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The Implicit Pedagogy of Saint Josemaría Escrivá

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In August 1977, I attended a course at the University of Navarra in Pamplona for professors and tutors organized by the Institute of the

Sciences of Education, then directed by David Isaacs. On that occasion I met José Luis Gonzalez Simancas, who had just published a book on the tutorial system of teaching. Many years earlier, in 1951, after two years spent studying in London, he had helped begin in Bilbao Opus Dei's first corporate apostolic work of secondary education. In that city a group of families had provided the financial means needed for the establishment of the school.[1]

At that time I was writing a book on experiences regarding the tutorial system in schools, and I asked him whether, when introducing tutoring in Gaztelueta High School in Bilbao, he had been inspired by the British tradition. He said no: that Saint Josemaría had been the one who had suggested to those starting the school that teachers should speak personally with each of the students every two weeks, a concept that, in

the Spanish school tradition, was absolutely new. Gonzalez Simancas also said that Opus Dei's founder had asked them to offer classes in the evening for young people who had to work during the day, in the same building used for daytime classes.

From this encounter we can discern two elements of what we might call an "implicit pedagogy" in Josemaría Escrivá's approach to education and formation: giving personalized attention to the needs of each student in a relationship based on trust, and trying to ensure that educational opportunities are open to persons from all social backgrounds.

I've recalled this anecdote to exemplify how the founder of Opus Dei, although he never wrote any treatises on educational or teaching methods, had indeed offered certain principles that inspired educational and formational activities.[2] Others

have developed these ideas with personal initiative, carrying out educational and formational initiatives or writing books on teaching methods. Josemaría Escrivá was able to teach the educators because he himself, during his whole life, had personally educated and formed a great number of people, one by one. By his word and through his writings he had communicated his ideas on effective pedagogy to encourage many initiatives aimed at leading each person to maturity and a happy life.[3]

As an example of his guidance to educators, here is the answer he gave to a teacher in a public gathering, on November 21, 1972, at the Viaró High School in Barcelona: “Prepare your classes well, and be loyal to your students, so that, little by little, they become your friends. Finally, don’t stand aloof from them. Meet them halfway, and let them come the other

half voluntarily. That way you'll get to know them very well.”[4] Over the years, the influence of his ideas has expanded in concentric circles, since the many people who have taken up his “educational model” have in turn educated other persons and given life to new educational and formational centers.

Therefore, I think we can speak of an “implicit pedagogy” in St. Josemaría, which others have later begun to make explicit through putting it into practice over the past eighty years and writing their experiences about it. Victor Garcia Hoz, a pioneer in the study of the educational ideas of Josemaría Escrivá, has shown that the development of so many educational institutions inspired by Escrivá would not have been possible without “a vigorous and clear idea of what education is in all its aspects, and principally as the human person’s search for truth.”[5]

The Sources

St. Josemaría formed men and women who put into operation a wide variety of educational and formational initiatives all over the world. As is well known, Opus Dei, by its specific nature, tries not to have a philosophy, theology or pedagogy of its own. But to grasp Escrivá's educational ideas, we will certainly need to consider the educational centers that arose through his encouragement, besides looking at his writings and oral explanations.

When Josemaría Escrivá encouraged those responsible for the University of Navarra to organize initiatives for the formation of professors, he advised them to focus the course on practical experiences, and not to overdo the (also necessary) philosophical presuppositions. Thus began the summer courses of the I.C.E. (*Instituto de Ciencias de la*

Educación), run initially by three former teachers from the Gaztelueta school. In this approach, pedagogical methods need to be nourished by reflection on actual educational practices. I don't want to get into the specific topic of university education here, as Juan Manuel Mora and many others have done,[\[6\]](#) but I would like to point out the significance of this specific way in which universities can help further the formation of teachers, according to the founder of Opus Dei.

In regard to Escrivá's ideas on education, Maria Angeles Vitoria states that "it is not exact to say that he gave rise a school of pedagogy or a teaching method proper to the institution that he founded. Certainly, St. Josemaría had his own point of view on the topic of human and Christian formation, as he did on other subjects, but these were his own personal opinions. His

contribution is not the fruit of academic work, but rather the reflection of Christian wisdom. But Saint Josemaría clearly did have a very specific view of how education should be carried out to be effective, recognizable in the many formative initiatives his spirit gave rise to.”[7] For Professor Vitoria, Escrivá’s pedagogical ideas can be seen in the work of the teachers in educational centers animated by the spirit of Opus Dei: fostering human virtues in the students, the effort to instill a love for work well-done through care for small things, and above all love for freedom and personal responsibility.

The anthropological focus

After Josemaría Escrivá’s death, those writing on the topic of his pedagogy, following Victor Garcia Hoz,[8] have devoted a lot of space to his Christian-inspired anthropology,

since any educational activity is clearly based the idea of man that underlies it. The central anthropological coordinates of Escrivá are enumerated by Garcia Hoz:[9] the creation of the human being as the result of God's love; unity of life, founded on the awareness of being a child of God, which generates joy in the soul and leads one to give importance to the small things of daily life and to see work as a means of personal fulfilment, human solidarity and union with God; the conviction that an act is specifically human when it is born of a free decision.

Hence, according to García Hoz, education for Escrivá is aimed at making people free and responsible for their actions through a pedagogy marked by loyalty and sincerity in the relationship between teacher and student, between parent and child, between tutor and the young person,

and in general between the educator and the one being educated. And even more so, between the person giving formation and the one who wants to receive formation, since in this case there is a true “pact of formation” between the two people who explicitly choose each other.

