

## Culture, Christianity, Pluralism. The mobilization of the laity

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“We have to be contemplative souls in the  
midst of the world, who try to  
convert their work into prayer”  
*Furrow*, 497

Josemaría Escrivá did not draw up a cultural programme; if the word “culture” occurred to him in a speech, firstly he would have probably thought about universities. He had them particularly at heart as places of solid professional training, last but not least, the University of Navarra, which he himself set up in 1952 and nowadays, it is regarded as one of the most successful universities of Spain.

To blame his attitude toward culture, would certainly mean to ignore the fact that the word “culture” even in the 1980s would often have still been searched for uselessly in theological dictionaries<sup>1</sup>. We find, for sure, in the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, not only a long excerpt upon “the right promotion of the cultural progress”, but also a sort of definition of the word “culture”: “that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature”<sup>2</sup>. However, this very circumlocution makes clear just how little the Church had been concerned with this topic until the Vatican Council II. When someone, in the majority of the European languages, spoke about culture, they did not have culture uppermost in their consideration, but sometimes on the one hand, either a well-taken-care-of lifestyle, or arts products in the widest sense, and on the other hand, the ways and manners, in which men think, speak, and relate with one ano-

<sup>1</sup> In the Church, “culture” has become an independent topic thanks only to the concept of “(Gospel-) Inculturation”, which was only used in the ethnological and sociological field before John Paul II.

<sup>2</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogm. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

ther, particularly the effective confrontation between man and his environment (which, only in part, is nature), in a particular time, in a particular given Région. At most, philosophers (and from the Council also theologians, of course) consider that culture could have something to do with the fact that people are related to nature; it has always had social implications and embraced also spiritual things as well, from concepts and languages up to and including ways of behaving and ideals. To understand “culture”, only, or, especially, as men’s business with nature would mean reducing *culture* to a natural product, something which would inevitably be quite near to its Latin original *cultura agri* – agriculture. Cicero was the first to call philosophy *cultura animi*. But, it would hardly be right for the current use of the word “culture”.

It certainly does not mean that the spirituality, which Escrivá tried to provide for the laity, has no cultural implications. However, in order to show that, one has need to make a brief digression that brings one back to the real thinking of Escrivá.

## 1. THE WORLD: MEETING PLACE WITH CHRIST

In a homily that Escrivá gave at the University of Navarra in 1967, he repeatedly told the students and workers gathered around him, to remember they had to learn “to materialize the spiritual life”. He had before his eyes the temptation to divide the relationship with God from the many “earthly trifles” that everyone meets daily in the family and work. A sort of schizophrenia or double life that makes a person ignore the fact that everyday situations involve “something holy, something divine”<sup>3</sup>. God “waits for us” day by day in everything we are doing, and although we only experience it half consciously, and also in our real duties in the professional or familiar life, and He wants that we place up our mind in Him over and over again.

In the case of that warning about double life, it deals more than ever with what is called God’s “omnipresence”. The idea of Escrivá on the tasks of the laity is based on those passages from the New Testament in which it is clear that there is nothing in this world that would not have radically been changed through the Logos’ Incarnation and Jesus’ Resurrection. Escrivá comments Jesus’ statement in John’s Gospel (12:32), that after he has lifted up, he would have drawn everybody (everything) to himself, with the words: “By His death on the Cross, Christ has drawn all creation to Himself”<sup>4</sup>. And, as Paul writes in the Letter to the Colossians (1:19-20) that it pleased God through Christ “to reconcile to himself

<sup>3</sup> *Conversations*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 59. One might certainly object that it is controversial if one really reads *panta* (*omnia*) and not *pantas* (*omnes*); the Neo-Vulgata has clearly decided on *omnes*.

all things whether on earth or in heaven”, Escrivá adds: “If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things good, noble or indifferent, which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death”<sup>5</sup>. Whenever he referred to similar ideas, Escrivá would have certainly thought less about realities such as objects or human beings, and more about situations, which manifest moment for behaving responsibly. It can already be noticed how he intends the invitation (very often repeated by him) to love the world: it is loved, if it is regarded as a “place of its meeting with Christ”.

