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St. Josemaria and the Poor

Dr. Bernardo Villegas writes in his column that if St. Josemaria Escriva had been in the Manila of today, he would have spent countless hours administering to both the material and spiritual needs of the very poor in such districts as Tondo and Payatas.

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ST. Josemaria Escriva would have been the male equivalent of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (now Blessed

Teresa) in the last century if he did not receive the vocation from God to found Opus Dei, a way of sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the ordinary duties of a Christian. He spent the early years of his priesthood substantially given to the ministry of the poor and the sick in the most depressed areas of Madrid, the capital of what at that time was very much a Third World country. If he had been in the Manila of today, he would have spent countless hours administering to both the material and spiritual needs of the very poor in such districts as Tondo and Payatas.

As Chaplain of an NGO that was called the Foundation for the Sick, he spared no effort and time to attend to thousands of poor and sick people. As one of his biographers, Andres Vazquez de Prada, wrote in *The Founder of Opus Dei*, "The Foundation for the Sick waged war

on ignorance and misery, through schools, soup kitchens, clinics, chapels, and catechetical programs scattered all through Madrid and the surrounding areas. On the ground floor of Santa Engracia, there was a public dining room, and on the second floor, a 20-bed infirmary. The parlors and bedrooms of the Foundation looked out into a large courtyard with a public church attached. There, early each morning, the chaplain said Mass." Through his personal example, he made it clear that the spiritual needs of the poor should be given the highest priority in any charitable work.

The priority given to the spiritual needs of the poor is clearly reflected in the following description given by Vazquez de Prada in his book: "There were all kinds of activities at the Foundation on weekends. As a prelude to his other pastoral ministrations, the chaplain started

off in the confessional. On Saturdays, the poor and sick from the surrounding neighborhoods came to Santa Engracia – that is, those whose ailments did not prevent them from getting there – or physical and spiritual care in the clinic and the chapel. On Sundays, it was the turn of the boys and girls of the schools that the Apostolic Ladies conducted. They all gathered at Santa Engracia, and Father Josemaria heard their confessions. So many people showed up there on the weekend that an observer used to say, 'Here at the Foundation, everything is done by the ton.'"

Despite his great concern for the material welfare of the poor, he never made the mistake of converting the Catholic religion into a purely social work. He made sure that first and foremost, the poorest of the poor had access to the life-giving Sacraments. In his own words, "I

went for hours and hours all over the place every day, on foot, from one area to another, among poor people ashamed of their poverty and poor people too miserable to be ashamed, who had nothing at all; among children with running noses – dirty, but children, which means souls pleasing to God. How indignant I feel in my priestly soul when they say that small children should not go to confession! That's not true! They should make their personal confession, speaking one on one to the priest in secret, just like everyone else. What good, what joy it brings them! I spent many hours in that work, and I'm only sorry that it was not more."

After he saw that it was God's will that he should found Opus Dei on that fateful October 2, 1928, Feast of the Holy Guardian Angels, he devoted all his energies to spreading the doctrine of the universal call to

sanctity, a teaching that became the centerpiece of the Second Vatican Council almost forty years later. His preferential love for the poor, however, never left him. He made sure that the young university students whom he introduced to the spirituality of Opus Dei would spend many hours in the slum districts of Madrid, bathing the sick, cutting their nails, giving them all the possible material and spiritual care of which they were capable, even at the risk of contamination from infectious diseases (tuberculosis was at that time still incurable). These examples from the first years of Opus Dei have been replicated thousands of times all over the world today as the faithful of the Prelature have given the highest priority in their corporate and personal apostolic works to giving material and spiritual assistance to the poorest of the poor. In all the continents where Opus Dei is

present, there are hospitals and clinics for the poor; technical schools for out-of-school youth in farming, electro-mechanical skills, culinary arts, and other skills that enable the children of the poor to obtain gainful employment. In the Philippines for example, faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei have established such technical schools for out-of-school youth like Dualtech in Manila and CITE in Cebu; Punlaan and Anihan in Luzon and Banilad in Cebu; Family Farm Schools in Batangas and Iloilo; and many other personal initiatives of individual members and cooperators.

As he told Tad Szulc of the New York Times in an interview on October 7, 1966, "In all countries in which it works, Opus Dei does carry out social, educational, and welfare projects. They are not, however, its main function. Opus Dei's aim is to help men and women to be good

Christians, and therefore witnesses of Christ in the midst of their everyday occupations. The activities you mention are directed precisely towards that goal. The effectiveness of all our work is, therefore, based on the grace of God and on a life of prayer, work, and sacrifice. But undoubtedly, any activity in the field of education or social welfare needs to make use of a certain amount of money." Fortunately, in the Philippines and all over the world, there are enough generous souls who give financial assistance to all these undertakings.

Dr. Bernardo M. Villegas //
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