As Madonna Murphy recently wrote, “St. Josemaría viewed education from a transcendent point of view, that of the totality of the human person’s being and end, in accord with the Christian meaning of life. His elevated concept of the dignity of the human being, based on an anthropology with clear Christian roots, led him to see each person as created in God’s image and likeness, with an immortal soul, with intellect and free will, and destined to enjoy God eternally as our ultimate end.”[\[10\]](#)

Value of moral freedom

According to Saint Josemaría, education should be aimed at instilling the capacity to freely choose the good known and loved as such, or what is the same thing, in fostering moral freedom. Education—an action that at the same time belongs totally to the educator and totally to the person being educated—consists, on the part of the educator, in fostering in the person being educated the capacity for free moral choice, and on the part of those being educated, in striving to become free and responsible for their own acts. This definition is valid for any kind of education, without any specific qualification (later we will see that he adds the adjective “Christian” here). Escrivá viewed education[11] as a help to construct a society in which laws are respected by citizens interiorly convinced of their fairness and usefulness, without the need for external controls.[12]

Since many people today are confused about what freedom really means, it is useful to quote Escrivá directly to clarify what he understood by freedom. In a get-together with parents in Guadalaviar, Valencia, on November 17, 1972, he said: “Love your children’s freedom and teach them to use it well. Help them realize that freedom is open to a serious illness: that of not wanting to accept the responsibility that goes with it. Then it’s no longer freedom, but license.”[13]

When he spoke about freedom he also stressed the need for responsibility. In his homily *Freedom, a Gift of God*, written in 1956, he wrote: “‘My freedom! My freedom!’ they cry. They have their freedom, but they don’t use it. They look at it; they set it up, a clay idol for their petty minds to worship. Is this freedom? What use is this treasure to

them, if there is no commitment guiding their whole lives? Such behavior goes against their very dignity and nobility as human beings. They are left aimless, with no clear path to guide their footsteps on this earth . . . A person who does not choose, with complete freedom, an upright code of conduct, sooner or later ends up being manipulated by others. He will lead a lazy, parasitic existence, at the mercy of what others decide.”[14]

Trying to have freedom without responsibility is the same as wanting to be free of any commitment in order to be open to all future possibilities. But thus one ends up letting others decide for them. If a young person seeks to live in this way, one cannot say that he or she is educated, because “acting freely” is equivalent to “acting morally,” and to desire only to be free of all lasting commitments, linked to a specific

end, implies rejecting all responsibility, and thereby renouncing the goal of becoming fully human.[15]

Education according to Pope Francis

Pope Francis has an idea of education similar to that of Escrivá. In criticizing the obsession of educators who want to control their own child or pupil in all situations they may encounter, the Pontiff writes: “This is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties.”[16]

For Pope Francis, as for Escrivá, the goal of education is moral freedom. What gives meaning and unity to the various educational activities is the conquest of a capacity for moral, free decisions to which the young person is called: “Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands, and that freedom is itself a great gift.”[\[17\]](#)

The Pope, as did Saint Josemaría, offers some specific guidelines for moral education in the different phases of growth. He begins with the suggestion to teach young people to renounce an immediate pleasure for the sake a better and more orderly life in common. Moral education should take place through “active methods and a dialogue that teaches

through sensitivity and by using a language children can understand. It should also take place inductively, so that children can learn for themselves the importance of certain values, principles and norms, rather than by imposing these as absolute and unquestionable truths.”[18]

It is not enough that the child, with the help of an educator, learns the natural moral principles that God has sowed in the soul, and thus learns to distinguish good from evil, because “other factors sometimes prove more attractive and powerful. We have to arrive at the point where the good that the intellect grasps can take root in us as a profound affective inclination, as a thirst for the good that outweighs other attractions and helps us to realize that what we consider objectively good is also good ‘for us’ here and now.”[19]

Another similarity between the pedagogical approaches of Escrivá and Bergoglio can be found in the area of *social education*. For Saint Josemaría, as for the current Pontiff, the opening up to interpersonal relationships and the active participation in the construction of the common good are two basic dimensions of the human persons that need to be fostered in practical ways. “A desire to work for the common good is not enough. The way to make this desire effective is to form competent men and women who can transmit to others the maturity which they themselves have achieved.”^[20] In the educational enterprises that have been inspired by Saint Josemaría’s message, not only is the noble ideal of understanding and serving one’s neighbor, and especially the weakest, fostered in young people, but at the same time they are taught to contribute what they can, with

professional competence and out of love for God, to building up the common good.[21]

Saint Josemaría frequently stressed that, if we truly want to help further social justice, first of all we each need to personally practice the virtue of justice in our relations with others: “Remember that justice does not consist exclusively in an exact respect for rights and duties, as in the case of arithmetical problems that are solved simply by addition and subtraction. The Christian virtue of justice is more ambitious. It enjoins us to prove ourselves thankful, friendly and generous. It encourages us to act as loyal and honorable friends, in hard times as well as in good ones; to obey the law and to respect legitimate authority.”[22]

Pope Francis voiced an important concern in an audience he gave on

June 3, 2015: “Living conditions in the poorest neighborhoods, with housing and transportation problems, as well as reduced social, health and educational services, bring about further difficulties. Adding to these material factors is the damage caused to the family by the pseudo-models spread by the mass media on the basis of consumerism and the cult of appearances, which influence the poorest social classes.” The consumerist “pseudo-models” introduced by the communication media even to the slums of cardboard and tin, demand of educators active in the poorest districts that they care in a special way for the concern of the students to improve their own community. This is well known by the spiritual children of Escrivá who work with young people in the “peripheries of the world.” The temptation to escape from their own native community to

enjoy, in economically better-off districts, the fruit of the professional skills acquired at school is very strong.

Similarly, in the educational centers animated by the spirit of Opus Dei, by express will of the founder, solidarity and social responsibility are fostered, especially among the young people from well-off families, through direct contact with the poor and marginalized.

A climate of friendship in educational relationships

The educator, as imagined by Escrivá, is confident that students accustomed to interior reflection will be able to discover inner moral principles. He also trusts that the good, when presented in a way suitable to the student's level of development, will gently attract that person's will. Escrivá never subscribed to "adulthood"^[23] or to

“moralism.”[24] He was well aware of the role played by conditioning factors in the environment, inner drives and other habits that may have developed, which at times hinder in the young person a clear vision of the good that makes us happy, the decision to attain it, and the carrying out of the actions necessary to act consistently according to the decision taken.[25]

Saint Josemaría left written in foundational documents—and explained in a thousand ways to those with tasks of formation in Opus Dei—some educational ideas that he called “*ideas madres*” (bedrock ideas): understanding for the weaknesses of others, the joy that comes from taking part in a work that transcends human capabilities, the optimism of knowing that in the end all will work out for the good, trust in the good will of others and in the attractive force of the good, the

constant effort to begin and begin again in one's personal struggle after every defeat.