Love of the world as such counts less, if we were to limit its meaning as something merely to be enjoyed; on the contrary, we should love it because it offers us the opportunity to follow the Lord. Love is thus for God and neighbour and it can be expressed when we perform our respective duties “as perfectly as possible”, even when they are “the most insignificant trifles of everyday life”. Then the trifles are, as it were, filled up “with God’s greatness”, from the “prose of everyday life” to an “epic poem”, “Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons and daughters, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives”<sup>6</sup>.

Every Christian is engaged in this kind of love, but with these words Escrivá thinks above all about the laity (though a priest lives in the world and he should not carry out poorly what he has to do). He has present the tradition (never expressly approved by the Church) according to which, if anybody aspires to holiness, he must become a priest or join a religious order, while the layman, just because he remains “in the world”, can be no more than a “decent Christian”.

## 2. SOCIAL PLURALISM, LAY MENTALITY

If Escrivá points out continuously that every job, activity and also the most insignificant trifles are situations in which God waits for mankind, it is because he wants to mobilize the Christian laity to realise that through their vocation, they are also called to holiness.

The “Work” founded by Escrivá is regarded as conservative. That should mean that the Work’s members profess an unconditional loyalty to the Church. This characterization is certainly truthful, although it is hard to understand why this attitude should be described as conservative. The loyalty of a Christian to the Creed and teachings of the Church is neither conservative nor progressive, neither left-wing nor right-wing, but first of all it is a loyalty to the *Logos* become

<sup>5</sup> *Christ is passing by*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> *Conversations*, 116.

man, to Jesus Christ and so to the sense and fulcrum of the cosmos. After all, only he who considers loyalty as a backward attitude could describe it as conservative. But it might mean that Opus Dei is politically or even only sociologically conservative, but this is not true for two reasons:

1. On the one hand, Escrivá repeatedly emphasized the complete freedom of the members of the “Work”, and above all that of the laity in every professional, social and political matter. In 1931 he already added a personal note about the fields of apostolic activity: “yet not a catholic party: multiplicity of opinions”<sup>7</sup>. Around one year later he wrote: “We are citizens like the others: with the same duties, the same rights. — With the political freedom of the members, whether men or women. Thus multiplicity of opinions in whatever is human”<sup>8</sup>. He expressly names a dimension of Catholic outlook “a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living”<sup>9</sup>. Later he has often used the expression “Unity is only what concerns the common denominator”. By this is meant that the common denominator of the members of Opus Dei is only the faith of the Catholic Church, and also the spiritual essence of the Work and her pastoral cares. “Once I attempted a sketch of the Work’s members”, he remarks in December 1931, “how God wants to have them: there are a series of fragments of the same denominator (of a uniform shape that leads the series to become one with Christ) and totally different numerators (autonomy), according to character, temperament and the different ways in which Jesus leads men of every age”<sup>10</sup>. Escrivá repeats those thoughts again in 1967 in an interview for a Spanish newspaper: “We cannot forget that the existence among Catholics of a true diversity of criterion and opinion in matters which God has left to the free discussion of men is in no way opposed to the hierarchical structure or the unity of the People of God. On the contrary, it strengthens them and defends them against possible impurities”<sup>11</sup>. This multiplicity concerns moreover not only opinions. Escrivá has also pointed out many times, for instance, in a letter of 19<sup>th</sup> March 1964, that “all the things of this earth... must be directed to God”, yet, everything “corresponding to its particular nature, in conformity with the immediate goal that God has granted to everybody”. It keeps away from the fundamentalist conception according to which everything must be shaped following the literal text of the Holy Scripture, as if it contained these single instructions

<sup>7</sup> *Apuntes íntimos*, nr. 206, quoted from A. DE FUENMAYOR - V. GOMEZ-IGLESIAS - J.L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Hardcover 1996, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Apuntes íntimos*, nr. 158, loc. cit., p. 34. A letter of January 1932 says: “The Work does not have a political program: this is not its purpose: it does not exist for that. Our goal is spiritual and apostolic... The bond that unites us is exclusively spiritual”.

<sup>9</sup> *Furrow*, 428.

<sup>10</sup> *Apuntes íntimos*, nr. 511, loc. cit., p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Conversations*, 12.

for the circumstances of life and so it could provide certainty of salvation, not only in heaven, but already on the earth<sup>12</sup>. Escrivá was against the typical model of Integralism<sup>13</sup>.

