

ST. JOSEMARIA: THE SAINT OF ORDINARY LIFE

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask you for pardon of my sins and grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Well, on this Feast of St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, the founder of the Work, we can begin our prayer by greeting him. We know how the saints are very close to us always in Christ, in and through Our Lord, in and through the Blessed Trinity in Heaven. They're so close to us, closer- much closer than we imagine, perhaps. And on his liturgical feast, we- we seek the company, the intercession, the closeness of St. Josemaria which is very fatherly, always. He is above all else a father. It's very loving. He always loved people and loved those who tried to follow his spirit and indeed he loved all mankind. His company is compassionate, enthusiastic, patient, encouraging. So, we seek to be united to Christ in our prayer through the intercession and the company of the saints. And in this meditation, we focus especially on St. Josemaria for his feast.

The reality is that all of the saints, St. Josemaria also, therefore, refers to Christ - they lead us to you, Lord, Jesus Christ, and in and through you to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In one of his encyclicals, I think it's the one on Christian hope, Pope Benedict referred to Christ as the great light, the great shining sight to which we're all attracted, to which we're all moving, to which we're all drawn. And around Christ there are lesser lights, lights that lead us to him and that derive their light from him, and these are the saints. And it's true that the beauty of holiness and the beauty of each saint is really radiant, attractive, warm. And that's logical, it's natural, because the saints radiate or reflect the beauty of you, Lord, Jesus Christ, yourself.

In a very interesting book, a lovely book called *The Beauty of Holiness* and *The Holiness of Beauty*, Fr. John Saward says the following; he says: "The saints owe everything to Christ. They are the men and women in whom his divinizing, beautifying grace is most resplendent. They are the Father's great work of art. Human beings who have let the Holy Spirit purge and fashion them into the likeness of the Incarnate Son changed from glory to glory. Their souls, to quote Hopkin's phrase, have a Christed beauty." There, Saward is referring to the great English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who, in one of his poems, refers to holiness as *Christed* or *Christed beauty*. I suppose that's made up to the beauty, or made unto the beauty of Christ himself. That's what Christian holiness is, is to become

Christ, to let Christ live in us. “It is not I who live,” says St. Paul, “but Christ who lives in me.” Elsewhere, in fact, Hopkins refers to holiness as immortal beauty- immortal beauty.

So, we seek the intercession, the company, now in our prayer, of St. Josemaria in order to be closer to you, Lord, in order to be closer to Christ. We see Jesus Christ. We touch him, in a certain sense, in and through the lives of the saints. In fact, in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 50, in the Second Vatican Council, the Church reminds us “that God shows to people in a vivid way his presence and his face in the saints. He speaks to us in them.” He speaks to us in them. So, the Council, they’re reminding us that in the saints, God shows us his presence, his face, and he speaks to us in them. How beautiful, how true, how worthwhile it is, therefore, to- to enter into communion with the saints. They in no way distract from God. Rather, they are smaller lights pointing to the great and ineffable light who is God.

“The saints,” says the Second Vatican Council, “make present the Lord’s own presence and his face and God speaks to us in them.” And we might say, well, what does God say to us in and through St. Josemaria? What’s a particular aspect of the gospel? Or, what ray of light, we might say, of the mystery of Christ is conveyed to us through St. Josemaria? Well, here you might say we have an authoritative answer because, on the occasion of the canonization of St. Josemaria, Pope St. John Paul II himself explained this. He said, “St. Josemaria was chosen by the Lord to proclaim the universal call to holiness and to indicate that everyday life, its customary activities, are a path towards holiness. It could be said that he was the saint of the ordinary. He was really convinced that for whoever lives with an outlook of faith, everything offers an opportunity for the meeting with God, everything becomes a stimulus for prayer. Seen in that way, daily life reveals an unsuspected greatness. Holiness is really put on everyone’s doorstep.”

The saint of ordinary life - that’s who we’re celebrating today. The saint of the ordinary, the saint of extraordinary love in the ordinary bits and pieces. The saint of, I suppose, being great through what is small, which is the Christian call, isn’t it? The saint of the closeness of God, the saint of the nearness of God, of the warmth of God. In fact, in this month of June, the Church celebrates very much the the closeness, the nearness, the warmth of God. It’s enough to think of the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Corpus Christi - how could Our Lord get ever- get any closer to us than that?

