
THE FOUNDER OF OPUS DEI

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This is the text of a homily given by Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei, during the Mass celebrated on 26 June 1989, in the Basilica of St Eugene, Rome, on the occasion of the 14th anniversary of the death of the Venerable Josemaría Escrivá, Founder of Opus Dei.

If the grain of wheat which falls into the earth . . . dies, it bears much fruit (Jn 12: 24).

We are gathered together for the fifteenth time, to call to mind the *dies natalis*, Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá's eternal embrace with our Lord. It is now even clearer just how fruitful a grain of wheat he was, cast by the divine hand into the world. And, thanks to God's loving generosity, that seed has really produced fruit. The fruitfulness of the life of the Founder of Opus Dei is striking, and for that we thank the One and Triune God. But to those who had the good fortune to know him, or who read and meditate on his writings, all this is no surprise. They know that it is Christ who is the source of supernatural effectiveness, and so are not surprised that the life of those who identify themselves with Christ continues to be fruitful, as the Master himself promised.

From his youth, Monsignor Escrivá had deeply engraved, in his soul, many sayings of our Lord. I remember now that cry of his: *Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo nisi ut accendatur?* (I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!) (Lk 12: 49). He responded to those words with an active desire to spread the fire of the love of God all over the world, convinced that, for every single person, unlimited generosity with God our Lord is the source of happiness, both temporal and eternal.

All called to holiness

For the many people who met the Father — that is what he was called and continues to be called by thousands of people of different nationalities —, the impression was invariably the same, even if they met only briefly: it was as if Jesus had spoken to them. The scene of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was re-enacted: enthusiastic after their meeting with the risen Christ, they said: 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the

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scriptures?’ (Lk 24: 32). Each took their leave of the Father with the clear idea that they had to obey our Lord’s solemn command: ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation’ (Mk 16: 15).

To think, as so many do, that apostolate is solely the responsibility of priests and religious, is a big mistake. The message God entrusted to Monsignor Escrivá is to remind all of us — each in his or her own place in the middle of our world — that we are all called to holiness; that we all have to imitate Jesus Christ; that each of us in our own situation and place of work ought to be a saint, and to do apostolate.

Jesus said that we Christians are ‘the salt and the light of the world.’ My brothers and sisters, to ensure that the salt does not lose its flavour we need to take good care of our own interior life, trying sincerely to do better all the time, never being satisfied with ourselves, and striving constantly to avoid the slide into spiritual mediocrity. We understand then, that ‘apostolate is the overflow of our interior life,’ in the words of Monsignor Escrivá.

The more immersed we are in the world, the more difficult the environment we work in, the further from Christ the life-style of the people around us, the greater our duty to become saints and to do apostolate. In other words, each of us has to be, in the world, *Christ who is passing by*.

Influencing society

Ignem veni mittere in terram It’s nice to repeat today, during this Mass offered for the soul of Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá, words which he said so often as an aspiration. In the two thousand years of Christianity much has been achieved. But a great deal more has to be done, because the Christians of each generation, like the first disciples of Christ, have the duty of influencing the society of their time with the light of the Gospel message. I am reminded of something St Augustine said about the time in which he lived:

You say — writes the holy bishop — that these times are difficult, that they are heavy and worrying. Well, if you live honourably, the times will change. The times have never harmed anyone. It is men and women who do harm. Let men and women change then, and the times will change (*Sermon 311, 8*).

Monsignor Escrivá used to speak about an incident that happened to him many years ago: one day a friend wanted him to consider the ‘failure

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of Christ' — that is what that person who was searching for the faith called it — because after twenty centuries of Christianity there are so many who do not yet know Christ and, among those who do, many live as though they didn't know him. With difficulty, Monsignor Escrivá got over the immediate sadness caused by these words; but immediately afterwards, a deep sense of gratitude to God overcame him:

Because Jesus wanted every man to cooperate freely in the work of redemption. He has not failed. His doctrine and life are effective in the world at all times. The Redemption carried out by him is sufficient, and more than sufficient (*Christ is passing by*, 129).

The redemption is being carried out, and Christ is so generous that he wants to bring it about with our help.

The situation of our world today may well seem distressing. As our Holy Father the Pope said in Oslo on 1 June:

the sense of the transcendent truth and of the living God has atrophied, almost died out, for many people. In a secularised world which needs only itself, and is concerned only with itself, people seem no longer to need religion and Church. Even among Christians faith has lost its force in the concrete, everyday world (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 June 1989).