Pope Francis too has stressed the joy and optimism that should mark the person who is carrying out educational tasks in the service of others: "Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good."[26] This is exactly what every educator worthy of the name tries to do, since one cannot educate with a stern and tense face.

For Escrivá, a "watched over" freedom is never fully formative. The

person being educated should not seek to imitate the educator, since the exemplary causality of the educator is something very different than the authoritarian imposition of a model. The educator seeks to pass on values, and is not the originating source of them. The educator and the person being educated adhere to values that transcend them both; they share certain goods that, because of age, the educator has mastered earlier, but that are not meant to be jealously kept to oneself.

On this basis friendship can arise, which Escriva frequently recommended that educators cultivate, although he also noted that the relationship between parent and child, between teacher and pupil, is not one of equality.^[27] “I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority, which the rearing of children requires, can be perfectly

harmonized with friendship, which means putting themselves in some way on the same level as their children. The children—even those who seem intractable and unresponsive— always desire this closeness, this fraternity with their parents. It is a question of trust. Parents should bring up their children in an atmosphere of friendship, never giving the impression that they do not trust them. They should give them freedom and teach them how to use it with personal responsibility. It is better for parents to let themselves ‘be fooled’ once in a while, because the trust that they have shown will make the children themselves feel ashamed of having abused it — they will correct themselves. On the other hand, if they have no freedom, if they see that no one trusts them, they will always be inclined to deceive their parents.”[28]

Friendship arises when there is a reciprocal good will between two people who share a common interest. For Escriva, parents and teachers should become friends of their children and students, breaking down barriers and eliminating as much as possible any distances. In seeking to interpret properly Saint Josemaría's ideas about the significance of friendship between parents and children, and between teachers and students, Michelangelo Peláez wrote: "The specific relationship of friendship is not, in practice, a secondary matter here; one could even say that it is inherent to all effective education. That is to say, there is no authentic education, with all that this entails, if in the respect for the freedom of the person being educated and the asymmetrical position of the educator, there is lacking reciprocal trust, the full disclosure of the good that is proper to the relationship between friends

and that makes the one being educated, in turn, a person capable of friendship. Thus we can speak of education through friendship and of friendship through education.”[29]

Young people have to learn to be friends of everyone (although not everyone will choose to correspond to their friendship), and therefore they need to be urged to seek new friends throughout their whole life. This desire to improve their own capacity for friendship is born and develops in young people through the experiences lived in their own family and in the centers where they are educated. Therefore it is up to parents and educators to take the first step to enter into friendly relationships with their children or students.

Orientation and Tutoring

In every effort to educate in accord with the teachings of Saint Josemaría

Escrivá—first of all, in the family environment—situations are intentionally created in which children are encouraged to make free decisions and to put them into practice on their own responsibility. As Escrivá told the publisher of a Spanish women’s magazine: “After giving their advice and suggestions, parents who sincerely love and seek the good of their children should step tactfully into the background so that nothing can stand in the way of the great gift of freedom that makes man capable of loving and serving God. They should remember that God himself has wanted to be loved and served with freedom and He always respects our personal decisions. Scripture tells us: ‘When God created man, He made him subject to his own free choice’ (*Sir* 15:14).”[30]

During the phase of “apprenticeship in freedom” (if I can use that expression), it is good that young

people have at their side a person who can help them to make their first fundamental decisions in life correctly and who, without imposing anything, can provide guidance. If at times young people, in the initial exercise of their freedom, make a mistake, they need to have an adult at their side who can help them to reflect on this experience and learn from it. The initial corrections of the route undertaken to become a mature human being reduces the risk of a bad use of freedom later on as an adult, although never completely eliminating it. If God respects and loves human freedom, said Escrivá, parents and teachers should also respect and love the freedom of their children or students.[31]

Educational guidance, usually called tutoring, is a feature of the educational centers started through the initiative of faithful of Opus Dei,

as the result of a specific indication of the founder. Interacting with a group of students is not sufficient for effective education. A personal relationship needs to be established with each student. Each young person has his or her own specific qualities, and should be seen as a “precious stone” that has to be helped to shine in all its splendor once it has been shaped by an adult, usually referred to as the “tutor” or “advisor.”

Escrivá often said that the most supernatural reason for carrying out a good action is “because I want to,”[\[32\]](#) and that the educational task consists in fostering good will: helping the person to “want to”[\[33\]](#) carry out the good. This strong love for freedom, present in the educational centers where teachers are inspired by the “implicit pedagogy” of Saint Josemaría, has two consequences: the atmosphere of

reciprocal trust among all the members of the educational community, and the acceptance on the part of the educators of the risk of a bad use of the very freedom they are fostering in their students.

Reciprocal trust

In a conference organized by the Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome for the centennial of the birth of Josemaria Escriva, a few months before his canonization, Concepción Naval gave a talk entitled *Trust: a Requirement for Personal Freedom*. Referring to the sphere of education, Naval said: “This appreciation for trust includes everyone, including children; hence its educational importance. Blessed Josemaría usually speaks about trust in the context of family education, but this recommendation can be equally applied to education in schools. Experience shows very

clearly all the problems that arise from a suspicious and untrusting attitude between teachers and students: the students, because they see their freedom threatened; the teachers, because they are exasperated by the apparent lack of results.”[34]

At the same conference, regarding the atmosphere of trust found in the educational centers inspired by the educational ideas of Escrivá, Professor Barrio Maestre said: “The first goal in these centers is to gain the trust of the families so that there is consistency between what the students see and hear at home and what they experience at school. This consistency is fundamental, especial when they are still quite young and when contradictory messages can disconcert the children. The next step is to attain the same environment, of a family we might say, in the school itself. For it is only

by obtaining the trust of the students, also by showing trust in them, that we can effectively achieve the educational goals that are sought.”[35]

Indeed, in schools run by teachers and parents allied by a pact of cooperation in the education of their children or students, and who know and try to live the Christian spirit as set forth by St. Josemaría, trust is a clear characteristic of the educational environment. In establishing a new educational center, trust needs to exist between the parents and teachers, between the teachers and students, among the teachers themselves, and among the parents who are sponsoring the school. Later trust is also extended to the new people who enter this educational community, and in a short time that trust is returned.