Or the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus - the closeness of Christ. Or the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary - the closeness of God, through, you might say, through the channel of his mother, through the motherly heart of Mary of Nazareth. The month of June, in a certain sense, you could say, is all about God’s closeness to us, his warmth, his love. And- and it’s kind of beyond words, really, isn’t it? The closeness and the warmth of God as- as reflected in the mystery of the

Eucharist, in the mystery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the heart which is wounded and pouring out all its love for us. God is close, so close. And this is at the heart of the message that the Lord entrusted to St. Josemaria to proclaim.

We might remember, and it's worth looking it up if you haven't recently, I recommend it to you heartily, St. Josemaria's homily *Passionately Loving the World*, which he preached in 1967 at an open air mass in the University of Navarra in Spain. *Passionately Loving the World*... you'll get it- just Google it, it's on the internet. And well, in that homily, which in fact is a very important text because it is the founder consciously trying to explain this- the charism of the Work, the spirit he had received and that he was spreading. And in some senses, it's a testamentary homily. It explains what is Opus Dei and what is the spirit of Opus Dei. That's why it's very special. And in that context, he uses the phrase: "There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary circumstances, and it's up to each one of us to discover it." Something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary circumstances, and it's up to each one of us - to you and to me - to discover that something holy. That's- maybe that's the invitation of this feast day, to discover that something holy in the ordinary circumstances. But what is this something holy, this something divine, this *quid divinum*, as he sometimes said using a Latin word, *what is it?* What is it, Lord, if not your very self?

The something holy that's present in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives is nothing other than a *who* it's not a *what*. It is the living Christ, Jesus, close by us in our work, in our rest, in our families, in our friendships, in our social life, in our pains, in our sorrows, in our joys, in our anxieties, in our moments of rest, of- of tranquility - whatever it is, the Lord there with us. It is you, Lord Jesus, the living and risen Christ, always by our side. And indeed, always on our side because your presence is a loving presence, a protective presence, an encouraging presence. In his book, *The Essence of Christianity*, the German Theologian Michael Schmaus talks about what was essential to Christianity. And he says, "In its innermost heart, Christianity is a living person, the Son of God manifested in human history. Therefore, to be a Christian is not merely or even primarily to accept certain truths and adhere to a certain law although that- although necessarily it is also these things. It consists primarily in meeting with the person; being a Christian involves a subjective relationship between man and God. It is a personal experience." It is a personal experience.

Well, that's what it's all about - this personal encounter, meeting with Christ in and through the ordinary. And that is what St. Josemaria spent his whole life teaching, and that is what within the much greater family of the Church, the little family of Opus Dei, the Prelature and all the friends of the Work, that's what it's about, isn't it? As the founder would say, "to open up the divine paths of the Earth." What- what a beautiful mission, what a wonderful thing, and for each one of us, everyday, to open up the divine paths of the Earth, to open up the divine vista, the presence of the

Lord, in and through the most ordinary things - driving a car, working at the computer, mowing the lawn, looking after small children, caring for the sick, exercising, socializing - whatever it is - the Lord in all of those things. This is what St. Josemaria invites us to, this personal meeting with Christ in everything we do.

I guess this requires faith to really believe, you know, to really believe that even now, as we pray together like this, that the Lord is- is so close to us, that he's listening to us, that, as St. Augustine says in his *Confessions*, "Lord, you are more intimate to me than I am to myself. You are closer to me than I am to myself." We know this intellectually, but sometimes our faith maybe, is a little bit weak. And therefore, we could ask the Holy Spirit to increase our faith, to help us to really live in the company of Our Lord Jesus Christ. And not only that, but to- to enjoy the Lord's company - enjoy, really, the Lord's company. Sometimes, people say, we often hear it said, and it's said with the best will in the world, of course, you know, if Jesus were alive today, what would he do? What would Jesus do about X or Y or whatever? It's, I'm sure, a well-intentioned question, but it's the wrong question because there's no question of *if* Jesus is alive today. Jesus *is* alive.

