

The Communicator

The following extracts are taken from 'The Man of Villa Tevere' by Pilar Urbano, a book about the founder of Opus Dei. The author highlights St Josemaría's capacity for getting through to everyone without distinction, making friends with them and putting them in direct contact with God.

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One day in the summer of 1966, Monsignor Escriva, Father Alvaro del Portillo and Father Javier Echevarria

went to Florence from Il Castelletto del Trebbio. They went to a big wholesale store, where they managed to persuade the shopkeeper to sell them three pairs of trousers at the extremely cheap wholesale price of 600 liras (just 50p) each. While Don Alvaro and Father Echevarria were choosing the sizes, trying them on, waiting for them to be parcelled up, and paying, Monsignor Escriva had taken one of the shop assistants aside. They talked together about the young man's work and leisure, his family, and his Christian life. There too, on a passing visit, with a person he might never see again, Monsignor Escriva was practising what he wrote and preached about: being "like red-hot coals, but without flames to be seen from afar... burning embers that will set alight each heart they come into contact with."(1)

The shop assistant did not know who it was he had been speaking with, but he was moved and encouraged by the fact that a priest was concerned about his life and his soul. When they said good-bye, he remarked to Don Alvaro and Father Echevarria, with a friendly wink, “*Il vostro compagno non perde il tempo, eh, ma lo farà molto bene.*” (Your colleague wastes no time, does he? But he does it very well.)(2)

Monsignor Escriva could enter the hearts of his friends because he had taken them into his own heart first of all. His noble, sincere affection meant that he was welcomed into the heart of one person after another. His apostolate was always very personal, an “apostolate of friendship and confidence.” This loyal friendship with human beings was built on the foundation of a loyal friendship with God. He loved people because God loves them. He looked

for traces of God in everyone. For this reason, he could never be deceived in anyone he made friends with.

Monsignor Escriva had an amazing facility for making friends. He was not the kind of man who confused friendship with social skills or mere politeness. He followed up his friends, cared for them, visited them, wrote to them and invited them home; he asked after their health and their progress at work; he kept up to date with their family joys and sorrows; he made time to attend to their needs; he did them whatever favours were within his power; and stood by them in time of need. In plain words, he loved them.

Monsignor Escriva carried out his friendly, confiding apostolate with every kind of person, from A to Z... from the A of agriculturists, artists, abbots, and architects right down to

the Z of zoologists; and he spoke to each person in their own language, adapting himself to their mentality, but neither diluting nor adulterating the truth of the message. He was certainly a great communicator. In private conversation and public preaching, in the dark of the confessional and under stage lights, Monsignor Escriva connected, struck people's hearts, moved them and attracted a following. He had drive and magnetism. He himself set no value on his own leadership qualities, having no wish to lead a column of followers or to be treated "like a saint in a procession". The only thing that interested him was how to bring people to God; to get them, as has already been said, to turn down the volume of their inner stereo and make silence in their souls so they could hear God speaking.

What marketing strategy did this awakener of consciences employ? His “technique” was devoid of special effects, with no recourse to rhetoric or penetration tactics, with no tricks or gimmicks; he told the truth, with the gift of tongues. “It’s not a question of ‘simplifying the message to get through to the masses’, but of speaking words of wisdom in clear Christian speech that all can understand.”(3)

Without adulterating the pure gold of the Word of God, he materialized the doctrine he taught by drawing his examples from real life, so that each individual could understand it, as being spoken in his or her own language.

He taught Fernando Carrasco, a wine producer, to put “the same care, the same art, the same loving attention” into his periods of prayer as he did

into his wine-making, “because you are a poet in wine.”(4)

Monsignor Escriva, the communicator, could make himself understood. He possessed an undeniable “gift of tongues”. Not only because he could say the same things in different ways depending on his listeners, which is a technique that can be learned; but because without either scandalizing or wounding people, he managed to bring a demanding message home to them, while applying healing ointment to any possible hurt.

He encouraged some Irish women to “take revenge” for the ill-treatment they had received from the English “by sending them a heavy downpour of prayers”, while at the same time he told them not to consent to feelings of victimization, still less vindictiveness.

He made clear the solidarity and affection he felt for the first Germans who came to study with him in Rome, soon after the Second World War, “because you have suffered under the yoke of a tyrant, a genocidal cur.” His harsh words referred to Adolf Hitler.(5) But some years later he put them and other Germans on the alert, warning them that their passion for work could lead them to turn their lives into hermetically-sealed, selfish preserves, shut to anything which was not materially profitable.

He made people from the United States think about both sides of the coin of their economic power and their influential world leadership, and see it as a challenge to responsibility towards others.