2. On the other hand, Escrivá always applied himself against what he called “clericalism”, that is, the idea that the ecclesiastical hierarchy could or should manage the Church’s people even in the matters of this world, as if they were under age. He has always emphasized “the personal freedom of every layman”, his good right to take decisions which do not fall within the “competence of the ecclesiastical office”, according to his “own personal convictions and aptitudes”, and of course, what is regarded as right before his own conscience<sup>14</sup>. Still in 1968, that is, three years after the end of the Council, we read in an interview: “One of the greatest dangers threatening the Church today may well be precisely that of not recognising the divine requirements of Christian freedom and of being led by false arguments in favour of greater effectiveness to try to impose uniformity on Christians”<sup>15</sup>.

All this may sound now banal today, nearly 40 years after the end of the Vatican Council II, because it is obvious. Yet, in the first place, that is, in the late 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was equivalent to a sort of revolution within the Church. One of the implications of this programme was that it cannot set out as a plausible duty of the Catholic, the duty to strive for a “Catholic State”<sup>16</sup>. Still between both World Wars, it was considered almost a heresy to make such a proposition. For Escrivá the christianisation of politics and society is not what should be aspired directly to; it is the “result” of the behaviour of many individuals. “God wishes a handful of ‘His own’ people in every human activity. — Then... ‘pax Christi in regno Christi’ — the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ”<sup>17</sup>.

In the second place this demand (it is more than a concession) for a “Pluralism”, however can be misunderstood by Christians. Today “Pluralism” (a word which Escrivá used very often) is mostly meant as a nearly boundless mul-

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. the essay by M. SPIEKER, *Waren Petrus und Paulus, Maria und Josef Fundamentalisten?:* «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of» 12.5.1993, S. 12.

<sup>13</sup> So M. RHONHEIMER, *Neuevangelisierung und politische Kultur*, «Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung» 162 (1994) 624.

<sup>14</sup> *Conversations*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. the very interesting essay by M. Rhonheimer (see note 13). The author, he himself a member of Opus Dei, convincingly describes that also and just from a Christian viewpoint absolute convictions and last certainties of salvation are alien to the middle class society and to its institutional praxis, and they can (and must) limit themselves to permit a common life in peace, freedom and justice.

<sup>17</sup> *The Way*, 301.

tiplicity of opinion and behaviour that is, at most, restricted by the Constitution of a country. Pluralism in Escrivá is more precise, more exact, ecclesiastical: its boundaries are those of the Faith and the rules of the Catholic Church (and for the Work's members also the Tradition handed down). The layman has to decide on his own conscience which job he chooses and to which career he tends, whether he remains unmarried or gets married, which party he approves, and follow the case of, whether he has influence on the culture of his environment in one way or another<sup>18</sup>. He is not free to be "for or against Rome". Except in a case where "Roma" would have demanded something from him outside its competence "Rome" would have demanded something from him. And it is always valid: "we must put Christ on the top of all our activities"<sup>19</sup>.

### 3. WITNESS FOR CHRIST – NAMELY: UNITY OF LIFE

For a culture, like the German one particular in the last 30 years that tends to interpret everything politically, it seems hard to follow this line of thought. Perhaps or just because the Work's members warn over and over again about "clericalism" (a word that always had a pejorative sound, yet previously it was exclusively almost used by critics of the Church), they are firmly suspected of being an "extended branch of the hierarchy", where "hierarchy" does not usually mean, for instance, the bishops, but rather, so to say, the "dark" figures of the Vatican. In Germany it is difficult to distinguish openly between the obedience to the Church as heritage of the *Logos* become man, which is represented then as "Institution", and the obedience to the "political entities" of the Church's representatives. For Germans it is easy to understand Escrivá's homily on the occasion of Christ the King's feast in the year 1970: "I do not approve of committed Christians in the world forming a political-religious movement. That would be madness... What we have to do is put God in the heart of every single person, no matter who he is"<sup>20</sup>.

