

Pope Benedict XVI on St. Josemaria Escriva

"Letting God Work": An article by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, published on the occasion of the canonization of Josemaría Escrivá.

05/18/2005

I have always been struck by the interpretation which Josemaría Escrivá gave of the name Opus Dei—an interpretation which we could call biographical and which allows us

to understand the founder in his spiritual dimension. Escrivá knew that he should found something, but he was always aware that whatever it was was not his work, that he had not invented anything, that the Lord had simply made use of him. Thus it was not his work, but *Opus Dei* [Latin for "work of God"]. He was only an instrument with which God had acted.

While I was pondering this fact, there came to mind the words of the Lord reported in the Gospel of John (5:17): "My Father is always working." These are words spoken by Jesus in the course of a discussion with some religious specialists who did not want to recognize that God could act even on the Sabbath. This is a debate that is still going on, in a certain way, among people and even Christians of our own time. Some people think that after creation God "retired" and no longer has any

interest in our everyday affairs. According to this manner of thinking, God could no longer enter into the fabric of our daily life. But the words of Jesus affirm the opposite. A man open to the presence of God discovers that God is always working and still works today: We should, then, let him enter and let him work. And so things are born which open to the future and renew mankind.

All this helps us to understand why Josemaría Escrivá did not consider himself “founder” of anything, but only a person who wants to fulfill the will of God, to second his action, the work, precisely, of God. In this sense, the theocentrism of Escrivá, in accordance with the words of Jesus, means this confidence in the fact that God has not retired from the world, that God is working now and we ought only to put ourselves at his disposal, to be ready, capable of reacting to his calling. This, for me, is

a message of greatest importance. It is a message which leads to overcoming what could be considered the great temptation of our times: the pretense, that is, that after the "big bang" God retired from history. God's action did not "stop" at the moment of the "big bang", but continues throughout time in the world of nature and the world of man.

The founder of Opus Dei said: I am not the one who invented anything; there is Another who acts, and I am only ready to serve as an instrument. So the name, and all the reality which we call Opus Dei, is deeply bound up with the interior life of the founder. He, while remaining very discreet on this point, makes us understand that he was in permanent dialogue, in real contact, with Him who created us and works through us and with us. The Book of Exodus (33:11) says of Moses that

God spoke with him “face to face, as a friend speaks with a friend.” I think that, even if the veil of discretion hides many details from us, still from some small references we can very well apply to Josemaría Escrivá this “speaking as a friend speaks with a friend,” which opens the doors of the world so that God can become present, to work and transform everything.

In this light one can understand even better what *holiness* means, as well as the universal calling to holiness. Knowing a little about the history of saints, and understanding that in the causes of canonization there is inquiry into “heroic” virtue, we almost inevitably have a mistaken concept of holiness: “It is not for me,” we are led to think, “because I do not feel capable of attaining heroic virtue. It is too high a goal.” Holiness then becomes a thing reserved for some “greats” whose images we see

on the altars, and who are completely different from us ordinary sinners. But this is a mistaken notion of holiness, a wrong perception which has been corrected—and this seems to me the central point—precisely by Josemaría Escrivá.

Heroic virtue does not mean that the saint performs a type of “gymnastics” of holiness, something that normal people do not dare to do. It means rather that in the life of a person God’s presence is revealed—something man could not do by himself and through himself.

Perhaps in the final analysis we are rather dealing with a question of terminology, because the adjective “heroic” has been badly interpreted. Heroic virtue properly speaking does not mean that one has done great things by oneself, but rather that in one’s life there appear realities which the person has not done

himself, because he has been transparent and ready for the work of God. Or, in other words, to be a saint is nothing other than to speak with God as a friend speaks with a friend. This is holiness.

To be holy does not mean being superior to others; the saint can be very weak, with many mistakes in his life. Holiness is this profound contact with God, becoming a friend of God: it is letting the Other work, the Only One who can really make the world both good and happy. And if, then, Josemaría Escrivá speaks of the calling of all to be saints, I think that he is actually referring to this personal experience of his of not having done incredible things by himself, but of having let God work. And thus was born a renewal, a force for good in the world, even if all the weaknesses of mankind will remain ever present. Truly we are all capable, we are all called to open

ourselves up to this friendship with God, to not leave the hands of God, to not neglect to turn and return to the Lord, speaking with him as if speaking with a friend, knowing well that the Lord really is a true friend of everyone, including those who cannot do great things by themselves.

From all this I have better understood the inner character of Opus Dei, this surprising union of absolute fidelity to the Church's great tradition, to its faith, and unconditional openness to all the challenges of this world, whether in the academic world, in the field of work, or in matters of the economy, etc. The person who is bound to God, who has this uninterrupted conversation, can dare to respond to these challenges, and no longer has fear. For the person who stands in God's hands always falls into God's hands. And so fear vanishes, and in

its place is born the courage to respond to today's world.

L'Osservatore Romano (special supplement)

pdf | document generated automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-us/article/pope-benedict-xvi-on-st-josemaria-escriva/> (02/07/2026)