

# **Saint Josemaria's vision of the University professor**

Saint Josemaria described himself as a university man with a passionate interest in all aspects of higher education. At the same time, he brought humour to his vision of the University professor, seeing the latter as bearing a certain resemblance to the humble donkey. In a talk given at a symposium on "The Christian Challenge of Daily Life", a professor of English Literature from the University of Ottawa develops the analogy based on

his personal experience during his teaching career. (Original title of ...

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...the talk: "The University is for Donkeys").

## **Saint Josemaria's vision of the University professor**

Saint Josemaria once described himself as a “university man” with a “passionate interest” in all aspects of higher education. I want to begin by recounting an anecdote that might not at first seem related to my subject but is, in fact, a preamble to it. One day a canon at the Cathedral of Valencia asked his good friend Josemaria for a photograph of himself. **“Sure,”** Escriva replied. **“With pleasure. I’ll give it to you**

**right away.”** He stepped into the next room and returned with a small cast-iron donkey. **“Here, take it,”** he said, **“Now you have a portrait of me.”** The canon stared at him in amazement until Escriva explained, **“Yes. yes, my friend, that’s what I am---a little donkey of the Lord.”**

I was amused to discover that university teachers, like myself, also bear a family resemblance to the beast of burden, for, on another occasion, Saint Josemaria wrote:

*For me all donkeys have the bearing of a professor.*

With those splendid ears, that seem like television antennae,

And that bright and alert look.

But besides, it’s clear that they are wise because they are docile,

They let themselves be led.

This passage convinced me that the university is for donkeys, not those **“old, stubborn, vicious one[s] that would give you a kick when you least expected,”** but those young ones that are **“hard-working and [have] a quick, cheerful trot.”** Saint Josemaria’s comments were inspired by the verses of Psalm 73: “I was like a donkey in your presence. But I am always with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will receive me to glory.” It was a donkey, moreover, that Christ chose as a throne when he presented himself to the people as king.

I will translate Saint Josemaria’s ideas freely by using his own words, including those spoken when he was Chancellor of the University of Navarre, and try to show how they apply to the daily life of a professor. Like his friend the donkey, the professor should always be on the

lookout for that *divine something* hidden in his everyday tasks. In practical terms this means **“there is no excuse for those who could be scholars and are not.”** If I am to serve God with my mind, then I must realize that **“an hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer.”** This intellectual work, if it is to please God like the fragrant sacrifice of Abel, will **“have been shaped through deep study and surrender to [divine] Wisdom.”** I should be **“eager to make [my] pupils understand quickly what has cost [me] hours of study to see clearly.”** By increasing their understanding, they will conclude that there can be no conflict between faith and science, faith and culture, since **“the light of reason comes from God and cannot contradict the light of revelation.”** The mind will then ascend from natural truths to contemplating their Creator. In order to facilitate this process, I must

imitate my brother donkey and put up my ears, like supernatural antennae, ready to hear my Master's voice and **"to receive the truth of Christ as a light that orientates both action and conduct."** As a **"privileged cultivator of Knowledge, in love with Truth,"** I have a duty to counteract ignorance, which is the worst enemy of God. I teach people, not books, and I must bear witness to those I come into contact with. I am called to be a fisher of men since **"men---like fish---have to be caught by the head."** People who do mostly headwork, intellectuals, are, as Saint Josemaria used to say, like **"snow-covered mountain peaks: when the snow melts, down comes the water that makes the valleys fruitful."** Scholars, in other words, cannot lock themselves up in an ivory tower; their sanctified labour has to act as leaven for the good of society as a whole. In this way Christ will reign at

the *summit*. of their intellectual activities.

This is indeed a noble human ideal, but one, I admit, that several times I fall short of attaining. I tend to complain that there are too many lectures to prepare, too many tests and papers to mark, too many committee meetings to attend, too many books to read and articles to write, too many colleagues and students to see. I become lazy and fulfill to the letter St. Jerome's dictum: "Experience shows that when a donkey is tired it sits down at every corner." These lamentations are the strident brays of an angry and restless donkey that could be translated as "**I've had enough!**"

At other times, I think I am no longer an *ordinary donkey* with only *average intelligence*. I want to shine before men and steal their applause for myself. I no longer let Jesus use my

mind as His throne. So I dream **“vain and childish dreams, like those of Tartarin of Tarascon---imagining [I am] hunting lions”** in university corridors, **“where the most [I] will find are mice, if that.”** I become a legend in my own mind, and forget that professors can publish and publish and still perish. I become self-satisfied and unpleasant, making my **“knowledge incompatible with good manners.”** I remain a scholar, but one fit to **“be tied to a stall, like a mule.”** In this sorry state I do not allow my Master to carry out his plan to make me a saint.

But when the Master sees me **“so out of sorts, he gives a hearty, understanding laugh.”** I then realize how silly and futile my antics have been, and how **“patient and compassionate towards the failings of men and the rough manners of donkeys”** the Master is. I realize, too, that the Master has been playing



with me, that all along I have been acting out **“a human comedy before a divine spectator.”** I can’t help but think of my beloved Dante and his Divine Comedy. My heart is filled with joy because I know the donkey’s story has a happy ending: he dies working for his Master. I remember that I have a part in this Ageless Story, that I am called to make **“heroic verse out of the prose of each day.”** Yes, donkeys are very much like Tolkien’s hobbits, I tell myself: when they are weak, then they are strong. With this consoling thought I go back to the drawing board. Through love, **“a power far greater than that of the legendary King Midas, who changed all he touched into gold,”** I can change my ordinary activities into **“something that will last forever.”** My time on earth is indeed **“a treasure of glory.”** And I realize that I love to learn so that I can learn to love, more and better.

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