Jesus is present with us in his Church in a superlative way in the Holy Eucharist, he's present to us in nature, in the whole world of work, of family, of life, whatever, even in our emotional life, our ups and downs, our moods, Christ the Lord is there too. Part of what we are called to sanctify, actually, is our emotional life, our interior life, in that sense. Do we really believe? Maybe St. Josemaria would be happy that on his feast day we would always ask for a greater faith, a living faith in the living Christ who is with us now and always. As he wrote in *Christ is Passing By*, "For Christ is alive. He is not someone who has gone, someone who existed for a time and then passed on leaving us a wonderful example and a great memory. No, Christ is alive. Jesus is the Emmanuel, God with us. His resurrection shows us that God does not abandon his own. His delight is still to be with the children of men."

You, Lord, you are delighted to be with us, and you are actually with us. But, I'm sorry, Lord, and here I want to make a very personal and- and genuine act of contrition because I- I often go through life not realizing that you're by my side. Maybe in the last few months with the pandemic we've had kind of funny experiences of, I don't know, maybe being beside a person for a few minutes and everyone's wearing masks, of course, and it's only after a few minutes you realize that the person you know is right next to you whom you haven't really recognized is a very close friend or a family member even, but because we're all wearing these masks, it's harder to recognize one another. And maybe, Lord, that happens to me a little bit as well - there you are by my side, looking after me closely, and I'm slow, I don't realize that you're there.

There's a beautiful text available, again on the Opus Dei website, and it's a meditation by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on St. Josemaria which was published at the time of his canonization in 2002. It's called *Letting God Work*. And it's a very deep and encouraging meditation, really. And Ratzinger, and now Pope Emeritus Benedict, of course, he was pondering as he says on Opus Dei, on the reality of Opus Dei and on the insistence of the founder that the Lord had made his work, that Opus Dei is the work of God, it's not Opus Escriva, in that sense, it's- it's the work of God, it's not a human endeavor. St. Josemaria always saw himself, as we know, as an instrument- an instrument.

And Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "While I was pondering this fact, there came to mind the words of the Lord reported in the Gospel of John, Chapter 5: 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 in 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 affirmed the opposite. A person open to the presence of God discovers that God is always working and still is working today. We should then let him enter and let him work. And so, things are born which opened the future and renew mankind."

This is a beautiful reality that- that- that's so worthwhile meditating on. My Father is always working, says Jesus to us. The Lord is working away all the time. As a friend of mine often says, the Holy Spirit isn't sitting in a corner with his wings folded, you know, looking on as a bystander. No, God is the protagonist of history. Christ is the very self of the Church. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. God is doing his Opus Dei, his work of God. God is building his Church all the time. And yet, in this article, Ratzinger is pointing to a very common perception, very common, that God having created the world just left it. I mean, it's a heresy that goes back centuries and- but it continues today, it continues today.

"The great temptation of our times," says Ratzinger, "is that pretense- a 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." This is interesting because, you might say, this is a global phenomenon not a certain philosophical bent, you might say, a frame of mind that- that's common in, I suppose, especially in a more secularized culture, that God, okay, maybe he did create us, if there is a God, but he certainly isn't involved anymore. And we might think, well I don't believe that, I'm a Catholic or I'm a Christian. I- I don't hold with that. And yes, maybe in the way I live my life, in my actions and even more perhaps in my reactions, maybe, I don't- maybe I don't really always react with faith. Maybe I don't really always realize, you know, how- how provident God is, how close he is, how- how he's the one doing things. Especially

nowadays, perhaps, you know, where there's such an emphasis on productivity, on meeting targets, on work, work, work, work work - in a word, on activism, as if it's all down to what we do.

And that's a fallacy, but it's very widespread and very deeply ingrained in many of us because we're not alien from the culture in which we live. Maybe it's very refreshing to rediscover the truth, that it's God who's doing things, it's God who is the ultimate motor of history, it's Divine Providence, actually, which is the framework of everything, not simply a system of controls that human beings set up, which are in the end ineffectual anyway, they're not effective. And we see this in the life of St. Josemaria, and I think that's the point that- that Cardinal Ratzinger was getting at there that, why did he refer to what he founded as Opus Dei, the work of God? It's because, as he said, Josemaria Escriva 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. It's true because we know from the various histories and biographies of- of the founder, that he didn't sit down one fine day and, you know, chew the stub of a pencil and say, well, what will we call this new foundation? No, that's not what happened. The Lord brought about the birth of the Work in the soul and then in the life and in the actions of the founder.

