

Forming One's Conscience in Social and Political Matters as Seen in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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1. Introduction

A full presentation of Blessed Josemaría's thought on the social and political activity of Christians would require a thorough analysis of his numerous writings and abundant oral preaching. Since this material covers a period of almost fifty years, it would be necessary to catalog and date sources, and determine the purpose and exact context of the available documents. Such a study would provide a better understanding of how the founder of Opus Dei's teachings in this area combine careful reflection on the evolving social magisterium of the Church with quite new perspectives, stemming ultimately from his divine foundational charism. One would also have to examine the written testimony of the

many people who heard his teachings and witnessed his activity, as well as all the bibliographical material currently available.¹

A recent study of Blessed Josemaría's writings concludes that one does not discover there "a theoretical program for action," but rather the "communication of a life."² One finds in his works not a dry academic analysis, but rather a living synthesis of theological and spiritual principles, profoundly meditated upon for many years in the light of his foundational charism. To fully understand his writings, one has to take into consideration the entire spiritual and pastoral experience and theological reflection that underlies them. This task, although immense, is absolutely essential if one is to provide the

1. Most of the bibliography relative to our subject has been assembled in the recent study of J. M. PEROSANZ, J. M. AUBERT, and T. GUTIÉRREZ CALZADA, *Acción social del cristiano. El Beato Josemaría Escrivá y la Doctrina social de la Iglesia*, Palabra, Madrid 1996.

2. See C. FABRO, "La tempra di un Padre della Chiesa," in C. FABRO, S. GAROFALO, M. A. RASCHINI, *Santi nel mondo. Studi sugli scritti del beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Edizioni Ares, Milan, 1992, p. 23.

“hermeneutic” principles that are required.³

This short study makes no pretense to achieving the above goal. To do so would require historical instruments not yet available, such as a scientific biography, an annotated edition of his complete works, or at least an annotated historical study of those works of greatest importance to this subject matter. This inquiry will be limited, therefore, to identifying the central aspects of Blessed Josemaría’s thought on the social and political activity of Christians, without taking into account their development and growth over time. An attempt will also be made to clarify the context in which they can best be understood.

2. The importance of a properly formed Christian conscience in Blessed Josemaría’s teachings on social and political matters

The writings of Opus Dei’s founder contain abundant theological and moral reflections on the activity of Christians in the social and political area,⁴ but nothing about what is commonly understood as “political ideas and opinions.”

Blessed Josemaría affirmed repeatedly: “I never speak about politics.”⁵ He thus stressed his resolve never to propose or suggest “a particular solution to a specific problem, in competition with those who stand for other possible and legitimate solutions.”⁶ He refused to take part in political debates, in the give and take of opinions that leads to political parties, organizations, cultural movements, and so on. He simply never allowed his words or activities to be interpreted in a political way.

Why did Blessed Josemaría adopt this line of conduct? A study of his writings reveals various reasons. First came the exclusively priestly character⁷ that he wanted to give to all his activity (“my mission as a priest is exclusively spiritual”)⁸ and his lively awareness of the supernatural mission of the Church that prevented him from reducing Christianity to a “political-religious movement. That would be madness, even if it were motivated by a desire to spread the spirit of Christ in all the activities of men.”⁹ Nevertheless the founder of Opus Dei always defended the right and duty of the Church’s hierarchy to pronounce moral judg-

3. Most useful in this sense are the two first chapters of the work of A. DE FUENMAYOR, V. GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS, and J. L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Scepter, Princeton, 1994.

4. See the ample selection of texts contained in the study of J. M. PERO-SANZ, J. M. AUBERT, and T. GUTIÉRREZ CALZADA, *Acción social del cristiano . . .*, cited above.

5. *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer*, no. 48 (Hereafter cited as *Conversations*). In the same sense: *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183.

6. *Conversations*, no. 76.

7. See for example *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 79.

8. *Conversations*, no. 48.

9. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183.

ment on temporal matters when it was demanded by Christian faith or morals.¹⁰ What is more, he constantly taught that the faithful have the moral obligation to accept internally and externally these doctrinal judgments.¹¹ He also incorporated into his oral and written teachings the basic content of the pontifical and episcopal magisterium on social matters. He always defended the right and duty of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to offer moral judgment on the new problems arising from social and technological changes and advances.

