

I like to think I met a saint

My chief memory of Msgr. Escriva is his great lightheartedness. Once he gave me a little laughing donkey and said: “Every time you look at it, it will remind you to pray for me.” He gave a special significance to the donkey; he used to call himself “a beast of burden for Our Lord.” Bishop William Gordon Wheeler of Leeds wrote the following testimony some years after the death of Msgr Josemaria Escriva in June 1975. It was published in the Scottish

Catholic Observer on 23 April 1982.

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I first met a member of Opus Dei here in Britain over 30 years ago. His name was Juan Galarraga, and at that time he was a layman studying at the University of London. I met him on a number of occasions at the Newman Centre in Portland Square; when I became chaplain to London University I saw much more of him and learnt a great deal about Opus Dei from him.

So, when Netherhall House, a residence for students, got going, I used to recommend students to go there. This was my first contact with a house of Opus Dei, but since then I have seen houses of Opus Dei all over the world.

Indeed, I am in a unique position to talk about what can be called the universality of the spirit of Opus Dei, having seen its activities all over the world. A few years ago I was in Peru and visited the house of the Work in Lima. I was interested to see how it had penetrated to such very remote parts of the world and taken root in peoples of such different backgrounds. This, I think, is part of the genius of the Founder, Msgr. Escriva.

The thing that always enchanted me about Opus Dei houses was the spirit of civilisation – the right kind of civilisation. There was no excessive grandeur; there was always a tasteful understatement, and yet a real Christianizing of the civilisation of our time. All over the world these houses stand out as something that Christianity, and Catholicism especially, must always be standing out for.

A family spirit was always noticeable. This was something I loved, too. It's a spirit of great personal discipline and integrity. The Founder of Opus Dei had got the balance that to me is the kind of pattern that should be followed by all sorts of people.

I still treasure that little copy of his book, *The Way*, because Msgr. Escriva wrote an inscription in it for me. He gave it to me in the late 1950s, but I knew *The Way* before, of course. I've always loved its simplicity.

One of the things Msgr. Escriva radiated was an enormous appreciation of the whole spiritual life. He had a great desire to lead people on in the most simple and straightforward way – a Biblical way. Here he was ahead of his time.

He was also ahead of his time regarding the Second Vatican

Council, with the conception of the laity playing a fuller part in the life of the Church, and being contemplatives in their ordinary lives.

He had the mind of Vatican II, and in the very difficult post-Conciliar period, when many in the Church went through something of a silly season, Opus Dei weathered things in a way that could be a great example to the rest of us.

I think this is because it has struck the right balance between aggiornamento and tradition, with all the time an eye cocked on the situation in the world today. So, it has been able to make a great contribution to the whole life of the Church. When the history of the period is written up, this will certainly have to be mentioned.

My chief memory of Msgr. Escriva, though, is his great lightheartedness.

He was a wonderful companion. I remember when some bishops were tackling him on a number of points over lunch one day, he broke down any resistance by the great love he radiated. You felt that he loved everybody that came his way and you couldn't help responding.

I felt I had met a very holy person who was a very human person. After all, true holiness builds upon the nature we have already been given by God. God enriched him very much in every way.

He gave me a little laughing donkey one day in Rome and said: "Put that on the mantelpiece in your study, and every time you look at it, it will remind you to pray for me." I still have it. It stands permanently on my mantelpiece and sometimes inspires me when I'm taking things too seriously.

Msgr. Escriva gave a special significance to the donkey; he used to call himself “a beast of burden for Our Lord.”

One aspect of the apostolate of Opus Dei I know especially well was its work with university students. But I’ve also seen work with ordinary lay people. There was Peter Scott, an old friend of mine from Oxford, and his family. It is remarkable these days when families as a whole are suffering from the impact of the permissive society in Europe generally, that a family like that has seemed to gain enormous strength and stimulus from the work of Opus Dei.

It is my experience that there is a close parallel between the members of the Work and the early Christians – people of different walks of life with something of the same spirit, in the middle of the world, trying to

sanctify their ordinary activities. This was one of the main lines Msgr. Escriva stressed. The notion of the apostolate of the laity was enshrined, according to this model, in one of the Decrees of the Vatican Council.

When people in future generations consider Msgr. Escriva and his work, they will be able to evaluate it much better than we can.

I think that through his writings and the memories of him, there will emerge a figure of a man who has had a very great impact on the life of the whole Christian people. After he died, I wrote to the Holy Father about it.

I like to think I had met a saint.

Bishop William Gordon Wheeler of Leeds, 1982.

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