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Homily of Fr Sheehan

Homily for Mass on the Feast of
St Josemaría, 26th June 2003, St
George's Cathedral, Southwark.

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Picture the figure of a young man in his early thirties dressed all in black. Not an uncommon sight in certain parts of London nowadays, you might say. However, we are thinking of a priest wrapped in the black cloak that was the customary dress of the clergy in Spain in the 1930s. He is busily making his way from one

end of Madrid to the other, invariably on foot, carrying out his chaplaincy duties as he tends to the terminally sick, the marginalised, the poor, the homeless. In and through his work, his apostolic zeal impels him to find time to meet with young students and workers, to enthuse them with love for God and a realisation that they are called to holiness, there in the middle of their ordinary activities.

As he hurries along the streets from one appointment to another, he seizes the opportunity for one of his favourite devotions, the Rosary. Mary is for him a shortcut to finding her Son, Jesus. As he writes in *The Way*: “To Jesus we always go, and to him we always return, through Mary”(1). He is praying the Rosary imagining that he is saying it --alternating the prayers-- with the Holy Father. At the end, he makes a Spiritual Communion, as though receiving the

Body of Christ from the hands of the Pope himself.

That picture came to my mind as I saw how today's feast, (the first time since his canonisation last October that we celebrate this feast of *Saint Josemaría*), falls on the eve of the great Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to be followed by the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and then Sunday's celebration of the outstanding saints of Rome, the Apostles Peter and Paul. I remembered some words written by Saint Josemaría back in 1934: "Christ, Mary, the Pope. Haven't we just indicated, in three words, the loves that make up all our Catholic faith?" (2) And here we are this evening with our new saint opening up the way for us to contemplate those three loves.

Some years earlier in July 1931 he had written in his *Intimate Notes* (3)

three aspirations that in a sense encapsulate the mission of Opus Dei, the institution that God caused St Josemaría to found on 2nd October 1928:

“Aims

-- That Christ reign, that he truly reign in society. *Regnare Christum volumus.*

-- To seek to give all the glory to God. *Deo omnis gloria.*

-- To attain sanctity and save souls. *Omnes, cum Petro, ad Iesum per Mariam.”*

Let’s take the third of those aims as our theme this evening: Holiness and apostolate – All, with Peter, to Jesus through Mary.

Holiness, for Josemaría Escrivá, is essentially to be carried away by love for Christ, to live his life, to become

identified with him in an imitation of the ordinary hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth in daily work and everyday situations. As he writes in *The Way*, “... in intentions, may Jesus be our end; in affections, our Love; in speech, our theme; in actions, our model”(4). The centrality of Christ in the Founder of Opus Dei’s life and teachings cannot be overstated. The path he mapped out for souls was a movement from getting to know Christ to living like Christ in becoming a man or woman for others, with a constant spiritual concern for others that overflows into apostolic action. Crucial to this process is a life of personal relationship with Christ, a life of authentic contemplative prayer to be embraced by everyone, a listening to the voice of the Master as he speaks to each of us individually.

“*Duc in altum*”. These are words of Christ that we have listened to in this

evening's Gospel: "Put out into deep water"(5). They are words that St Josemaría would often use in his preaching to encourage his spiritual sons and daughters to be daring and confident in leading others --their friends, work or study colleagues and other family members-- to a surer knowledge of Christ through spiritual and doctrinal formation. They are the words that Pope John Paul II chose as the theme of his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, as he indicated the challenge facing the Church at the start of the new millennium. And so, we find ourselves *cum Petro*, with the successor of Peter, who tells us that we have to start afresh with confidence and daring from the contemplation of Christ. In the words of the Holy Father himself: "It is not a matter of inventing a 'new programme'. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living

Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem”(6).

The Pope himself has linked that programme of centring all efforts at holiness and apostolate on Christ, with devotion to the Mother of God through the Rosary. When he proclaimed this year leading up to the 25th anniversary of his election as Pope as a Year of the Rosary, he wrote another letter in which he told us that “the contemplation of Christ has an *incomparable model* in Mary... No one has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary”(7). In the preface to a little book that the saint we are remembering this evening wrote back in the early

1930s, we read: “*The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary. Do you want to love our Lady? Well then, get to know her. How? By praying her Rosary well*”(8). For Saint Josemaría, an important part of that ‘praying the rosary well’ was always the contemplation of the mystery. Many of us here would have to recognise our gratitude to him for teaching us to pause at the start of each decade in order to reflect on the mystery, say a short aspiration, or offer those prayers for a particular intention. We can be confident that Mary will lead us to Jesus, to a deeper consideration of the mystery of the Incarnation.

In many places, the Founder of Opus Dei speaks of the process of making Christ the centre of our lives as “seeking him, finding him, getting to know him, loving him”(9). Elsewhere

he mentions two specific places in which to seek Christ: the Bread and the Word, the Eucharist and the Gospel (10). We can again turn to Peter for guidance. John Paul II some months ago issued an Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. In it he reminds us that the whole life of the Church draws its strength and is directed to the Eucharist (11). For St Josemaría the Eucharist was the “centre and root of his interior life”(12). Many are the testimonies that refer to the veneration with which he celebrated the sacrifice of the Mass, or even to his genuflections that reflected the strength of his faith in the Real Presence, and the dedication that led him to risk his own life during the Spanish Civil War to ensure that souls would be able to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. He would stir people's hearts with love for the Eucharist, recommending daily Mass and Communion, as well as daily

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and frequent Spiritual Communions. In keeping with his constant teaching on the value of little things, he would even demonstrate how we can show great love for Our Lord with a calm and prayerful genuflection before the Tabernacle.

“To contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary, is the ‘programme’ which I have set before the Church at the dawn of the third millennium, summoning her to put out into the deep on the sea of history with the enthusiasm of the new evangelisation”(13). These words of the Holy Father take us back to that aim of Opus Dei as expressed so many years ago by her founder: “All, together with Peter, to Jesus through Mary”. On the morning of 26th June 1975, the day God was to call him to his presence, Mgr Escrivá asked two members of Opus Dei to visit a friend of Pope Paul VI on his

behalf. He gave them these instructions: “Tell him this: that for years I have been offering the holy Mass every day for the Church and particularly for the Holy Father. You can assure him –you know how often you have heard me say this—that I have offered my life to Our Lord for the Pope...”(14).

In an audience following the death of the Founder of Opus Dei, Pope Paul VI commented that Josemaría Escrivá belonged to the whole Church and the members of Opus Dei had the duty of preserving the details of his life and teachings, and of spreading this treasure far and wide. We ask Saint Josemaría to continue interceding for our present Holy Father in this year of his silver jubilee as Bishop of Rome. We also ask the saint to keep us firmly united to the one he liked to call “the sweet Christ on earth”, using a term dear to St Catherine of Sienna. We ask that

as children of him who was called “the Father” while here on earth, and as children of our Holy Father, John Paul II, we might share in their great love for our Blessed Lady, confident that she will lead us safely to the contemplation of her Son, in union with the Father and the Holy Spirit for all eternity. Amen.

1. *The Way*, n. 495

2. *Instruction*, March 19 1934, n. 31

3. n. 206

4. *The Way*, n. 271

5. Lk 5: 4

6. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29

7. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, n. 10

8. *Holy Rosary*, Preface

9. *Friends of God*, n. 300
10. Cf. *The Way*, n. 87
11. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 60
12. Cf. *Christ is passing by*, n. 87
13. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 6
14. Quoted in C. Cavalleri, *Immersed in God*, Scepter 1996, p. 194

Fr Gerard Sheehan
