

Not a Controversial Figure

The Guardian in its issue of Saturday, December 22, 2001, carried the story that Pope John Paul II has cleared the way for the creation of three new Saints. While commending The Guardian for its report and article, it should nonetheless be pointed out that Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was not a controversial figure as he was described in The Guardian.

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Irrespective of how “Controversial” is defined by dictionaries, the word conjures the figure of someone who is a radical, who challenges the establishment on issues. Many people regard a controversial figure as a person who exhibits disputed behaviours. He causes argument between opposing points of view and almost invariably seeks to attract attention to himself.

By the definition of “controversial” which has been given here, no one who knew Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, whether by reading about him or by interacting him in person, can by any stretch of the imagination honestly call him a controversial figure.

Testimonies to Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, which were given by eminent persons, some of who were his contemporaries, close associates, referred to the brotherly affection of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and his

capacity for friendship. He preached and practised the apostolate of friendship.

Testimonies also highlighted the simplicity and naturalness of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. It was pointed out that he had a great heart and that his soul was not complicated, but simple and straightforward.

Contrary to what a controversial figure would do, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá would rather suffer in silence than attempt to justify his action or defend himself.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá preached the doctrine of the universal call to holiness by doing well our everyday activities, sanctifying work, sanctifying oneself in work, sanctifying others through work. According to the Information Handbook on the Opus Dei Prelature, the sanctification of ordinary work which Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

preached, is like a hinge on which the whole spiritual life of the ordinary Christian revolves.

Sanctifying work means carrying it out with the greatest possible human perfection, that is, with the greatest professional competence and with Christian perfection, which means doing our work for the love of God and as a service to humanity.

In his book, *Friends of God*, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá pointed out that “any honest, legitimate job, from the most important to the humblest in human terms, is a means and path to holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies. It can be an occasion for giving glory to God and for serving others”.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá pointed out further that an essential characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei, which he founded, is that it does

not take anyone out of his place.

“Rather it leads each person to fulfil the tasks and duties of his own state, of his mission in the church and in society, with the greatest possible perfection.” Blessed Josemaría Escrivá emphasized that the ordinary Christian can seek and attain holiness in and through the ordinary circumstances of life.

However, some people, particularly some Catholic priests, contended that the views of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on the holiness of lay faithful were revolutionary. When he started to preach about the universal call to holiness, the widely held belief was that the lay faithful could not attain holiness, which was thought of as a prerogative of priests and religious.

Anyone who wanted to lead a holy life was expected to become a priest or sister or to enter a monastery. It was, therefore, thought to be

preposterous, in fact a heresy, for a priest to state, as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá did, that ordinary Catholics could be holy and could become saints. Some people disagreed with the views of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on holiness, but that did not make him a controversial figure.

The Guardian in its report, described Opus Dei as one of the fastest growing movements in the Catholic Church, which has been criticized as being secretive and ultraconservative. Whenever a new organization is established, there are always those who will have something negative to say about it, especially if in a relatively short period of its existence, it has made a significant positive impact.

It is therefore, not unexpected that there were gossips, comments, backbiting and slanderous insinuations which were capable of

undermining someone's name even though they were completely baseless. Many of the damaging comments and insinuations, which were made about Opus Dei, were based largely on ignorance, envy, selfishness and mischief.

When Opus Dei came to Ibadan in 1965 where it first started in Nigeria, a small but influential group of priests who opposed the presence of Opus Dei in the then diocese of Ibadan disseminated negative comments and insinuation about Opus Dei. They had thought that Opus Dei was a threat to their stronghold over the administration of the then diocese of Ibadan.

Furthermore, the Founder of Opus Dei could not have been a controversial figure because he did not take any action which was not approved by the church. Sources have confirmed that he never took

any step in his foundational work without the knowledge and approval of his bishop.

Moreover, his doctrine of the universal call to holiness which was described as revolutionary has been adopted by the Church and expressed in the Second Vatican Council documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. It has since become a common doctrine.

In his lifetime, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá enjoyed a great reputation for holiness. Since his death, there has been further evidence that his reputation for holiness has spread throughout the world. When Blessed Josemaría Escrivá died on June 26, 1975, there was popular demand for the commencement of the Cause of his canonization. Many thousands of people from all the five continents petitioned the Pope to open the Cause of his canonization. The petitioners

included 69 Cardinals and about 1300 bishops, more than one third of all the Catholic bishops of the world.

The organization, which Blessed Josemaría Escrivá established to foster the awareness of the universal call to holiness among men and women of all walks of life, now has about 84,000 faithful throughout the world. At least an additional three times that number of people who are not faithful of Opus Dei benefit from and participate in the means of formation and other activities, which take place in the various centres of Opus Dei. Moreover, it is well known that Pope John Paul II has great admiration for Opus Dei.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was born in Spain on January 9, 1902, which explains why the faithful of Opus Dei the world over are currently celebrating the centenary of his birth. On May 17, 1992, he was

beatified by Pope John Paul II before a mammoth crowd in St. Peter's Square in Rome.

On December 20, 2001, Pope John Paul II approved a decree which was issued by the Vatican Department for the Cause of Saints, confirming the final miraculous healing, through the intercession of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, of a Spanish doctor from a chronic cancerous radiodermatitis in 1992.

The last hurdle for Blessed Josemaría Escrivá to be declared a saint has now been cleared. What is now left is for the Pope to fix a date for his canonization. We can only hope and pray that it will not be long before our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, announces the date for the canonization of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, a man of God.

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By Professor Joseph Obemeata

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