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In love with the world

Work and Christian life are not incompatible. Early Christianity did not dichotomize between daily life and the practice of faith. St Josemaria Escriva reminds us that the task of lay people is to bring Christianity to secular structures in order to transform them.

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The hullabaloo over the *Da Vinci Code* brought attention to the Opus Dei. Curiosity over the Work, because

of the ridiculous caricature of a murdering “albino monk of Opus Dei” who practiced outrageous corporal mortifications, brought to fore a lot of the objects of morbid curiosity – the cilice and the discipline. I believe one local broadsheet (not the Business World) also featured some interviews and write-ups about Opus Dei. Of course, what I would consider the most objective view about Opus Dei is the book by John L. Allen, a respected journalist who works the Vatican scene.

Simply put, much of the questions have somehow been cleared up – i.e., the Work is not some kind of secret Mafia; the so-called corporal mortifications are really a mild form of regimen practiced only by the celibates in the Work, but nothing as horrific as that performed by the stupidly created Silas character; and, Opus Dei is really about living a life

of sanctity in the world, in the daily grind of one's profession, school, and home. In fact, this is nothing new: St. Therese, or the "Little Flower," showed us the "little way" which she called her "elevator" to heaven, since she was too obscure to practice big acts of piety and heroism.

As a student, I also remember an anecdote about Don Bosco who, as a boy, when asked what he would do if he were told he was to die in the next moment, said he would go on playing with his ball – after which our good Sister explained to us the virtue of the "sacrament of the now moment."

Last Monday, June 26, the Church celebrated the feast of Josemaría Escrivá, who died in Rome on June 26, 1975, and was canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 6, 2002. Who is Josemaría Escrivá, what is Opus Dei and its message, and what difference does it make in the life of

an ordinary person such as you and I? Some people who attribute sinister motives to this movement have simply misunderstood it.

The second child in the family, Josemaría Escrivá was born in Barbastro, Spain, on January 9, 1902, to an ordinary couple, Jose Escrivá and Dolores Albas. Their financial situation was comfortable, but they were not terribly rich. In fact, at one point, Jose's business collapsed as a result of his partner's chicanery, and the family had to move away from Barbastro. He bore his misfortune well, and the family learned from his cheerful sacrifice. The Escrivás were a Christian family, going to Mass together on Sundays, saying the Rosary, and going to Saturday devotions.

Josemaría learned his prayers from his mother, and was prepared for his first confession by her. Later, he was

to write that his parents “did their best to give me a Christian formation, but it was in the home that I acquired it rather than at school.” It is therefore not surprising that among the centerpieces of Opus Dei, which he was to found in 1928, is Christian formation in a home that is “bright and cheerful.”

Without going into the details how, as a young priest, divine inspiration led him to start this revolutionary movement, and the many trials and tribulations he had to go through to finally establish Opus Dei as a true “Work of God,” let me try to distill the essence of this Work. It was “revolutionary” in the sense that in the modern day, the Christian faithful began to dichotomize between living their Christian faith and their daily lives. Piety and contemplative prayer were seen to be the function of priests, nuns and religious; the ordinary man had to

make a living, and going to Mass on Sundays and holidays of obligation, saying some devotional prayers, and in general, “being good,” was enough. His relationship with God and the world were two different things – being “good” meant not doing big bad things like murder, fornication, and adoring false gods.

Opus Dei opened up a whole new way of sanctification in the middle of the world, through the exercise of man’s ordinary daily work, and the fulfillment of family, social and personal obligations. Being a “saint” need not be through heroic things like being tortured and killed for one’s faith, but in little things one encounters in everyday life.

“Everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians.” Josemaría said, “Your ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are... It is in the midst

of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.” The world, in short, is not evil – it has come from God’s hand (“He looked upon it and saw that it was good.”) – it is we who make it evil and ugly with our sins and infidelities, he stressed. And so, we must “passionately love the world.”

In essence, he preached that we must not live a “double life,” that there must be a unity of our spiritual longing and our mortal desires. In other words, there is nothing wrong with working for a living, even of aspiring for professional and material advancement – what is essential is uniting these earthly desires with our final goal, which we were taught as young children, is to be happy with Him forever in Heaven.” For most of us, as we left the safety of home and school (where comparatively it was easier to be

“holy”), and began our lives in the “real world,” the concept of “holiness” became an esoteric idea that was difficult to practice in a “modern world.” This was a world where compromises had to be made, where piety was seen as weird in the office setting, where ethics was a situational norm.

But Josemaría, now a canonized saint, preached the unconventional: “Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him... our age needs to give back to matter and the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ.” In other words, he says it means to make “verse out of the prose of each day,” of doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

In essence, it is as simple as doing one's work as best as one can, whatever circumstances he finds himself in. It is an office or factory worker coming to work on time, and using his time fruitfully, and turning in work that is not slipshod. It is a businessman who, while doing his best to ensure a "black bottom line," does not underpay his workers, does not use inferior materials, does not fiddle with his books, does not cheat the government of taxes. It is a government official who, despite temptations, does not give in to bribes, does not cheat in elections, and does not use his position for his own gain. It is a journalist, editor or publisher who does not tolerate the slanting of news. It is the advertising executive who does not use his "creativity" by exploiting the human body, or the model who dares to say "No!" because he or she knows his or her body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a teacher or a nurse, or a

soldier who is underpaid, but does his duty faithfully. It is a professional who does not compromise his ethical principles for fame or glory. It is no less the housewife making both ends meet cheerfully, who tries to make her home a haven for her family. It is a husband who does not seek his pleasures outside his home. It is a child or student who diligently works at his lessons, because his parents work hard to assure him of a good education.

Work and Christian life are not incompatible. Over the years, true Christianity has become confused with rituals that are not “practical” in daily life so that the commandments have begun to lose meaning in men’s consciences. What is, in fact, important is to be in the world, while being otherworldly in the heart. It is to be in the middle of the world, but to be aware of the world beyond. Early Christianity did not

dichotomize between daily life and the practice of faith. Opus Dei simply reminds us that the task of lay people is to “bring Christian leaven to secular structures in order to transform them.”

In fact, the *Da Vinci Code* has actually led to many people seeking to learn what Opus Dei is all about. It has led them to discover that there is nothing sinister or secret about the preaching of this “extraordinarily ordinary” saint – his preaching is about learning to do little heroic acts (actually as simple as occasionally giving up a favorite snack, or of holding one’s temper when a goofy driver cuts in on you in traffic, or of smiling when you would rather be your *taray* self); in short, turning yourself inside out.

There is nothing secret about St. Josemaría’s preaching – it is open and out there for all the world to

see... and to practice. If only we all believed in unifying our ordinary lives with our spiritual sanctification, perhaps this world, which we continually lament as “going to the dogs,” would be a better one, one that we can truly love because it is a gift, because God “saw that it was good.”

Mercedes B. Suleik //
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