A second reason stems from the nature of Opus Dei's specific spirituality, and therefore from his mission as founder and shepherd of souls. Opus Dei has an exclusively spiritual mission.¹² Thus, the Work does not propose to its members "concrete solutions for any economic, political or cultural problem. Each member is absolutely free to think and act as he sees fit in those fields. ... Opus Dei is open to people of every political, social, cultural and economic tendency that a Christian conscience can accept. ... This pluralism is not a problem for the Work. Rather it is a sign of good spirit that bears witness

to the legitimate liberty of each individual."¹³ To make things absolutely clear, Blessed Josemaría said: "If Opus Dei had ever gotten involved in politics, even if only for a second, I—at this mistaken moment—would have walked out of the Work."¹⁴

The above reflections, although true, are incomplete: they reveal what the teachings of Blessed Josemaría *are not*, and what Opus Dei *is not*. But what then *are* his teachings on the Christian's political and social activity? The answer is found in a declaration that is of capital importance for grasping the purpose of Opus Dei, and therefore for understanding the teachings of its founder: "Opus Dei's main activity consists in offering its members, and other people, the spiritual means they need to live as good Christians in the midst of the world. It helps them to learn Christ's doctrine and the Church's teachings. Its spirit moves them to work well for the love of God and as a service to other men and women. In a word, it helps them to behave like genuine Christians: being loyal friends, respecting the legitimate freedom of others, and trying to make our world more just."¹⁵ The teachings of Blessed Josemaría are

10. See *Conversations*, no. 11.

11. See *Conversations*, no. 29. See *Letter*, April 30, 1946, no. 18.

12. See for example *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 70.

13. *Conversations*, no. 48. For the Founder of Opus Dei there is also a legitimate pluralism in the theological field, and in this sense he always declared that the Work does not have any opinion of its own—any school of thought—in theological questions that are matters of opinion: see *Letter*, October 24, 1965, no. 53.

14. Cited by A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, 2 ed., Rialp, Madrid, 1984, p. 295.

15. *Conversations*, no. 27.

intended to provide the formation necessary to live as good Christians in the midst of the world. It has been aptly said that his writings constitute a pressing call “to a full Christian life in the world that can’t help but produce fruits of social transformation, of the establishment of justice, fraternity, and peace. Faith and love should overflow into deeds; grace can and ought to produce fruits of redemption now and at every moment. Yet a fully Christian life transcends these consequences since it reaches beyond time and history. Its results are secondary and gratuitous in relation to the paramount goal: radical identification with Jesus Christ, full surrender to God.”¹⁶

Therefore, the context of the founder’s teachings in this area lies in the formation of the consciences of Christians who live in the world and desire to seek sanctity, animating with Christ’s spirit the realities in which their lives unfold: professional, cultural, social, and political realities. As a means to this end the founder of Opus Dei transmitted “the doctrine of Christ” and “the teachings of the Church” (in this study, the social doctrine of the Church).¹⁷ In his writings the Church’s doctrines and teachings acquire specific and sometimes highly original perspectives

and purposes that are not always well understood, even on the part of well-intentioned observers. It is these perspectives and purposes that will now be the focus of this study.

3. The fundamental theological framework

In Blessed Josemaría’s writings one clearly notes the constant and unifying presence of “a singularly rich and coherent understanding of the mystery of Christ, perfect God and perfect man,” which permits one to find in the “Incarnation of the Word the perennially present and operative foundation of the Christian transformation of man, and through the work of man, of all created realities.”¹⁸ Glossing the teachings of the Epistle to the Colossians (1:19-20), the founder of Opus Dei states: “Nothing can be foreign to Christ’s care. 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.”¹⁹ And referring in a more direct way to the theme under study,

16. *The Canonical Path*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

17. See *Conversations*, no. 27.

18. C. FABRO, *La temprera di un Padre della Chiesa*, *op. cit.*, p. 115. On this point one should also see J.L. CHABOT, “Responsabilità di fronte al mondo e libertà,” in M. BELDA, J. ESCUDERO, J. L. ILLANES, P. O’CALLAGHAN, *Santità e mondo. Atti del Convegno teologico di studio sugli insegnamenti del beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1994, pp. 197-198.

19. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 112.

he added: "The apostolic task that Christ entrusted to all his disciples leads to specific results in social matters. It is inconceivable that a Christian, in order to fulfill his task, should have to turn his back on the world and become a defeatist with regard to human nature. ... A Christian has to be ready, at all times, to sanctify society *from within*." ²⁰

This Christological principle determines Blessed Josemaría's vision of a Christian's *being in the world* and *living in the world*, or, in other words, his conception of *secularity*. This leads directly to what might be called the principle of responsibility and participation: to live in the world means to feel oneself responsible for it, to take up the task of participating in human activities in order to structure them in a Christian way. "Be fearlessly present in all the activities and organizations of men," he wrote in 1959, "so that Christ will be present in them. I have applied to our way of working those words of Scripture: 'wherever the body is there the

eagles will be gathered together' (*Mt* 24:28), because God our Lord will ask a strict accounting of us if, out of carelessness or comfort, each one of you, freely, does not try to take part in those human tasks and decisions on which the present and future of society depends." ²¹

Underlying these words is a clear perception of the ethical and religious meaning of the interdependence of men and of nations, which in modern society has acquired a global dimension. From the beginning of his activity, Opus Dei's founder stressed the importance of not enclosing Christian solidarity within narrow, provincial limits, while he also insisted that solidarity begins with those nearby. The holy preoccupation of a Christian, he wrote in 1933, "begins with what he has at hand, with the ordinary activities of each day, and little by little his eagerness for the harvest extends out in concentric circles: in the heart of the family, in one's place of work, in civil society, in places of culture, in

20. *Ibid.*, no. 125.