How far from the teaching of Josemaría Escrivá is an educator who seeks to grant a child a “watched-over freedom”! On the contrary, educators should show a “watchful trust” in their students, as Professor Barrio Maestre[36] says regarding Escrivá’s approach to education. Only in this way can a friendly relationship arise between the educator and the person being educated. Teachers in schools sharing in the “implicit pedagogy” of Saint Josemaría should strive to give all interpersonal relationships an optimistic tone, through an atmosphere of reciprocal trust and friendship.

The educational community

Saint Josemaría Escrivá always stressed the primacy of the parents with respect to the formation and education of their children. Professor García Hoz,[37] who met the founder

of Opus Dei in 1939,[38] was surprised the first time he heard a statement that he later repeated many times in the course of his life: “In a school there are three important things: first, the parents; second, the teaching staff; and third, the students.”[39] Over time, he came to realize that the primacy of the parents is not only a matter of educational rights, but that it is required for the teachers’ efforts to be effective, and therefore for the good of the students. When speaking to those responsible for schools, whether corporate works of Opus Dei or other professional endeavors directed by members of the Work, Escrivá advised that they strive first of all to get the parents involved in the educational process at their children’s school. A specific pedagogical formation of the parents should be the first concern of the directors of a school.[40]

The idea of an educational community in which parents take an active role was not very widespread in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century, even in Catholic schools. Escrivá, however, when encouraging faithful of the Work who were teachers to start schools, indicated clearly that they should involve the parents in this process right from the start. Speaking to parents at the Viaró High School in Barcelona, on November 21, 1972, he said: “I insist: these parent-sponsored schools are particularly important, first, for the parents; second, for the teaching staff; and then for the students.”[41]

To grow in freedom and responsibility, students need a certain harmony and consistency between what they are told at home and at school. For the efforts of the school to be effective, a loyal pact of cooperation is needed between

parents and teachers. The secret of the success of the educational initiatives that have arisen under the impetus of Josemaría Escrivá is found in the alliance between the family and school. Over seventy years of experience attests to the value of Saint Josemaría's pedagogical intuition. These schools have been successful when their primary objective has been the formation of the parents; less so, on the other hand, when the promoters fail to pursue this goal with a strong and steadfast determination.[42]

Christian identity

Escrivá, as we said, envisioned schools where first the parents will be formed,[43] then the teachers, and finally the students. Schools open to persons from all walks of life, thanks also to scholarships, who are helped to discover their identity as children of God, and thereby the source of

true happiness. Schools that respect the freedom of consciences and the educational rights of parents and that welcome students from all religions, while never hiding their own Christian identity.

In accord with the vocation of lay Christian faithful who seek holiness by exercising their civil rights, the schools run by Saint Josemaría's spiritual children together with other citizens—not necessarily believers—and which are not officially Catholic, [44] help their students to acquire a “catholic” mentality, in the original sense of the term, that is, a universal one. As the founder of Opus Dei said in *Furrow*, a book published after his death: “Since you want to acquire a catholic or universal mentality, here are some characteristics you should aim at: a breadth of vision and a deepening insight into the things that remain alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy; a proper and

healthy desire, which should never be frivolous, to present anew the standard teachings of traditional thought in philosophy and the interpretation of history; a careful awareness of trends in science and contemporary thought; and a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living.”[45]

Separate schools for boys and for girls

At times outside observers find it hard to understand the reasons for the separation based on sex in the schools inspired by Saint Josemaría, since in many countries today this goes strongly against the trend. Single sex schools can be surprising at first glance. But here they are the result of a very clear goal: that of recognizing the specific value of each sex in view of a mutual collaboration based on reciprocity. Escrivá did not oblige anyone to create schools that

were only masculine or feminine, but he established that Opus Dei would give priority to providing pastoral assistance and spiritual help to schools that offer a separate educational program for boys and for girls.[46] And the argument can be made that separation based on sex in the educational and formative activities at these schools (between the ages of six and eighteen approximately) is in line with the Church's educational tradition since antiquity and consistent with its pastoral experience.[47]

It is not difficult to see that the methodological choice to divide students according to sex is based on an underlying anthropology and a specific pedagogy. For a Christian anthropology, the sexual characterization of the person as man or woman has great value, for it stems from human nature, although in every culture it takes on different

manifestations. For a personalistic pedagogy, every boy or girl by the fact of being unique and unrepeatable, merits specific attention from educators, shown in a close personal relationship with each student's growth and education. Escrivá always had a deep appreciation for femininity and masculinity as a gift from God to the human being. And he warmly invited educators to foster each student's personal qualities through a strong educational relationship based on friendship, which at the same time is respectful of each person's intimacy. [48]

Education in the human virtues

The educational centers inspired by the “implicit pedagogy” of Saint Josemaría are not limited to imparting information, but also aspire to imbue children, teenagers and adolescents with noble and great

ideals to which it is worthwhile dedicating one's life. Part of this effort involves helping them acquire the human virtues that Aristotle three hundred and fifty years before the birth of Jesus saw as perfecting the human being, and that the Christian educational tradition has cultivated in youth for twenty centuries as an indispensable basis for acquiring the supernatural virtues.