After all, Escrivá's concepts only anticipate what the Vatican Council II has stated about the laity's duties. "The laity", as is said in *Lumen Gentium* (31), "by

<sup>18</sup> During the time of Franco's regime a member of the Work was a minister, while another, member of the opposition. The latter let the minister know that he would have been imprisoned, if the minister had proceeded with a certain polity. The minister sent a message to him: "These are not the rules of the game according to which we have joined in; you can become a saint even in prison".

<sup>19</sup> *Letter 19.3.1954*, quoted from P. RODRÍGUEZ - F. OCÁRIZ - J.L. ILLANES, *Opus Dei in the Church: an Ecclesiological Study of the Life and Apostolate of Opus Dei*, Princeton 1994, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 183.

their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God". The texts of the Council expressly pointed out many times that we should not "hide ourselves behind the Church", but have the courage to take the responsibility for our choices as our own (and also not to involve the Church in choices for which she does not have competence, and thus for which it is not responsible). The Catholic, at least the Catholic layperson, we may say in summary, must take decisions in matters of the world according to his conscience shaped by the Faith in the Church, without asserting that these decisions are "Catholic" or "the only right Catholic" ones. Nobody, who does not expressly ask, needs to know, that another person is Catholic<sup>21</sup>. Not by chance did Escrivá continuously emphasize Jesus' "concealed life" of more than fifteen years during which he was active in the workshop of a craftsman, whose son he was. Since he did not speak about his Mission, nobody, but his mother (cfr. Luke 3:51) and perhaps his foster father, might have realized it. A Man who was God contributed in a humble place, to the Redemption of the world, brought about only by Him. "In his hands, a professional occupation, similar to that carried out by millions of people all over the world, was turned into a divine task. It became a part of our Redemption, a way to salvation"<sup>22</sup>.

With respect to this concept of Escrivá, it is not only anticipates the Council's statements, but also is a guidance to the activity of the Christian laity all over the world — a guidance in a way that goes far beyond the "Work" founded by him. It is an invitation to all the laity, in the midst of the world, to sanctify their ordinary life and work, without introducing oneself as "professional Catholic" which is something that upsets some non-Catholics (and also Catholics). The teacher, the dentist, the actress, the baker, the post-woman (to mention a couple of randomly chosen examples) should accomplish their tasks, everyone in his or her own position, loyal to the Church, as if the Lord had personally exhorted them to do it. Thus, the vocation, upon which the *Lumen Gentium* speaks, is addressed to every layman, simply because he is a Christian. He needs only to grasp consciously what God is inviting him to do.

Apart from everything else, today laity should work against the misunderstanding — above all in Germany — that accompanies and darkens the reception of the Council's message. The Council tried to mobilize the laity in a way which was not usual in the Church at that time. But it had no intention of inviting the laity to jump continuously to the altar, not to talk of meddling with the bishops' and priests' tasks.

<sup>21</sup> This seems to me to be the very problem of the unhappy association *Donum vitae*. To formulate once and for all, exaggerating a little exaggeratedly: it seems to me to be worthwhile discussing whether a Catholic, who wants to save as much as possible a life not yet born, could be active in a State consulting room, even if, when necessary, he were compelled to give a consultation card; on the contrary, the founders of the mentioned association want to be recognized their doubtful decision as absolutely "catholic".

<sup>22</sup> *Conversations*, 55.