Faced with a secularised world and the deterioration of faith, many people seem to be sad, resigned and discouraged because, as the Pope said on another occasion, having warped their own conscience, they have substituted the true joy of life for material well-being at any cost (Cf. *Homily in Galway*, 30 September 1979).

Apostolate of giving doctrine

It is our task as Christians — let us never forget — it to give back hope to the world, the hope of Christ, stopping that widespread flight from God, an irrational flight, because God is the Beginning and the End of all creation. We must convince them that what they are doing is crazy, illogical, because it will bring them to a void, to temporal unhappiness and to eternal unhappiness. Mankind, the mankind we belong to, the mankind we must serve, makes us say with Jesus: *misereor super turbam* (I have compassion on the crowd) (Mk 8: 2). And we are

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reminded that we must bring the fire and the light of Christ to the world, not considering ourselves better than others, but as instruments in the hands of God, as leaven, to serve him.

Let us dwell for a moment on another topic, which was mentioned in today's Gospel: 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . . He was in the world, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not' (Jn 1: 5,10,11). These words of the prologue of the Gospel of St John help us realise that the great enemy of God and the great ally of the devil is *ignorance*.

Fraternal love for the multitude and for each individual should urge us on, following Monsignor Escrivá's invitation, to an extensive apostolate of giving doctrine. Thus he wrote in the first point of *The Forge*:

We are children of God, bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed.

The Lord uses us as torches, to make that light shine out. Much depends on us; if we respond many people will remain in darkness no longer, but will walk instead along paths that lead to eternal life.

Apostolate with our friends

To overcome any inertia, caused perhaps by not being able to see clearly what to do, permit me now to ask some questions which I hope will touch your heart. Their purpose is simply to allow us to make an examination of conscience, in order to spur you and me on to more zealous apostolic action.

How many of your family, friends or acquaintances do not know Jesus Christ and his teaching? How many of them know clearly that man is not just a body, but that he possesses an immortal soul, and allow themselves to be guided in their choices by this realisation? And since the soul needs to be fed, through the Sacraments and prayer, with at least the same attention as we give to the body: do we help those around us live a sacramental life? Do you not suffer when you know that so many people are spiritually dead, because they are no longer in the grace of God? How many of your friends remember that grace is lost through mortal sin, the greatest evil which man must avoid with all his strength and with the help of God? How many still don't know — or pretend

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that they don't — that abortion, at whatever stage it is procured, is a crime before God, because it is the extermination of a human life in the mother's womb? How many have never experienced the sweet savour of forgiveness in the sacrament of Confession?

What lies the devil has spread about Confession! And what great need there is for people who are willing and able to help the members of their family and their friends rediscover the Sacrament of Penance. It is above all in this Sacrament that God shows his mercy. Just think about the thief on the cross: he confessed his crime and men condemned him to death for it; but from Jesus he hears the astonishing reply: 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Lk 23: 43). 'In his mercy, God not only pardons us our sins,' St Gregory the Great writes, 'but promises the kingdom of heaven to those who, after having committed an offence, repent' (*In Evangelia homiliae* 19).

Vocation

And also, how many of those around you are not able to enjoy the sweetness of the Eucharist, because they do not realise that in that Sacrament Christ gives himself to us, to the soul in grace, with his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity? How many young people, attracted to the ideal of a vocation, are dissuaded from it by the too human outlook of parents, relatives and friends, who think that God does not merit the total offering of one's life? To those young people and to their parents I say: give yourselves to our Lord without fear, without caution. God is a good paymaster. And, the last question: how many of our acquaintances do not realise that we are Christians because of our spiritual lukewarmness and our apostolic inactivity? Look, my brothers and sisters, my sons and daughters, look at what exciting horizons lie before us.

Conscious of the implications of these questions, each day the Father felt, in a pressing way, the sweet weight of the Church and of souls, and he turned to our Lady, full of hope: *Monstra te esse Matrem!* Show yourself to be the Mother of all men. Today, we too turn to her who is *Spes nostra, Sedes Sapientiae, Ancilla Domini*, (our Hope, the Seat of Wisdom, the Handmaid of the Lord) and ask her to show us that she is indeed our Mother, helping us in our efforts to help all the people we know overcome their ignorance, and recover their faith, stirring up in them also an ardent longing to be apostles of Jesus Christ.

Mater Ecclesiae, ora pro nobis!