Before looking at specific virtues, I want to stress that educators seeking to encourage students to acquire a virtue have to first possess it themselves and show that they are trying to live it as well as possible. Indeed, it is well known that for a virtue to take root in a young person's lifestyle, an exemplary cause is needed to provoke the free decision to acquire it by the intentional repetition of specific acts. The special characteristic of Saint

Josemaría's pedagogy, in regard to acquiring the human virtues, is the stress on trying to live them as lay people, *nel bel mezzo della strada*,^[49] as he liked to say in Italian, in the middle of the world and as a child of God thanks to the grace of Baptism.

Some of the principal virtues that, according to Saint Josemaria, educators should strive to foster in their students are: sincerity, loyalty, trust, friendship, refinement in human relationships, optimism, fortitude, temperance, an eagerness to work well. I will refer briefly to each of these below, and at the end consider the value of collegiality for the work of education.

—*Sincerity*

When anyone asked him which virtue he liked the best, Saint Josemaría always answered: sincerity. “Let our yes be yes. Let our no be no”: this is the motto found at

the entrance of the first school started under Saint Josemaría's direct encouragement. He used to tell those who came to him in search of spiritual advice and guidance that they needed to be sincere with themselves, with God, and with others. In *The Forge*, for example, he wrote: "Looking at our Lady's example has confirmed for me a clear rule of conduct: if we want to enjoy peace, and also to live in peace, we must be very sincere with God, with those who direct our souls and with ourselves."[50]

—*Loyalty*

On November 12, 1972, in the Andalusian city Jerez de la Frontera, Escrivá told a father that, along with sincerity, loyalty was a key virtue children needed to acquire: "Help them to be loyal and sincere, not to be afraid to tell you things. To do that, you have to be loyal towards

them. Treat them as if they were adults, adapting your approach to their needs, their age and their characters. Be their friend. Be kind and honest to them; be sincere and straightforward.”[51]

He recommended reflecting carefully before making any promises or taking on a commitment, in order to respect any “pacts” made, keep one’s word and fulfil commitments that have been freely taken on. In schools inspired by his pedagogical teachings there is a “pact” or “contract,” which is explained as clearly as possible, between the directors of the school and the families of the students, between the directors and the teachers, between the parents and the teachers, between the teachers and the students, and finally within the teaching staff, and among all the students. “I made a mistake” is a phrase that is heard frequently in these schools, without dramatizing

things, without any loss of prestige, without major conflicts. A person who makes this admission whenever necessary finds it easy to tell someone later, face to face, in private: “I think you made a mistake.”

—*Trust*

Escrivá always said that he would rather be fooled by someone than distrust an honest person. In *Friends of God* he wrote: “I will say it again: we have to be prudent, yes; but not suspicious. Give everyone the utmost credit for what he says. Be very noble. As far as I am concerned, the word of a Christian, of a loyal man—I trust every one of you entirely—is worth more than the official signatures of a hundred notaries who are in unanimous agreement, even though on some occasions I may have been deceived by following this rule. But I prefer to leave myself

open to the unscrupulous abuse of this confidence, rather than deprive anyone of the trust he deserves as a person and as a child of God. I can assure you that I have never been disappointed by the consequences of this way of acting.”[52]

Therefore he asked educators to make clear to students their strong trust in them. Teachers need to be ready to run the risk that someone might abuse that trust, but this would pale in comparison with the enormous damage to the growth of their freedom and responsibility if students were denied complete trust, shown in many small details.

—*Friendship*

The founder of Opus Dei had such a high regard for the human virtue of friendship that he stressed its importance for bringing people to God: “Through real, personal, loyal friendship, you create in others a

hunger for God and you help them to discover new horizons — naturally, simply. With the example of your faith lived to the full, with a loving word which is full of the force of divine truth.”[\[53\]](#)

The capacity for making friends with other persons, and preserving and protecting friendships when misunderstandings or differences of opinion arise, requires a specific educational effort. But for young people to acquire this virtue, even more effective is the experience of living in an educational community marked by a climate of friendship and getting along well with others.

In the schools inspired by St. Josemaría, friendship is fostered among the families of the students, between the parents and the teachers, among the teachers themselves, among the students, and between the teachers and the

students. The friendship between teachers and students does not harm the authority of the educators in the educational relationship, which is asymmetrical insofar as the adult possesses a good that the young person does not possess yet and seeks to acquire with the educator's help.

This principle is even more important in the context of education in the family. A point in *Furrow* says: “You have had the good fortune to find real teachers, authentic friends, who have taught you everything you wanted to know without holding back. You have had no need to employ any tricks to ‘steal’ their knowledge, because they led you along the easiest path, even though it had cost them a lot of hard work and suffering to discover it. Now, it is your turn to do the same, with one person, and another—with everyone.”[\[54\]](#)

—*Good manners*

I seemed to be hearing Saint Josemaría's voice again when the present Pontiff said: "In the family we learn to ask without demanding, to say 'thank you' as an expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggressivity and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm."[55] The founder of Opus Dei always recommended great refinement in interpersonal relationships, especially from those who direct an educational center. Two points from *The Forge* are quite relevant here: "Try to be considerate, well-mannered. Don't be boorish! Try to be polite always, which doesn't mean being affected."[56] "When you have to give orders, do not humiliate anyone. Go gently. Respect the intelligence and the will of the one who is obeying."[57]

—Optimism

We read in *Furrow*: “The task for a Christian is to drown evil in an abundance of good. It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being *anti* anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy, and peace. We should be understanding with everybody, with the followers of Christ and with those who abandon him, or do not know him at all. —But understanding does not mean holding back, or remaining indifferent, but being active.”^[58] In Escrivá’s view, a person afflicted with chronic pessimism and who is reluctant to use the means to overcome that defect, is of no use in educating and forming others. For an educator the virtue of optimism requires the habitual effort to see, first of all, the positive aspects of each student, so that these strong

points can then be used to help overcome any negative aspects.