The prayer of the Council's fathers says: "Be there where you are and not only on Sunday. Christians, worth the name, become aware of your job, your family life, whatever you do as a commitment that the Lord has entrusted you. And at the same time — in a discreet way — be an apostle". Vittorio Messori has summarized this message of Escrivá in this way: the time has come "to put an end to a Christianity of first and second class. There are not on the one hand the few 'Gospel's professionals' (priests, monks, nuns and also some laity, but of 'particular kind', perhaps 'consecrated') and on the other hand the huge majority of 'Christianity amateurs'. No, the Gospel, the entire Gospel, exists for everybody. God requests that everybody becomes saint, that is, to live the Gospel in its totality"<sup>23</sup>. The late historian from Cologne, Peter Berglar<sup>24</sup>, once told me what first struck him about the members of the 'Work': "In a time during which young people, above all students, strolled around long-haired and as much as possible slovenly dressed, the members of the 'Work' were well hair-styled and faultlessly dressed". This may be a total secondary question, and nevertheless, expression of an inner attitude — an attitude of a person that has consciously grasped his whole life as a commitment. Escrivá has described this attitude a little sharply, in a 1948 letter thus: "For you" — including himself among those who surely understood and emphasized studies and training —, "the job shall never be a play that is not taken seriously and even less a matter for dilettanti or amateurs. What advantage do I get out of it, for example, if it is said about one of my sons: he is surely a bad teacher, but a good son? If he is not a good teacher — what does it serve me? In reality, he is actually not even a good son because he has not employed the means to improve himself in his profession... A man without any enthusiasm for his profession is of no use to me!"<sup>25</sup>. This may sound almost ruthless, because it is hard for many people to live with a constant tension to demand daily from themselves the best they can do. It becomes more understandable when we consider that Escrivá did not, by any means want to educate his "sons" to become workaholics. The sanctification of ordinary life and work, as he continuously repeated from 1928 on, is not measured by efficiency by the change in the world, ability, education or other things, but it mingles with a contemplative dimension: one must always do what one can, as well as possible, but eventually for love of the "world", that is, for an engagement in a situation in which God and the neighbour are consciously served. "The moment has come, when it becomes impossible to distinguish where the prayer finishes and work begins,

<sup>23</sup> V. MESSORI, *Opus Dei, Leadership and Vision in Today's Catholic Church*, New York 1997, p. 151. The chapter corresponding to that page brings as title the turning point of Escrivá: "Stay where you are".

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. P. BERGLAR, *Opus Dei: Life and Work of Its Founder*, Princeton 1993.

<sup>25</sup> *Letter 15.10.1948*, quoted from P. BERGLAR, op. cit., p. 283.



because our work “is” also prayer, is contemplation of God, is really the mystic life of unity with God, it is, without exaggeration, deification”<sup>26</sup>.

Not everyone is ready or suited to become a member of Opus Dei; I myself, in spite of statements which may sound to the contrary, have never become one. I have never once considered myself a member of a “circle of friends”, whose membership it seems I am often accused of belonging to (though I am not afraid to tell people that I am “well acquainted” with one or another member of the “Work”). It is part of the natural rights of freedom of a Catholic Christian (and also of a citizen), to be member of that community in which he feels at home and to decline in a friendly way an invitation of another one. Yet, it does not prevent me from acknowledging the fact and thinking that the message Josemaría Escrivá has left would provoke a silent world revolution, if many of us Christians took it to heart or really pursued it. It would also be a “revolution” in the field of culture. The re-evangelisation to which John Paul II has exhorted us for many years, will be not achieved, by setting up institutions and associations, like is so easily done in Germany. It will only be achieved if, we — Catholics, but also Christians of other confessions — take seriously what we believe and carry out this faith with all its consequences in our everyday life, without excuses to which we accede too easily, but at the same time without any kind of fanaticism that is not in line with love to which the Lord tries to persuade us.

All things considered, I cannot under any circumstances find the “obscure conspiracy” that is so often today attributed to Opus Dei. Whether we are members of the “Work” or not, the programme or actually the spirituality that Escrivá shows us (and which was inspired directly by God), is for us laity the only thing that could cause a change of culture.

#### 4. DID THE CULTURAL AND AESTHETICAL ASPECTS LAID BEHIND?

It may be objected, that while Escrivá may have surely had a good dose of humour, yet he was lacking in sense of aesthetics and in respect of this, want lacked a capacity to enjoy things, an important dimension of every culture. Actually, hints such as how deeply the beauties of nature or works of art or even interpersonal relationship can (and must) touch us, are hardly found in his writings<sup>27</sup>.

But was this sense not lacking in the Apostles too? Luke himself, a Greek, does not seem to have noticed the effective magnificence of the Parthenon, as if

<sup>26</sup> *Letter*, 6.5.1945, quoted from P. BERGLAR, op. cit., p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> It is not devoid of a paradoxical comicality the fact that a great part of the literary, and descriptive art which we love also as Christians is “unmoral”. We treasure it, because it shows paradigmatically dimensions of the “human side” and thus it remind us what we are or can be like.

it was a sublime dream, still visible today, when he participated in Paul's dialogue with the epicurean and stoical philosophers on the Agora (Acts 17:16-34).

