

Thanksgiving Mass Homily of Bishop Stack

Bishop Stack was the main celebrant at a Mass of Thanksgiving for the Canonisation of Saint Josemaria Escriva in London on November 26, in the church of Our Lady of Victories. This is the text of his homily.

12/15/2002

One of my favourite pieces of modern art is the controversial

painting of the crucifixion by Salvador Dali. The viewer looks down from above on the bowed head, the outstretched arms and the tapering legs of the crucified Jesus. From that perspective, the eye is taken to the foot of the cross which is plunged deep into the earth. Calvary is the “holy ground.” It is the place where God plumbed the depths of human suffering, where people reject the revelation of God’s love, where evil seems triumphant.

When looking at that picture, the text which immediately comes to mind is that spoken by St. Josemaría Escrivá as he reflected on his mystical experience in August 1931. At the elevation of the host after the consecration, Josemaría was overwhelmed with the words from the 12th chapter of St. John’s gospel: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

The Cross stands at the crossroads of human history. The lowest point of human history becomes the highest point of God's revelation. Hanging on the Cross Jesus goes on revealing, goes on loving, goes on forgiving, those who would wish to erase the presence of God from human experience. "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

The Cross stands at the centre of each person's individual life also. The questions raised by the Cross, about the nature and purpose of human existence, how we view the meaning of life and our contribution to it, are focused in the self-giving love which enables Jesus to give his life for the salvation of the world. I am always struck by the fact that Jesus *gives* his life, Judas *took* his life: two totally different perspectives on life, death and resurrection.

Reflecting on his encounter with the transcendent, Josemaría wrote: “I understood that it would be the men and women of God, who will raise up the cross with the teachings of Christ, placing them at the peak of all human experience. And I saw Our Lord triumphing and drawing all things to himself.”

In calling us to contemplate the cross of Jesus Christ, Josemaría asks us to enter into its mystery. Cardinal Hume often said it is only in prayerful contemplation of Christ crucified, followed by the action which his divine love demands, that the cross will slowly yield up its secrets, as we try to comprehend the mystery of life, and death, and life beyond the grave. It is the life of prayerful contemplation which surely is at the centre of the call to holiness proclaimed and lived by our new saint.

Reflecting on the canonisation, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: “Being holy is nothing other than speaking with God, as a friend speaks to a friend.” Cardinal Newman once said, *cor ad cor loquitur*, “the heart speaks to the heart” in this contemplation, which is loving prayer.

That prayerful dialogue, of course, calls us to action. The contemplative and active involvement of every person is the universal call to holiness, which is the essence of the message of Opus Dei. Saint Josemaría called for a new theological insight and understanding of creation and our part in it. He did not accept that God withdrew after his definitive act of creation. Josemaría saw all human beings almost as co-creators, as stewards of God’s creation. That surely means every word, every action, every thought, every decision, contributes to the building up of God’s creation and His kingdom here

on earth. We either build up or contribute to its diminution.

No wonder he spoke of the way to holiness and redemption as being through the sanctification of the ordinary things of life: allowing the presence of God to transform our world of work, our world of leisure, our intellectual life and our spiritual life. By recognising that our career, our vocation, our every job, everything we do, everything we are, constitutes the stuff of which holiness can be formed.

The way in which we *engage* with that world of work is an outward sign of the inner reality which is the glory of God and is humanity fully alive. The conscious dedication of every little thing, the word, the gesture, the relevant question to colleagues or friends, the example to fellow workers, all opportunities not just to fulfil our own spiritual

destiny, but to be an example and a guide to other people on their journey of faith, on their journey through life.

Salvador Dali got his inspiration for his crucifixion scene from the great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross. St. Teresa of Avila relied greatly on this sixteenth century mystic and his understanding of the place of the cross in human history. Another daughter of Carmel, St. Theresa of Lisieux, taught us (and still does) that heroic virtue, true sanctity, real personal conversion, do not come *primarily* through great gestures and heroic witness. They come through the *Little Way*. “Well done, good and faithful servant, because you have been faithful in little things, I will put you in charge of even greater things” (Luke 19:17).

I was privileged to be in Rome for the celebrations marking the

canonisation of St. Josemaría. I was able to see at first hand the love and loyalty and the inspiration which he offered to over three hundred thousand people who attended that ceremony and the hundreds and thousands of other members of the family of Opus Dei throughout the world. I was also privileged to stand close to one who is bearing in his own body the burden of the Cross and who seemed uplifted with elation as he pronounced the name of our new saint.

As the Pope's physical strength seems to be ebbing away, there is a forcefulness and a strength in his word and example as to what it means to engage with suffering and pain and the burden of years. He is an example of what it means to be faithful to our vocation no matter what the circumstances of our lives. It would no doubt be easier for him not to engage with the social, moral,

spiritual and political issues of our day given the fragility of his health. But standing by the cross of Jesus is where the Holy Father stands in his own life. And in doing so, Pope John Paul II surely personifies the words that he used at the time of the canonisation: “The Lord made Josemaría understand deeply the gift of divine filiation. He taught us how to contemplate the tender face of Jesus Christ, who speaks to us in the most varied vicissitudes of everyday living,” personifying in his own life, as we must personify in ours, the power of the Cross to transform every human experience if only we enter into active contemplation, so that the Cross yields up its mystery as to what life is all about.

On this happy evening, let us pray that St. Josemaría Escrivá will help us renew our commitment to recognise God’s presence in every circumstance of our lives. Let us pray

for the wisdom, insight and strength, to translate that deep encounter and the presence of God which we have experienced, into our work, into our friendships, into our service, into our salvation.

And may Opus Dei, the Work of God, destined to develop God's kingdom here on earth, continue to grow under the inspiration of its Founder, who put into practice the teaching which is now laid before us as a universal way, a Catholic way, a way in which Jesus Christ may be served all over this world.
