. It is not the coach of an all star team. Opus Dei is not for super Catholics, or elite Catholics, but just ordinary Catholics. All that is required is a willing disposition and a desire to serve.

In conclusion, let us take advantage of this joyful, grace-laden occasion to examine our conscience to see how faithful we have been to our responsibility to continue the work that St. Josemaria has passed on to us. No matter how poor we may feel our response to have been, let us take advantage of this occasion to start over again, full of hope and trust in his kindly and very powerful intercession. May we continue to ponder his teachings—they have unsuspected depth—and contemplate his example. This makes it easier for us to resist the temptation to be lukewarm and careless in our duties. It also helps us to be mindful of the absolute priority he assigned to prayer. Remember those priorities: “First prayer, then atonement, and in the third place, very much in the third place, action.”

May the Blessed Virgin, whom he taught us to love as children ought to

love their mother, bless each of us and our families. May she make our desires to serve the Church be ever more fruitful.

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