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Saint of the ordinary

Columnist Mercedes Suleik writes in BusinessWorld about St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder Opus Dei, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of his death on June 26, 1975. June 26 is now the feast day of St. Josemaria.

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Last Saturday, June 26, was the feast of St. Josemaría Escrivá, otherwise known as the saint of the ordinary. He also established Opus Dei, which, contrary to many misconceptions, is

neither a cult nor a secret mafia, nor an association of strange people (as depicted in a best-seller some years ago). He died in Rome on June 26, 1975, having lived a pious life and teaching that, to be a saint, one does not have to do extraordinary things but simply to live one's life in whatever circumstances one finds oneself in and turn these events into "a means and an occasion for continuous meeting with Jesus Christ." He was canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 6, 2002.

But let me put in perspective the life of this ordinary man who lived a holy life and taught that one can be a "saint" in lower case (difficult to aspire to be one in caps), because this has been taught since the beginnings of Christianity. As St. Paul has said, we are all called to be holy. As indeed were the early Christians who did not dichotomize between daily life and the practice of faith. Similarly,

another 20th-century saint, Therese of Lisieux, described her "little way" as an "elevator" to heaven, since she was too obscure to practice big acts of piety and heroism. Josemaría Escrivá simply showed the way to practice holiness in ordinary life -- for people who lived in the world as professionals, manual workers, students, housewives, people in high places or in the very lowest rungs of society.

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer was born, the second child in the family, in Barbastro, Spain, on January 9, 1902, to an ordinary couple -- Jose Escrivá and Dolores Alba. Their financial situation was comfortable, but they were by no means 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. He learned his prayers from his mother, who prepared him for his first communion. He was later to say that his parents "did their best to give me a Christian formation...it was in the home that I acquired it rather than at school." It is not surprising then that among the centerpieces of Opus Dei, which he was to found in 1928, is Christian formation in the home.

As a young priest, divine inspiration led him to start the "Work of God" that firmly establishes the fact that living the Christian faith and one's daily life in the world is one that should be unified. Ordinary man has to make a living, and can in general be "good" if he does not kill or steal, and anyway he goes to Mass on Sunday, maybe says some devotional prayers, but that's about it, we often

think. Escrivá however taught that man's relationship with God and his relationship with the world were not two different things.

Opus Dei opened up a whole new way (or re-established how Christianity was practiced in its early years) of sanctification in the middle of the world, through the exercise of man's daily work, in the fulfilment of family, social, and personal obligations. "Everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians," he 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 is not evil -- it has come from God's hands ("He looked upon it, and it was good....") -- it is we who make it evil and ugly with our sins and infidelities, Escrivá

stressed, and in his words, we must "passionately love the world."

In essence, St. Josemaría preached that we must live "unity of life," that our mortal desires and our spiritual longings must be unified. And so, there is nothing wrong with working for a living as most of us do, of even aspiring for professional and material advancement -- what is essential is uniting these earthly desires with our final goal...which if we recall, we were taught as young children, is "to be happy with Him forever in heaven." Unhappily, for most of us, leaving the safety of home and school, and plunging into the "real world," being "holy" became something that we left behind as it was rather difficult to practice in a "modern world," where compromises had to be made, and ethics became "situational."

As St. Josemaría preached, "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, it means that we must do ordinary things extraordinarily well. And listen, I love this: we have to "make verse out of the prose of each day..."

I remember at one seminar we held in the early days that we were advocating corporate governance to a group of brokers, one said that "first, we have to survive." That, I saw was the current attitude that thinks that being ethical and moral was out of place in the hurly-burly of business -- that is, in business, if one

wished to be successful and prosperous, one had to choose between being good and being bad, proper and improper, moral and immoral, selfless and selfish.

Of course making the right choice is not easy. It involves a struggle with oneself. And of course, one keeps falling. But holiness is not about people who are already perfect. And that is why this saint, who considered himself an ordinary man who struggled every day of his life can show us that holiness is for everyone, for the businessman, for office and factory workers, for students and professors, for jeepney drivers and their passengers, for the housewife and mother who must teach the little ones to make the right choices in the small things that take place in their everyday lives. It is certainly not easy, not with our weak, concupiscent natures, but St. Josemaría says that it is possible,

even for ordinary people. With God's grace, to which we must be open...just as children are open and ready to accept that Daddy and Mommy want the best for them, even while throwing a tantrum about what they want. As most of us do, toward our Father God, whom we think is bent on creating difficulties for us!

We celebrate the feast of St. Josemaría, because he has taught us the way to be holy in our ordinary lives, that we can still live in the world with its cares and worries, and joys and rewards, and be certain that we are fulfilling the will of God for us.

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