He could also make himself understood by people who did not speak his language. Marlies Kücking,

who could speak many languages, recalled her experience as a translator over a number of years for many foreign visitors who would come to see Monsignor Escriva at the end of his morning's work in Villa Tevere.

When the visitors had arrived and were waiting for Monsignor Escriva to come, there was often a feeling of uncertainty, especially if they had come to see him for the first time. They would ask things like, "Will he speak, or do we speak? What can we talk to him about? How are we going to understand each other? How do we greet him? Will he mind if we take some photos?"

As soon as Monsignor Escriva came into the sitting-room, it was as if the light had come on: he was smiling as he came in, and he called them by their nicknames, his arms outstretched towards them, as if he

had come to meet each of them individually. In a moment the strained politeness of a formal visit had vanished. Within a few seconds, everyone felt at their ease and the atmosphere was one of cordiality, understanding and trust – a real family atmosphere. The translator hardly had to do anything, because it was Monsignor Escriva who took the lead, talking, asking questions, joking, and also being moved to pity by a piece of bad news which they had not intended to tell him but that somehow just came out. The minutes simply flew by, but when Marlies went over the conversation with them afterwards, putting it all into their own language, they were always amazed that in such a short time they had covered so many subjects, so intensely and in such depth.(6)

Monsignor Escriva's gift for communication, his gift for people,

went hand-in-hand with a total incapacity for treating visitors with conventional politeness, pronouncing a few set phrases to get the visit over with. He went to the heart of people's concerns, and never treated them as trivial. For him, such times were unrepeatable moments, and he applied all his talents and put his heart into them, making the utmost use of every second to give of himself to the "other", wholly and in absolute sincerity. In other words, he never treated his visitors merely as visitors.

However, the real reason for the lasting effect of even the shortest visits lay in another factor.

Monsignor Escriva never talked to any of his visitors as from his position as President General of the Work, his rank as Monsignor or his role as founder. At every moment he was truly and totally a priest — that is, someone who had been set there

to make contact between men and God. This was exactly what happened in each of the visits he received: contact was made without needing a dictionary.

The times he lived in were times of “adaptation” and even “barter” for many priests who felt inadequate and out of place, and who lacked the courage of their convictions. They were times in which facile labels were invented and applied, labels which pigeon-holed people, disqualified them from speaking, tied their hands, and destroyed the freedom of consciences to make a stand on matters of faith or morals. Monsignor Escriva, far from being afraid of such labels, rebelled against them. He treated them in the same way as he dealt with clichés and half-truths: he turned them inside out and showed how void of real meaning they were. He did this quite naturally and with plenty of verve;

but it took courage, because he took the risk of saying what he did before massive audiences made up of all sorts of people, whom he did not know at all beforehand, so he could not tell how they might react. These audiences, who came to hear him without previous preparation, were mainly adults, most of them lapsed or not practising any religion, and as he himself acknowledged, “You could tell me: ‘Go home, priest!’”

Monsignor Escriva had too much respect for God to give way to “human respect”. He could not care less what people might say, or whether he was popular or unpopular, or about having a good or bad press. He also spoke out against the over-simplification that split humanity into “traditionalists” and “progressives” in every field of thought. This dichotomy was both false and deceptive. Those who maintained it had started by cheating

on the terms of their own definitions. They claimed to be the pioneers of progress, and even dictated in advance the direction which progress, according to them, was obliged to take.

Monsignor Escriva did not beat about the bush. “‘Traditionalists’ are like Egyptian mummies. ‘Progressives’ are like badly brought up children who smash everything they touch. But above all these two words are criminal: the effect they have is that many people don’t dare say what they really think, for fear of being labelled as one or the other of them.”(7)

In a cry for freedom from conformity, breaking out of the trap of false concepts, he went on to say, “I am neither traditionalist nor progressive, just a priest of God and a lover of truth. I possess the freedom of God’s children, which Christ won

for us on the Cross. I feel as free as a bird that looks for good food wherever it can be found. We love sound doctrine, and we leave people utterly free in matters of opinion. So if anyone calls us traditionalists or progressives, it isn't true! We are children of Christ's Church. We feed on sound doctrine, and no one can take that freedom away from us!"(8)

Notes

1. Cf. Josemaria Escriva, *The Forge*, 9
2. Bishop Javier Echevarria to the author
3. Cf. Josemaria Escriva, *The Forge*, 634
4. Testimony by Monsignor Cesar Ortiz-Echagüe (AGP, RHF T-04694)
5. François Gondrand to the author
6. Testimony by Marlies Kücking

7. Testimony by Monsignor Cesar Ortiz-Echagüe (AGP, RHF T-04694)

8. AGP, RHF 20761, p. 712

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