Maybe the seriousness of the apostolate for Escrivá was such a heartfelt wish that — from this point of view, not unlike the Apostles — he gave up everything that appeared to him as waste of time, at least here and there, the distraction from what is more important. “God has got the right to ask: do you think about me? Do you bear me in mind? Do you look for me as your support? Do you look for me as light of your life, as fortress, as armour, as everything?”<sup>28</sup>.

My supposition is that Escrivá, answering such questions, would have most probably alluded to the particular beauty that is to be found only through the contemplation. Saint Thomas gave a brief section to it in the *Summa*<sup>29</sup>. Or did he avoid expressing his own judgement, above all in writing, even in matters of art, pleasure, taste? These things, from his point of view belong to the field of Christians' freedom, so emphasized by him that he did not want to dominate the temporal concerns. If he states “that the Christian vocation consists in making heroic verse out of the prose of each day”<sup>30</sup>, even to performing with love the insignificant trifles of everyday life, then a devaluation of the great services of culture, would appear not to be truly compatible with it.

Many native Spanish people point out the familiarity of Escrivá with the classics of the Spanish literature and the high literary quality of his own writings. The elevated language to poetry of his works has doubtless been the expression of a particular skill, so witnesses of the time report, but it is also fruit of intense work of his struggle over the word and his polishing the text. Nevertheless, for him the masterpieces of the mankind remain only a weak reflection of heavenly beauty: “Consider what is most beautiful and most noble on earth, what pleases the mind and the other faculties, and what delights the flesh and the senses. And the world, and the other worlds that shine in the night: the whole universe. Well this, along with all the follies of the heart satisfied, is worth nothing, is nothing and less than nothing compared... with this God of mine! of yours!”<sup>31</sup>.

It is not forbidden to anyone who venerates Escrivá, nor to any member of the “Work”, to notice beauty; and the many occasion to feel joy that we encounter in this world, as an occasion in which God waits for him. Also an apostle must continuously “refesh” himself; this kind of “refreshment” is not only sought exclusively among what could be described as “conscious prayer”. For example, even Mozart's *Coronation Mass* has been defined, not unjustly, as a prayer: “una preghiera, una domanda poggiata su Dio fatto uomo per salvare la

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from BERGLAR, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, 180, 3 ad 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Conversations*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> *The Way*, 432.

povertà e la meschinità di noi uomini”<sup>32</sup> and even listening to it can be a prayer, a thanksgiving for such a moving witness in the world, as Christ has redeemed us. Once I expressed this thought — meant as a gentle-critical question to Opus Dei — to a friend of mine, a member of the “Work”. He fully pretended not to have heard my critical doubt and took my example of the *Coronation Mass* simply as a confirmation of Escrivá’s idea. In fact, nothing seemed beautiful enough to him if related to God, to the honour of the cult and liturgy and even the worthiest thing would still appear inadequate. Even in times of radical poverty, he surpassed himself in the generosity concerning the liturgical accuracy and the outfit of the chapels in the centres of the “Work”.

My doubt whether in Escrivá or in Opus Dei the appreciation of beauty from a natural, human and artistic point of view is not considered perhaps a little too briefly, was by no means cleared up by that. Because my doubt was aimed more at the worldly culture. My suspicion was that the aesthetic moment would thus fall back behind the aesthetic effort to be detached from the “world”, which is doubtless an important effort also for the laity. This suspicion was compellingly denied by people who personally knew Escrivá. Firstly, according to Blessed Josemaría, the ascetic exercise of this detachment from the world consists always in acts of love directed to God. What is renounced must then be something suitable, that is, something good. Secondly, in the ascetic struggle he always granted primacy to such acts which made life more pleasant for others: therefore withdrawal of one’s own Ego, fighting against selfishness. Thirdly, for the layman, whose typical milieu is the “world”, constant vigilance would be indispensable in view of the temperations in the same world, so as not to develop affections that takes him apart from what is most important.

