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Precursor of Second Vatican Council

On the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the 10th anniversary of St. Josemaria Escriva's canonization, Dr. Bernardo Villegas reflects on St. Josemaria's message and the spirit of Vatican II.

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DURING the month of October, two important celebrations coincided. One was the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican

Council last October 11, 2012, which was the occasion for the launching of the Year of Faith by Pope Benedict XVI. The other was the tenth anniversary of the canonization of St. Josemaria Escriva, Founder of Opus Dei, last October 6. This coincidence made me reflect on the major contribution of St. Josemaria to the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Reflecting on my own personal experience, I can say that St. Josemaria can be considered as a precursor to the Second Vatican Council by teaching the really revolutionary doctrine that every ordinary Christian, whatever his state in life, is called to the fullness of Christian life, that every baptized person is called to be a saint. This was termed by one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) as the "universal call to holiness."

I grew up to adulthood as a "pre-Vatican" Christian. By the time Blessed John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council on October 1, 1962, I was already writing my doctoral dissertation for my Ph.D. in economics at Harvard University, where I first encountered Opus Dei. In this very secular environment, I learned about the "revolutionary" teachings of St. Josemaria for which, in 1928, he was labeled a heretic because he maintained that everyone has an obligation to be a saint. I can understand the reaction of his critics in those years of the late 1920s and early 1930s in Spain for I, too, was reared in a Catholic environment in the Philippines where it was a general belief that if one wanted to pursue sanctity to the fullest degree, one had to renounce the world and enter a religious order or congregation or at least become a priest. Those who did not have a vocation to the priesthood or

religious order, consciously or unconsciously, already assumed that they were relegated to a second-rate Christianity. Especially if they decided to get married, the most they could do was to avoid going to hell. If they wanted to be involved in some apostolic work, they had to join some "mandated" apostolate like Catholic Action, Legion Mary, Sodality, Knights of Columbus, etc., which many of us pre-Vatican Christians dutifully did under the supervision of our respective Bishops.

As every post-Vatican Christian knows, one does not have to be a priest or a religious to strive for the fullness of Christian life. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church reads, "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness, a more human manner of life is fostered also

in earthly society." I and many other Catholic students in the Harvard community were strongly attracted to the teachings of St. Josemaria as explained to us by the members of Opus Dei. The universal call to sanctity was the fulcrum of those teachings. In a document as early as 1930, St. Josemaria already affirmed: "Holiness is not something for some privileged few. God calls everyone; from everyone He waits for Love: from everyone, wherever they may be; from everyone, whatever may be their state in life, profession, or occupation." I can still see the enthusiastic faces of the graduate students from Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)--physicists, biologists, economists, law students, medical doctors, etc. – when they first heard of this teaching from the chaplain of the Harvard Catholic Club, who at that time was a priest of Opus Dei. It was especially refreshing

for them to know that the ten to twelve hours of study they spent daily in their doctoral work were their main means of becoming saints. They did not have to be active in any "mandated" apostolate to spread the doctrine of Christ.

St. Josemaria was already preaching, much before the Second Vatican Council, that all Christians are directly committed to apostolate by virtue of their consecration at baptism. This was affirmed by the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* of the Second Vatican Council: "...the Church exercises it (apostolate) through all its members, though in various ways. In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well" (no.2). This was already *modus operandi* for the members of Opus Dei since the early 1930s. Written evidence is found in a text written by St. Josemaria in 1932: "The prejudice that ordinary faithful

can do no more than limit themselves to assisting the clergy in ecclesiastical apostolates must be rejected. There is no reason why the apostolate of the laity always has to be simply a participation in the apostolate of the hierarchy: they have the duty of doing apostolate. And this not because they receive a canonical mission, but because they are part of the Church. They carry out...this mission through their profession, trade, family, relations with colleagues, and friendships."

I had the great fortune to personally meet St. Josemaria in May 1964, before the Second Vatican Council ended. He told me and the others from all over the world who had a get-together with him to offer a lot of prayer and penance so that the Holy Spirit guide those assembled in Rome for the Council. He might not have personally participated in the Council. But some of his spiritual

sons participated in the Council, among them his closest collaborator, Father Alvaro del Portillo, In the years of the council (1962 to 1965), many council Fathers wanted to meet Monsignor Escriva and hear his views about the matters under discussion. We can truly say that St. Josemaria Escriva was a precursor of the Second Vatican Council.

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