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Decoding St Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer: doing the ordinary with extraordinary grace

A homily by Bishop Fisher on the occasion of the feast day for St Josemaría Escrivá, in which the bishop contrasts the reality of Opus Dei with its portrayal in The Da Vinci Code.

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Some of you might have heard of a recent film which made a splash in some circles. The supposed author, Dan Brown, is, if you know the code, really Fr John Flader, who has a day job as an adult educator and spiritual director, nightlights as an albino assassin named Silas, and in-between times writes racy novels cleverly designed to draw attention to Opus Dei. I'm told that interest in Opus Dei has never been so great and that millions are hitting its websites as a result of the novel and film. The story involves various assassinations and cover-ups ordered by a bishop and perpetuated by Opus Dei monks who've apparently been up to this sort of no good for centuries. I must say that the idea of a hit-squad at behest of local bishops does have its attractions... but talk of medieval Opie monks does strike me as a little improbable given that their founder was a twentieth century saint and there are still no monks in the family.

Perhaps it is another miracle to his credit.

Mr Brown is not one to let facts get in the way of a good story. Underneath the pseudo-scholarship, risqué titillation, conspiracy theory and apparent plagiarism is a radically post-modern boredom with fact. Reality, it seems, is altogether too ordinary for his tastes. Better to spice it up with goddess-worship and sun-worship, Gnostics and Templars, tarot and grail, impugning Our Lord and his Church, and finding Mary Mag in drag in the middle of Da Vinci's Last Supper. Most of this is just surreal, if rather profitably so.

The real Opus Dei is also too ordinary for such a fable. So an organisation whose central aim is to help people live their Christian faith right in the middle of a secular society is presented as the exact opposite: as a group of monks

removed from the world. This back-to-fronting of Opus Dei takes us to the heart, I think, of the hostility: for St Josemaría taught people to live holy lives in the midst of the world and such public holiness always inspires opposition. Far from justifying doing evil to achieve good, Escrivá's Work teaches virtue and so (without wagging fingers at anyone) is a reproach to a pragmatic and self-serving world. Far from inviting escape from the world into illusions, its 83,000 lay members and 2,000 priests engage with the world as it is and so are (again, without raising a voice of complaint) a kind of critique of the unrealism of the post-modern and nihilist.

What I suspect is most galling to some about St Josemaría is the ordinariness of his message and so the critics must superimpose their own nightmares. Recently we returned to "Ordinary Time", those

33 or 34 weeks that as a boy I thought was the long boring "Green time" when nothing happens; that time when there is none of the dour purple drama of Lent with its ashes and fasts and covered statues and none of the bright gold razzmatazz of Easter, with its candles and bells and processions. Of course, what I didn't understand as a boy – and no child really does – is that you can't have feasting without fasting. No-one can be permanently on a high. If every day is our birthday, as children might wish, then there are no real birthdays; if every night is a party, as some adolescents might want, then we never really get to party at all. Only ordinary time allows us to mark the extraordinary time of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

Of course, ordinary time doesn't just mean time when nothing extraordinary happens: it also means ordinal or counted time, time when

we gratefully number the weeks of grace and offer them back to God in liturgy and life. And when we say Cardinal Pell is the ordinary of the diocese we certainly don't mean he is run-of-the-mill: we mean he is ordered or ordained to a purpose. Ordinariness, in all these senses, is I think, what made Escrivá 'prime number' among the saints, one of those special cases God and Pope John Paul picked out to teach us new things about sanctity. Christians don't need to go searching in strange and exotic corners like Mr Brown for a world different from the one we're given. We don't need to spice up our history with fables or our present with illusions. We don't need to be armoured knights or habited assassins or art detectives. No, ordinary time, everyday life, is the very time for heroism, for finding God in the garden in which he planted us, in the midst of home and work. Ordinary time is the time for

cultivating virtues such as faith, hope and love, perseverance and patience, prudence and moderation, fairness and the rest. Ordinary time is the time for extraordinary grace to yield holiness.

When the Creator entered the realm of time and space in Jesus Christ he was joined to ordinary human life, ordinary time, so that he might raise it up with himself to the throne of God. And we in turn continue that process of celebrating the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, raising the life of family and work and culture and community to God. Cardinal Ratzinger, as he then was, said of St Josemaría that his desire was always that, wherever he was, wherever we are, God's will be done, and that "this desire, this unceasing plea, prepared him to answer, in the moment of illumination, like Peter: 'Lord, at your word I will let down the

nets' (Lk 5:5). His 'yes' was no less audacious than the Apostle's on Lake Gennesaret after a long and unproductive night. Spain was convulsed with hatred for the Church, for Christ and for God. People were trying to rip the Church out of the country at the time when Escrivá received the call to let down his nets for God. From that moment on, and throughout his life, as a fisher of men for God, he kept throwing out the divine nets tirelessly in the seas of our history, to bring great and small to the light." Josemaría went on to show that the pursuit of holiness by seeking God's will and doing God's work is not an optional extra or the task of some holiness elite: it is ordinary time for every baptised person. "Holiness does not consist of the sort of heroism that is impossible to imitate, but has a thousand forms and can become a reality anywhere, in any job. It is normal and it consists of

directing one's ordinary life towards God and filling it through with the spirit of faith."

At the time of my election as bishop an article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald complaining of my supposed ultra-orthodoxy but climaxing with the dark charge that I was "rumoured to have Opus Dei connections". That accusation is a badge of honour. But it was a pity that this Dan Brown-like reporter had not bothered to do the basic research to discover I was a Dominican, a member of an Order with a much more sinister past and many more candidates for inquisitor-assassin than Opus Dei. Yet as a friar I can only echo Josemaría's call to find God in the world and bring the world to God. Priest and founder, servant of the poor and sick, scholar, spiritual master and saint, Josemaría taught us that saints are to be made amidst the ordinary things of life.

Our Christian heroes are not X-men in surreality, but people like us: people who, wherever they found themselves, did the ordinary with extraordinary grace, and said to God, *serviam*, I will serve.

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