—*Fortitude*

“Begin and begin again.” Saint Josemaría often used these words to encourage people to react positively when faced with personal and collective failures. “Your interior life has to be just that: to begin... and to begin again.”[59] This fortitude of soul stems from the humble recognition of one’s own limits and complete trust in God’s all-powerful mercy, who always offers us the means needed to begin again. “Do not be ashamed to discover in your heart the *fomes peccati*—the inclination to evil, which will be with you as long as you live, for nobody is free from this burden. Do not be ashamed, for the all-powerful and merciful Lord has given us all the means we need for overcoming this inclination: the Sacraments, a life of

piety and sanctified work. —
Persevere in using these means, ever
ready to begin again and again
without getting discouraged.”[60]
Adults who, after a personal failure,
are able get up again because they
are humble, also encourage young
people not to accept defeat, but to
struggle against difficulties and
failures.[61]

—*Temperance*

Saint Josemaría used to tell parents
that they should set an example of
temperance in family life and keep
their children short on spending
money. He wrote in *The Way* that the
only way to be an apostle is to love
and practice poverty of spirit,
contenting oneself “with what is
sufficient for leading a simple and
temperate life.”[62] In *Friends of
God*[63] he dedicated an entire
homily to the topic of detachment,
another, more secular name for the

Christian virtue of poverty. Here his teachings are very close to those of Pope Francis.[64]

—*Appreciation for well-done work*

Care for small things is perhaps the most direct pedagogical implication of Josemaría Escrivá's teachings on the sanctification of work.[65] Work that is planned and carried out carefully requires that it is also be well finished, for attention to the small details is where the love with which the person has worked is most clearly seen. One grows and matures personally through work that is carried out as well as possible, taking into account the time and means available, and as an act of service to other men and women. For Escrivá, work done with great care stems not from a maniacal perfectionism or from a stoic sense of duty, but from the free intention to serve others joyfully, that is to say, from a spirit of

service. Only thus can one avoid the danger of falling into routine, which leads to working negligently and merely to get things done.[66]

—*Religious formation*

“Children should see in their parents an example of dedication, sincere love, mutual help and understanding. The small trifles of daily life should not be allowed to hide from them the reality of a love that is capable of overcoming all obstacles.[67] When a father or mother asked him how to give religious education to very small children, Escrivá in first place recommended that they love each other, because children sense God’s love when they see that their father and mother truly love one another. [68]

Parents who want to enroll their children in a school inspired by the spirit of Opus Dei—including those

who do not practice the Catholic religion—first receive a clear explanation of the school’s goals and educational program, so that they can decide freely if they want to enroll their children there or not. They are told that religious education is grafted onto the trunk of the natural human virtues, and that this religious education is specifically Catholic education, which seeks to impart to students the realization that God is our Father, who wants us to share in his divine life attained for us through the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, his only-begotten Son, who has made himself a brother of all mankind.[69] The school’s educational ideal is clearly explained to everyone. And naturally, parents can request that their children be exempted from classes on the Catholic religion.

Collegiality in educational efforts

The education of a young person is a collegial effort of many artists who, by working in harmony with each other, produce a marvelous symphony. Each teacher tends to perceive in the student positive or negative aspects that reflect one's own experience and sensitivity. Teachers should never aspire to form young people in their own image and likeness, but rather to ensure that each person develops his or her talents to the full. Personalized educational plans and the correct assessment of each student require the integration of the viewpoints of many teachers. A student should not be guided in accord with one teacher's views, but in accord with what the team of educational specialists, in agreement with the parents, decide on as the best way to draw out that student's full potentiality.

Anyone who has read Escrivá's texts addressed to those with responsibilities of direction in educating and forming others, knows that for him the principle of collegiality[70] is a key element at all levels, whether it be for the formation of the members of the Work, for those who seek guidance from Opus Dei, and for the running of educational centers open to everyone, in which faithful of the Prelature work professionally alongside their colleagues.

Conclusion

As we said at the beginning, Escrivá was not strictly speaking an educator, but rather a “former” of persons. He never wrote a treatise on education, but throughout his life he formed thousands of persons of all ages and walks of life. From his writings and the centers he inspired some clear principles can be deduced

for education and formation, an “implicit pedagogy” based on the anthropological truth that the human being is a child of God, made in his image and likeness in a unique and irrepeatable way, with a masculine or feminine identity for the good of the reciprocal collaboration between the two sexes.

In order to be truly human, each person needs to acquire, through education, true moral freedom. For Escrivá, the goal of education is the acquisition of the capacity to make free moral decisions, with the corresponding responsibility for the actions carried out. Showing trust in young people is the first recommendation Escrivá gives to educators, who above all should create a friendly and cordial climate where they carry out their work. Collaboration between parents and teachers, collegiality in educational decisions and the building up of a

true educational community are three constants found in all the educational centers inspired by Escrivá. The key human virtues that Saint Josemaría encouraged people to practice form the indispensable foundation for a strong supernatural life, open to the sanctifying action of divine grace. This, in summary, is what we have tried to make clear in this article.

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[1] See Ramon Pomar, “San Josemaría y la promoción del colegio Gaztelueta,” in *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 4 (2010), p. 121.

[2] Education here refers to the effort aimed at making young people morally free and responsible for their actions. While formation refers to the effort to help adults improve—if he or she freely desires it—in some aspect of their life. Adults have the duty of educating children, although at times young people may rebel against the authority of their educators. The formative process is gradually injected into the educative one. Formation is possible when a person, to the extent that he or she is free and responsible for their actions, decides to strive to improve in some specific aspect: character, spiritual life, professional activity, religious doctrine, apostolate, culture, politics, art, sports, etc. Formation has to be initially sought; it cannot be merely accepted, as happens in the case of education, when those being educated realize that the educator has taken the initiative in trying to impart to them

something that by themselves they could not obtain and therefore they willingly agree to collaborate. The demand for formation can only come from the one being formed; if it is imposed, it is almost always ineffective: for example, in the case of some obligatory courses of professional updating.

[3] Both published and unpublished works of Saint Josemaría Escrivá will be cited. The unpublished writings are easily recognized by the citation AGP (Archivo General de la Prelatura).

[4] *Hogares luminosos y alegres. Catequesis sobre la familia* (“Bright and Cheerful Homes. Catechesis on the Family,” p. 110), in AGP, Library, P11.