But the name, in a sense, came later, and it was almost accidentally, but not accidental. It was providential. One day, his spiritual director who at that time was Fr. Sanchez, a Jesuit, who was aware that St. Josemaria felt called to found something for God. Fr. Sanchez just said kind of off the cuff to St. Josemaria, well, how's that work of God coming along? How's that work of God coming along? And the Holy Spirit fixed that in the mind of the founder - work of God, Opus Dei - that's it, that's it, Opus Dei. And then he discovered in his spiritual notes that he had actually used that expression before, the work of God, in relationship to what he was trying to do, and that's how the Work got its name, really. You could say God gave it its name and- and more than a name, isn't it really more like a description, you know, the work of God is more a description than a name. It's just saying what it is and that's what it is, it's the work of God.

Ratzinger offers this interpretation or exegesis of the- of the name, Opus Dei. He says, "The founder of Opus Dei said, 'I am not the one who invented anything. There is another, with a capital A 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, one 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 says of Moses that God spoke with him face-to-face as a friend speaks with a friend. I think," says Ratzinger, "that even if the veil of discretion hides many details from us, still, from some small references, we can very well apply to Josemaria Escriva 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."

So, this is also our call - your call, my call - to open up the doors of the world so that God can work. Let God work. My Father is working still, says Jesus. Well, we as Christians are called to let him do his work, and that's what Opus Dei is all about. That's indeed what the church is all about, but letting God work. So how do we do this in practical terms, we might say? Well, to get ourselves a little bit out of the way we've got to get the ego a little bit out of the way and let the Lord in there. And we do this by being, in the first place, by being more focused on the Lord ourselves, by being very Christ-centered. Here we can take some nice advice from St. Josemaria: "We must seek Christ in the Word and in the bread, in the Eucharist and in prayer, and we must treat him as a friend, as the real living person he is, for he is risen."

So, friendship would Christ like Moses speaking with God as a friend speaks to a friend. We know, in fact, that St. Josemaria spent his whole life struggling and making the effort to become ever more contemplative, ever more constant and loving in his dialogue with the Lord. And that's also our call, our vocation. Nothing new in this, we might say, it's something that's as old as the Church itself, as old as the gospel, and yet, like the gospel, new. I'm thinking here of that beautiful prayer, that act of faith of St. Patrick, it's called St. Patrick's Breastplate, it's like his- his shield, his armor that gave him the strength for a very arduous task, the conversion of the fairly wild Irish. He has that beautiful prayer called Patrick's Breastplate: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ below me, Christ above me, Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand, Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my standing, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me, Christ in every eye which looks upon me, Christ in every ear which listens to me."

That is poetry, but it's not just poetry, it's Catholic faith. It's faith in you, Lord, the living and risen Christ who are so close to us, so close to us all the time and so loving, so warm. St. Josemaria as the saint of ordinary life is also the saint, you could say, of the closeness of God. Well, all the saints are saints of the closeness of God, but it's very explicit in St. Josemaria, the closeness of God, in secular, ordinary realities, in all the bits and pieces of everyday life. What a beautiful mission this is to open up the divine path of the earth to proclaim with our own behavior and also with our words that there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary, everyday things. And the corollary of that is that holiness, therefore, consists for us in friendship with the divine someone, who's always by our side.

Again, from the Ratzinger reflection, he says, "To be a saint is nothing other than to speak with God as a friend speaks with a friend. This is holiness." This is holiness. Yes, Lord, on this Feast of St. Josemaria and through his intercession, I ask for the grace of holiness from myself and for all my brothers and sisters. I ask for holiness in the ordinary, which is heroic, but doesn't mean that it's

strange or exotic, but rather, it's this openness to Our Lord, this dialogue with Our Lord in and through my ordinary life.

I ask you, Lord, and for the zeal that is required for this. St. Josemaria often said that he didn't want to suggest himself as a model in any virtue, but he did say that if one did want to imitate him in anything, he would have us imitate him in the love that he has for Our Lady. So, we finish this period of reflection of prayer by looking at Our Lady, Mother of God and our mother, to whom St. Josemaria was very particularly devoted. And we look at the face of Our Lady. We see how she is the radiance and beauty of holiness to the highest degree from our race. She is the highest honor of our race and at the same time we realize that most of her life was very ordinary, very simple, very straightforward.

I give you thanks, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask you for help to put them into effect. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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