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The Primacy of Freedom

An article published in “L'Osservatore Romano” last June by Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Vicar General of Opus Dei, on the renowned philosopher Cornelio Fabro's great respect for St. Josemaría's teachings, especially on love for freedom.

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This year is the centennial of the birth of Cornelio Fabro, who was born in Flumignano, Italy, on August 24, 1911, and died in Rome on May 4,

1995. Fr. Fabro was a Stigmatine religious, and a great philosopher and university professor. For me, his memory is also closely tied to his relationship with St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, although they never met.

Fr. Fabro frequently mentioned the sorrow he felt in not having personally met St. Josemaría, whom he knew and greatly admired through his writings. This knowledge was increased by his friendship with Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, the first successor of St. Josemaría, and with other members of the Opus Dei Prelature, especially with the philosopher Carlos Cardona.

Cornelio Fabro's admiration and veneration for St. Josemaría was, in a certain sense, intuitive. The founder's message seemed to him to have the charm of the Gospel *sine glossa*, as I heard him say more than

once. This admiration increased, from the intellectual point of view as well, through his attentive reflection, which penetrated right to the core of any question. I think that was the reason why Cornelio Fabro, already in the early '70's, encouraged us to carry out the plan of St. Josemaría that later became a reality in the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

I cannot fail to recall with sincere gratitude the desire, frequently expressed by Fr. Fabro (and carried out with the authorization of his Superiors), to donate to our University his impressive library: impressive not only in quantity (some 30,000 volumes), but above all in quality. And I cannot fail to mention here the marvelous seminars that he gave for the students and professors at the University of the Holy Cross.

Fabro dedicated several works to commenting, with his habitual rigor, on some of the central elements of St. Josemaría's teachings. I will refer here to only two of these, which I consider of special importance. First of all, the article entitled *El primado existencial de la libertad* [The existential primacy of freedom], which developed and amplified a shorter text published in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1977 under the title *Un maestro de libertad cristiana* [A teacher of Christian freedom].

Fr. Fabro (who, as is well known, studied and wrote a great deal on the topic of freedom) perceived and explained very well the profound originality with which St. Josemaría helps us to penetrate into the knowledge of this great gift of God, both in the order of nature and, even more, in that of grace: the freedom of the children of God, which Christ has

won for us. “Only the Christian who is completely docile to the impulses of grace is truly and completely free,” he wrote. “This Gospel message shines with a special light in the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei. It is a paradox, the greatest paradox in our existence. But in Christianity, the highest truths always appear in a paradoxical form. Thus the true, that is to say the ‘real’ freedom of man, wounded by sin and weakened in spirit, is to be found in true, that is to say ‘real’ obedience to God, through renouncing oneself and the spirit of the world, through the suffering of the present life, and through a longing for eternal life.”

He went on to say: “in perfect harmony with the Second Vatican Council, the founder of Opus Dei sets forth, as the first good that has to be respected and fostered by Christians, precisely personal freedom; so that the primacy of freedom is not only

recognized in doctrine, but lived in practice, also with respect to other people.” However, as Fabro concludes, “the existential primacy of Christian freedom preached with such energy by Msgr. Escrivá does not leave man abandoned to his own strength, but is inseparable from the realization that one can only reach Christ through the Cross and under the guidance and help of our Lady, Mother of God, of Christ, and our Mother.”

The other text by Fr. Fabro to which I would like to refer is entitled *El temple de un Padre de la Iglesia* [The mettle of a Father of the Church]. This is a wide-ranging analysis of the central themes in the founder of Opus Dei’s writings, based on works of his that had been published up to that time (1992). This very detailed study led Fr. Fabro to the conclusion that St. Josemaría “unites mystical intuition with the most secure

doctrinal orthodoxy, thus leading the reader, gently but firmly, along the path of ardent contemplation and incisive apostolate. It does not seem excessive to say that, in our days, these works constitute an inexhaustible source of inspiration for a new dawn of God's Church in the world."

The widespread secularization seen in today's world, to be sure, is an obstacle to the salvific presence of the Church in the world. In reflecting on the thought of the founder of Opus Dei, Fr. Fabro said that "to the challenge of secularization, the Church responds through Escrivá in the most radical and effective manner: not entrenching the Christian behind a barricade raised to defend oneself nor foolishly embracing a culture hostile to the faith, but rather affirming that the incarnation of the Word is the perennially timely foundation for

man's transformation in Christ, and through human work, of all creation."

The depth with which Cornelio Fabro captured the central aspects of the spiritual message of St. Josemaría shows the keenness of his speculative mind. Fr. Fabro himself said that his own philosophical activity had developed in three basic directions. The first was that of interpreting and going deeper into the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, which led to what Fabro called *essential Thomism*, centered in the rediscovery of being as act and the corresponding notion of participation. A second direction was the study of modern and contemporary philosophy, which led him to study with special rigor the close tie between atheism and the philosophy of immanence. The third was a defense of Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegel, with a

Kierkegaardian defense of personal freedom and the choice to commit oneself to the Absolute, that is, to God.

These three directions all converged and cannot be seen as merely the rejection of modern thought. In Cornelio Fabro's intellectual itinerary, we encounter an immense effort to preserve whatever is of value in modern thought in the light of Christian realism. Here too we can see a real harmony with the insights of St. Josemaría, who wrote: "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” (*Furrow*, no. 428).

In regard to the depth with which Fr. Fabro captured the central elements of the teachings of St. Josemaría, one must also take into account that Fabro, while a philosopher, was also a theologian, and not only by reason of his preparation for the priesthood and his later studies and publications, but also and above all because he always saw his dedication to philosophy as something inseparable from his priestly life: as a service to the Truth who is Jesus Christ. A few days after the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination, in a letter dated April 25, 1985, Fr. Fabro told me: “Divine Providence and the constant protection of the Mother of God have

always helped me, and especially in the moments of greatest risk and suffering. I see it as a sign of divine mercy. *Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo*. I await with confidence, and I would even say with a serene joy, the coming of ‘the One who is to come.’ Fifty years of continual striving, in the service of the truth, with my eyes fixed on my own wretchedness, but also with immense gratitude for such a high goal, with a hope that will not be disappointed.”
