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A Coach and a Father

An interview with Fr. John Henry Hanson, O. Praem., author of the recently published book "Coached by Josemaría Escrivá: Lessons in Discipleship."

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Can you share a bit about your background and what inspired you to write a book on Saint Josemaria?

Yes, I am a Norbertine priest from Saint Michael's Abbey in California

and a cooperator of the Work. I've found inspiration and encouragement in the writings and recorded talks of Saint Josemaría for many years, and have been assisting the Saint Josemaría Institute for at least a decade.

Even though he wore his “secularity” as a badge of honor, still, as a saintly priest, his example and teachings inspire me in cultivating a priestly heart, in my religious observance, and in helping the laity see their crucial role in sanctifying the world from within.

For some, this latter point is “news,” and I'm happy to be the herald of it. I find in Saint Josemaría's fiery words practical motivation. He gives no quarter to mediocrity, yet is so completely compassionate toward human frailty. It's the perfect gospel balance.

Could you explain what you mean by your book's title, "Coached by Saint Josemaria"?

Coaches are essentially motivators, and maybe secondarily strategists. My project was to cull some of St Josemaría's most energetic and motivational sayings into one place that would function almost like a handbook, for quick reference, so to speak, combined with my own commentary. Among my guiding principles for selection was what I have found most helpful in my own spiritual journey.

What are some of those helpful points?

Definitely his tough "coach's" talk—which I need to hear daily. It's so easy to get distracted during the day and lose intentionality in one's work. I mean, if Jesus tells us that without Him we can do nothing, then I need to stay united to Him throughout the

day, and not forget to renew my union with Him frequently.

Saint Josemaría calls me “back home” to check myself and my motivations so that I haven’t lost sight of the Lord, even as I do His work. Strangely, it is possible to be so spiritually absentminded.

But it’s not only the tough talk: I also find in him a compassionate spiritual father who understands, from the inside, what it means to be a sinner who never gives up the fight. To experience one’s sinfulness is discouraging, but to have a father who never allows you to sink into the swamp of hopelessness, this prevents even sin from waylaying us in counterproductive shame and sadness.

Is there a particular point that might, in a good way, surprise or amaze readers?

Oh yes! Read chapter 4, which I entitled (tongue-in-cheek): “Not for Your Coffee Mug: The Unquotable St. Josemaría.” I quote point no. 592 in *The Way* where he says, “Don’t forget that you are just a trash can.”

It sounds so dismissive, doesn’t it? So contrary to what we might expect from a saint, a spiritual book, or even from our cultural setting. But context here is essential. He has extracted this point from his personal journal. In other words, he is primarily talking to himself. But he is making a universal reflection. My reflection on that point from *The Way* (which includes more than the sentence quoted) focuses on finding joy in our poverty before God, as the saints do.

Trying to grasp the Son of God’s voluntary impoverishment for our sake, His extreme humility, His being rejected and despised for our sake, we find the ‘garbage can’ imagery

not so demeaning after all. God can only glorify those who become the least among all, servants of all, and who are willing to bear their share of His passion for the salvation of souls. In other words, to walk in step with the Lord is to share His humiliation. But that humiliation is the precursor of glory.

How can St. Josemaría's teachings be relevant for both lay persons and those in religious life?

That's a good question, because for many people, there doesn't seem to be any clear crossover between the spirituality of the Work and religious life. I see it this way: the core of Christian spirituality is the same for all of us, namely, the perfection of charity. How we live out the gospel call to love as Christ loves will obviously differ according to our state in life. But for anyone striving for holiness, what seems to separate

consecrated life from committed lay life actually unites them.

What do you mean?

I mean the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. For religious, these are the material for our vows, but living the *spirit* of these counsels is incumbent on anyone seeking gospel holiness—and this you will find not only in Church documents, but also woven throughout St. Josemaría's spirituality. Lay life requires that one have material means and independence, and normally also includes marriage and children. And that is good. But to hold yourself up to the gospel standard of poverty, chastity, and obedience, with all of the detachment that implies, makes you a very intentional and effective disciple. It keeps us mindful of our need to keep a loose grip on the

goods of this world, even if we are immersed in them daily.

What is the most important lesson you hope your readers will learn from the life and teaching of Saint Josemaria?

Mainly two things: the fire to follow Christ to perfection, and the reassurance that He understands all of our weaknesses when we fail to live up to the high bar of gospel perfection. As I've mentioned, I find in Saint Josemaría an incredibly encouraging father. Sometimes we might be tempted to think that the gospel is, practically, an impossible ideal.

But the saint's encouragement (often based on his own experience) leaves us not only no room for excuse, but also the enthusiasm to apply ourselves wholeheartedly to a generous program of holy living—the highest bar possible: “You have

forgotten the Lord's admonition to the Apostle: 'My grace is enough for you!' which is confirmation that, if you want to, you can" (*Furrow*, no. 166). Fathers encourage their children to do great things, and this encouragement brings with it the assurance that those great things can be done.

*Link to Coached by Josemaría Escrivá:
Lessons in Discipleship at Scepter
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