In his youth Escrivá wanted to become an architect, my interlocutors added. For all his lifetime he was particularly interested in the numerous building plans at service of the apostolate of Opus Dei and he contributed for ideas of the aesthetic elaboration. For example, he always brought photos from his travels to provide inspiration for particular details. The beauty of places, houses and spaces, were of great value to him, above all, if they were dedicated to the service of the others. Even though he, he himself had to keep a strict diet, he gave not little attention to the food and drink and in fact highly recommended his spiritual daughters to reach a high level. This leads on not a few occasions in married life, where both the of the married couple belong to the “Work”, to a singular, surely not dialectic, “quarrel” that illustrates nicely the relationship between the esteem of the worldly things and the releasing from them: she strives to cook very well and he strives not to help himself excessively. Cost him tremendously to ensure that quite something that his daughters and sons — even in the difficult

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. the commentary of Luigi Giussani in the edition *Spirito Gentil*, 2000 on the performance by Herbert von Karajan with the Wiener Philharmoniker.

times of the reconstruction of Roma — found occasions to practise sport and relax with excursions or visits to museum.

## 5. ANSWERS FROM LIFE

There are documentary films on the meetings of Escrivá with the members of Opus Dei and friends during his travels of catechesis in 1972 throughout Spain, and in 1974 in several Latin American countries. In these meetings he answered very spontaneously to the partly personal questions of the people present. Theological or spiritual writings did not offer occasion for the remarks often made in this extraordinary context.

5000 people gathered on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1974 at the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires. There, a young artist stood out from the audience and asked him what she could do in order to persuade her colleagues that they would be no less artist if they respected Christian morals in their profession. Here is the spontaneous answer of the founder of Opus Dei: “Listen, my daughter: they know it. Sit down. I have absolutely no shyness in admitting that I like the classical nakedness and it leads me to God. There is a Venus in Rome – the Capitoline Venus. She is kept in the Capitol. She does not descend from a collection belonging to Satan, on the contrary, the popes have preserved her and assigned her to this museum. She stands there, anyway I saw her there some years ago, all on her own in a hall and she does not have anything on. I have watched her – in her nakedness – and praised God because you women are so beautiful. No wicked thought, no bad desire [...] Tell your colleagues, but say it affectionately: they have not to be dull. If they can be God’s creatures, they have not to turn into animals. And tell them you have heard a priest that loves the Blessed Virgin Mary, the pure Mother and conceived without original sin — and he has said to have watched no less than a Venus — the Capitoline Venus, with great admiration, and thanking God our Lord”.

The spontaneous affirmation provoked by the artist is coherently suitable in view of a homily of Escrivá about marriage as a Christian vocation. “Sex is not a shameful thing”, it is said there, “it is a divine gift, ordained to life, to love, to fruitfulness. This is the context in which we must see the Christian doctrine on sex. Our faith does not ignore anything on this earth that is beautiful, noble and authentically human”<sup>33</sup>.

One must be thankful for a glance in the ordinary life of a Blessed. I was told with pleasure by the esteemed professor of Architecture Cesar Ortíz Echagüe, the following event which speaks also of the humour of the speaker, for

<sup>33</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 24.

long years member of the directorate of Opus Dei, at first in Spain and then in Rome. He was consecrated priest only in 1983, at 56 years old and he became regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Germany in 1984.

He said that, in the 1960s, when he belonged to the regional commission of Opus Dei in Spain, “We received a very curious task from Rome – directly from Mgr. Escrivá. It was the time in which the Beatles were all the rage among young people. Not only in England, but also in Spain. Today somebody may classify the youth cult around the Beatles differently from what the enthusiasm suggested at that time. Anyway, we received the task to get four wigs that copied the hairstyles of the Beatles and to send them to Rome. The hardest thing was to find the right hair colours, since coloured photos were not yet so current as today. But eventually we succeeded fairly well and we brought the strange goods to Rome. We had not long to wait the solution of the riddle: among the young, even if no longer wholly young, people who were studying Philosophy and Theology from all over the world surrounding our (at that time) general president — they all had already obtained got a civil profession or at least a corresponding diploma — formed a quartet that simulated excellently the genial originals. Blessed Josemaría enjoyed the performance and ordered the wigs for the quartet. If my memory does not fail me, he himself kept the wigs in a pocket during a gathering and put them on the pseudo-Beatles — to everybody’s amusement — in the midst of a performance”.