[5] Victor Garcia Hoz, *Tras las huellas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Ideas para la educación*, Rialp, Madrid, 1997, p. 12.

[6] See Juan Manuel Mora, “Universities Inspired by Catholicism: Identity, Culture, Communication,” in *Romana*, no. 54 (2012/1), pp. 178–197; Various authors, *Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y la Universidad*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1993.

[7] Maria-Angeles Vitoria, “*L’éducation au service de la vocation divine de l’homme selon saint Josemaría Escrivá*,” in Various authors, *Education et éducateurs chrétiens*, L’Harmattan, París, 2013, p. 190.

[8] See Víctor García Hoz, “*La pedagogia in Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer*,” in *Studi Cattolici*, nos. 182-3 (1976), pp. 260-266.

[9] See Victor Garcia Hoz, *Tras las huellas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Ideas para la educación*, Rialp, Madrid, 1997.

[10] Madonna Murphy, “*Educación y enseñanza*,” in José Luis Illanes (ed.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, Instituto Histórico San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2013, p. 361

[11] See Saint Josemaria, *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, Little Hills, Sydney, 1993, no. 84.

[12] Education is the only way to ensure voluntary adhesion to the moral law, upon which is based the respect shown by citizens for the laws established by the state. As Pope Francis wrote: “The existence of laws and regulations is insufficient in the long run to curb bad conduct, even when effective means of enforcement are present. If the laws are to bring about significant, long-lasting effects, the majority of the members of society must be adequately motivated to accept them,

and personally transformed to respond” (Encyclical *Laudato si'*, no. 211). That personal transformation is the positive result of a successful education.

[13] “*Bright and Cheerful Homes. Catechesis on the Family,*” p. 53.

[14] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, Scepter, London - New York, 1983, no. 29.

[15] To make clear the pedagogical reasons implicit in the unbreakable tie between freedom and responsibility found in Escrivá, I want to stress again that the activity of educators consists, simultaneously, in enlightening the moral conscience of those being educated and in stirring up in them the will to act according to moral principles, discovered by means of interior reflection. With these goals in mind, educators should seek to pinpoint the most suitable means for fostering the

development of moral freedom in the various stages of growth of the child, the pre-adolescent, and the adolescent youth. The first step is always to help the young person to consider sincerely how he or she currently is, in order to decide what they want to become

[16] Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 261.

[17] *Ibid.*, no. 262.

[18] *Ibid.*, no. 264

[19] *Ibid.*, no. 265.

[20] *Conversations with Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 73

[21] Saint Josemaría often cited in his encounters with young people the phrase from Isaiah (1:17), *discite benefacere* — learn to do good.

[22] *Friends of God*, nos. 168–169.

[23] Knowledge, skills and values need to be presented in a way and with a language suited to the age of the person being educated. The error of “adultism” is treating children as though they were adults in miniature.

[24] Parents and teachers fall into moralism almost always through laziness, because they fail to consider carefully how they can make an objectively good moral principle be such subjectively also for the one being educated, or, more generally, how to help young people “interiorize” an absolute value. For a child to behave morally it is not enough to set forth objective moral principles external to that person. Rather, young people need to be helped to “conquer” these principles subjectively, to discover them within themselves, with an adhesion to the good that leads them to practice the

virtues as an expression of the values understood and accepted by them.

Life in common, stories that are heard or read, movies, all enable the young person to experience the relationship between a good life and struggling to live the virtues. Later, when the ability to reflect and reason grows, there comes the interiorizing of moral principles and the full capacity for free choice. But the child has already been helped to experience in some way the value of a good life.

[25] Upon finishing the educational process, the young person should be capable of habitually acting with freedom, in accord with interiorized moral principles that have been understood and loved. Having attained this interior maturity, the young person can act morally without the need for continual

assistance, controls, promises of reward, or warnings of punishment.

[26] Apostolic exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 9.

[27] Friendship between two persons arises when they share a common interest. In the case of two people united by an educational relationship, the common interest of the educator and the student is the obtaining of full human development on the part of the latter, that is to say, the autonomous capacity to act correctly for a true and just reason, interiorly understood and loved.

[28] *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, no. 100.

[29] Michelangelo Peláez, “*San Josemaría Escrivá e la sfida educative*,” in *Studi Cattolici*, no. 600 (2001), p. 91.

[30] *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, no. 104.

[31] Naturally the capacity for free moral decisions does not arise suddenly like a mushroom in a forest after a night of rain. The fact that freedom is acquired gradually, and strengthens to the extent that it is used well, is what justifies the guidance students receive in the school, which tries to assist them in their initial exercise of personal freedom.

[32] See Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, Scepter, New York 1974, nos. 17 and 184, and *Friends of God*, no. 35.

[33] See *idem*, *Letter August 8, 1956*, no. 38, cited in Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid, 2011, vol. II, p. 252.

[34] Concepción Naval, “*La confianza: exigencia de la libertad personal*,” in Antonio Malo (ed.), *La dignità della persona umana, International Congress “The Grandeur of Ordinary Life” (January 8-11, 2002)*, vol. III, Edusc, Roma, 2003, p. 241.

[35] José María Barrio Maestre, “*Educación en la libertad. Una pedagogía de la confianza*,” in Francisca R. Quiroga (ed.), *Trabajo y educación, International Congress “The Grandeur of Ordinary Life” (January 8-11, 2002)*, vol. VI, Edusc, Roma, 2003, p. 93.

[36] See *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[37] See Víctor García Hoz, “*La pedagogía in Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer*,” p. 264.

[38] See Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. III, Scepter, New York, 2005, pp. 111-118.

[39] *“Bright and Cheerful Homes. Catechesis on the Family,”* p. 107.

[40] Experience has shown that, in the schools sponsored by parents who are faithful of Opus Dei together with their friends, a new educational center can be established only if there is a group of parents, with a good pedagogical formation, who take on responsibility for its operation. Later on, this center will continue functioning well if, from the beginning, the group that promoted it is concerned to find and form new parents each year, who in turn will take the place of the initial group in the running of the center, in harmony with the directors of the school. The cycle of completely replacing the group of parent sponsors will usually take about twenty years.

