

Holy humorist

On June 26 we will celebrate the feast day of St Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. Much has been written about him, but there is a side to him that is rarely commented on though it was noticed by his contemporaries - it was his good humor.

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This article by Andrew Soanne first appeared in the Catholic Herald in Great Britain in Nov 2, 2001.

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I was reminded of it recently when moving, an exercise that required me to transport boxes of books up and down several flights of stairs. (In the process I discovered that St. Thomas Aquinas wrote more than I can carry.)

Among those books, I came across an article called "Chronicle from Rome" by Eugenio Montes. It was published in 1975, the year the founder of Opus Dei died. It reads: "Voltairian anticlericalism has slanderously painted the Christian faith in dark and foreboding colors, but a sign of beatitude is precisely its cheerfulness. It has been said that one could detect St. Theresa's dimpled smile in her Castilian prose.

Florence's Philip Neri, arriving in the full tide of the counter-reformation, was a constant bubble of sparkling phrases. It is likewise with Msgr.

Escriva ... whose conversation used to transmit a joyful cheerfulness to all."

There are many witnesses to this joy. Dom Pío María, a Camaldolese monk, wrote that, in the 1940s, a comment sometimes heard in the monastery of El Parral, Madrid, was "here comes the priest who is always in such a good mood." The monk added: "One felt enormously at ease by his side, because of his amazingly rich human warmth." There was an occasion when Blessed Josemaría and some priests were in a car, being driven erratically around Madrid by an inexperienced driver called Caesar. The passengers were petrified, especially, when the car swerved off the road, travelled along the pavement for a few yards and finally collided with a lamp post. In the silent tension that followed there came from Blessed Josemaria's lips: "*Ave, Caesar, morituri te*

salutant!" (the gladiators' greeting to the Roman emperor: "Hail, Caesar, we who are about to die salute you!"). And the fear and the tension vanished.

Rabbi Kreiman said at a conference on Blessed Josemaria in Buenos Aires earlier this year, that his writings in fact "teach something that is authentically Jewish to sanctify life through daily action".

He added: "Man is God's co-creator in the measure in which his daily action is dedicated to the Lord. What Blessed Josemaria underscores is that consecration which man must have with Creator."

The famous Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl - a former disciple of Freud, and as accustomed to demythologisation as his master - once met the founder of Opus Dei. He and his wife had travelled to Rome for professional reasons, and they

visited Blessed Josemaria. Prof. Frankl afterwards summarized his impressions: "If I am to say what fascinated me particularly about his personality, it is, above all, the refreshing serenity which emanated from him and warmed the whole conversation. Next, the unbelievable rhythm with which his thought flows, and, finally, his amazing capacity for getting into immediate contact with those he is speaking to."

Three years younger than Josemaría Escrivá, Viktor Frankl, who was Jewish, had kept himself going from 1942 to 1945 in several Nazi concentration camps (including Auschwitz and Dachau) through his faith in humanity. As he writes in the preface to one of his books: "In spite of everything, one must say 'yes' to life". Frankl noticed a similar joie de vivre during his conversation in Rome with the founder of Opus Dei, and he describes it in precise

technical terms: "Msgr. Escriva evidently lived totally in the present instant, he opened out to it completely, and gave himself entirely to it. In a word, for him the instant possessed all the qualities of the decisive (*Kairos-Qualitäten*)."

Another holy man famous for his liveliness was St. John Bosco. His sense of humor kept him going despite the rebuffs he suffered at the hands of others who should have known better. The authorities even sent a carriage round to collect him and remove him to an asylum. It is related how, at the last moment, Don Bosco stood aside to let the official (another cleric) into the vehicle first, and then closed the door from the outside and sent the carriage on its way. With this practical joke he avoided his psychiatric appointment. I feel Blessed Josemaria Escriva, Rabbi Kreiman and Viktor Frankl would all have loved that.

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