[41] *“Bright and Cheerful Homes. Catechesis on the Family,”* p. 107. To

make this ideal a reality, one first needs to clarify the roles of those running the school, of the members of the board of directors, of the representatives of the parents in the class councils, of each parent and each teacher. If these responsibilities are vague or undefined, conflicts will inevitably arise between families and the school, especially when it comes to evaluating the results obtained by the students, the teachers and directors, and of making timely decisions regarding rewards or corrections.

[42] Only friendship between the parents sponsoring a school and the parents of the new students can assure the continuity of the school. The gradual replacement of those responsible comes about to the extent that the new parents become enthusiastic and get involved in the educational enterprise initiated or developed by others. This also

explains why, for Escrivá, in the school it is the parents who come first, then the teachers, and lastly the students. Without parents who, while respecting the professional autonomy of the teachers and directors, take primarily responsibility for the school, it will not be successful.

[43] Escrivá told Catholic parents regarding the education they should try to ensure their children receive: “This is how you will best contribute to making your children become true Christians, men and women of integrity, capable of facing all life’s situations with an open spirit, of serving their fellow men and helping to solve the problems of mankind, of carrying the testimony of Christ to the society of which they will be a part” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 28).

[44] These schools are promoted by Catholic citizens, together with

others who may non-Catholics, and are civil and not ecclesiastical initiatives. With regard to this fact, Escrivá said: “On the other hand, I must confess, that I do not like the expressions, ‘Catholic schools,’ ‘Church schools,’ etc., even though I respect those who think differently. I prefer to see things distinguished by their results and not by their names. A school is truly Christian when it strives for excellence, and gives a complete education—which includes Christian ideals—at the same time respecting personal freedom and earnestly furthering social justice. If this is accomplished, the name is of little importance. Personally, I repeat, I prefer to avoid those adjectives” (*Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*. no. 81).

[45] St. Josemaría, *Furrow, Scepter*, Princeton – London, no. 428.

[46] In higher level educational institutions inspired by Opus Dei's charism, for example, in universities, this criterion is not followed.

[47] For Escrivá, pluralism in these question should be fostered and loved by all Catholics. Responding to a question about apostolic activities of Opus Dei for married people (a distinct topic from that of schools promoted by members of the Work), Escrivá once told a Spanish journalist, in regard to other Catholic groups that organize means of spiritual formation that are mixed, for men and women together, that it seemed to him good that they did what they considered most suitable. However, this should not be considered the only possible way of giving spiritual formation nor was it obvious that it was the best way (see *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, no. 99).

[48] During Escrivá's lifetime, the results of studies showing that the level of learning is notably higher in single-sex schools than in mixed schools were not yet widespread. Nor can we assume that this educational advantage was his only concern in encouraging these types of schools.

[49] Alvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God, Scepter, Princeton, 1996, p.59.*

[50] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge, Scepter, London–New York, 1988, no. 328.*

[51] “*Bright and Cheerful Homes. Catechesis on the Family,*” p. 59.

[52] *Friends of God*, no. 159.

[53] *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 149.

[54] *Furrow*, no. 733.

[55] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 213.

[56] *The Forge*, no. 99.

[57] *Ibid.*, no. 727.

[58] *Furrow*, no. 864.

[59] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, Scepter, New York 1979, no. 292.

[60] *The Forge*, no. 119.

[61] Schools inspired by the educational principles of Escrivá are, in my experience, usually able to impart to students the necessary reference points they need to walk freely in the right direction in life, towards personal happiness. To those teachers who sometimes do not immediately see the effectiveness of their educational efforts and who could become discouraged, it is useful to remind them of what difficult former students so often say about themselves: “I went off the right path. I knew in my heart what the path was that I should follow but

I didn't want to, and now finally I have decided to do so.”

[62] *The Way*, no. 631.

[63] *Friends of God*, nos. 110–126.

[64] Pope Francis has often spoken about educating in temperance and self-mastery. For example, in the sixth chapter of his encyclical *Laudato si'*, he writes: “If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market” (no. 215).

[65] See Carlo Pioppi, *Escrivá de Balaguer. Un'educazione cristiana alla professionalità*, La Scuola, Brescia, 2013.

[66] See Giorgio Faro, “*Esistono virtù proprie del lavoro? Un contributo di san Josemaría Escrivá*,” in Javier López Díaz (ed.), *San Josemaría e il pensiero teologico. Atti del Convegno teologico: Rome, November 14-16, 2013*, vol. II, Edusc, Rome, 2015, pp. 293-302.

[67] *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, no. 108.

[68] Pope Francis too stresses the importance of the parents' example: “In the family, faith accompanies every age of life, beginning with childhood: children learn to trust in the love of their parents. This is why it is so important that within their families parents encourage shared expressions of faith which can help children gradually to mature in their

own faith. Young people in particular, who are going through a period in their lives which is so complex, rich and important for their faith, ought to feel the constant closeness and support of their families and the Church in their journey of faith” (Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, no. 53).

[69] A person who possesses a good foundation of natural virtues, is prepared to appreciate the greatest gift of God to mankind, moral freedom. God does not revoke this gift even though men and women so often misuse it, damaging themselves and making others suffer. The supernatural virtues, infused into the soul of the baptized person, and strengthened through personal correspondence to divine grace, are grafted onto the natural virtues and perfect them. The adjective “Christian” gives a further dimension of meaning to education, by

highlighting the interior struggle between positive and negative tendencies that every man and woman notices within him or herself, and giving the person being educated a clear and firm goal: the goal that God wants us to attain for our complete and unending happiness.

[70] The principle of collegiality was foreseen by him as early as 1936 when, having planned the opening of the first centers of Opus Dei outside of Madrid, specifically in Valencia and in Paris, the founder wrote some guidelines for those who would be directing the formational activities in these cities (see *Instruction*, May 31, 1936).

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