21. *Letter*, January 9, 1959, no. 20; see also *The Forge*, no. 715. On many other occasions Blessed Josemaría reflected on the Christological foundation of the concept of secularity. "Let me give you an example of the kind of attitude which develops if one is unable to penetrate this mystery of Jesus. Some people tend to see Christianity as a collection of devout practices, failing to realize the relation between them and the circumstances of ordinary life, including the urgency to meet the needs of other people and remedy injustice. I would say that anyone who has that attitude has not yet understood the meaning of the Incarnation. The Son of God has taken the body and soul and voice of a man; he has shared our fate, even to the extent of experiencing the excruciating anguish of death. Yet perhaps without wanting to, some people regard Christ as a stranger in the world of man.

Others tend to imagine that in order to remain human we need to play down some central aspect of Christian dogma. They act as if the life of prayer, continual relationship with God, implied fleeing from responsibilities and forsaking the world. But they forget that it was none other than Jesus who showed us the extreme to which we should go in love and service. Only if we try to understand the mystery of God's love—a love which went as far as death—will we be able to give ourselves totally to others and not let ourselves be overcome by difficulties or indifference." (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 98).

the political assembly, among all one's fellow citizens no matter what their social condition; it even reaches to relations between different peoples and includes in its love the most varied races, continents and civilizations" ²²

In many of the founder's reflections one finds an echo of the Sermon on the Mount, which contains a message characterized by a novelty that does not imply a rupture, but a fulfillment. ²³ The teachings of our Lord did not destroy the noble contents of the law of Moses or of human morality, but brought them to their fullness. It interiorized and radicalized them, thus leading them to their fullest expression, free of casuistry. This perspective, faithfully reflecting the logic of the Incarnation, has numerous echoes in the writings that are the subject of this study: for example, the clear conviction that there is perfect harmony between faith and science, and the high regard placed on human virtues. Although it is impossible to consider these in detail in this study, it is important to emphasize the great value Blessed Josemaría gave to created realities and especially to personal freedom, God's principal gift to

man, and to the autonomy proper to earthly realities. ²⁴

The autonomy of temporal realities implies, in the writings of Blessed Josemaría, the need to know and respect their intrinsic dynamism, the fruit of the rationality which the wisdom of the Creator has impressed upon his works. It therefore demands technical and professional competence — indispensable requirements of any apostolic initiative for the sanctification of the world *from within*. "When he does his work, a Christian is obliged not to sidestep or play down the values that earthly things have in themselves. If the expression 'bless all human activities' means abusing or neglecting their intrinsic qualities, I would never use such a phrase. Personally I have never been convinced that the ordinary activities of men and women should carry a placard or confessional label. Although I respect the opposite opinion, I feel that using such a label involves a risk of using the holy name of our faith in vain. And there is evidence of the label 'Catholic' being used to justify activities and behavior that sometimes are not even decently human." ²⁵

When carried over into the

22. *Letter*, July 16, 1933, no. 15.

23. See for example *Mt* 5:17 ff.

24. We have already said that we will not take up in these pages a chronological study of the thought of Blessed Josemaría. But it would not be difficult to show that this respect for the autonomy and intrinsic value of temporal realities was present from the beginning of the founder of Opus Dei's activity, that is to say, from the end of the 1920s, long before this theme was dealt with by the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the second Vatican Council.

25. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 184.

social arena, this same perspective gives rise to a profound understanding of the proper nature of social relationships. God did not create only individuals; he also created social relationships—such as the family—whose dynamism has to be recognized, appreciated and respected if it is to be redeemed. To be more precise, God did not create individuals, but persons, and therefore he created relationships. In the social sciences there was a tendency for many years to define human existence as a polarity between the individual, understood as an atom, and the state; at times another element was added: the marketplace. Only recently, with the development of third and fourth sector sociology, is this narrow outlook being overcome.²⁶

The founder of Opus Dei never entered into methodological debates with the social sciences. But his teachings and initiatives in the fields of the family, education, social development, and the means of social

communication showed that he possessed a vision of “social subjects”²⁷ much broader than that encountered in many studies of social questions. This sensitivity probably derived from his profound meditation upon the social doctrine of the Church. A definitive judgment on this hypothesis will require a detailed study of the origins and sources of his conception of the specificity of social realities, as distinguished from state and private realities.²⁸

The founder of Opus Dei stated that “no one has a right to impose non-existent dogmas in temporal matters. Given a concrete problem the solution is to study it well and then to act conscientiously, with personal freedom and with personal responsibility as well.”²⁹ But he did not contend that everything in this world is contingent, since he proclaimed fearlessly to all without exception the binding force of universally valid ethical demands. His position is clearly defined in point

26. See for example P. DONATI, *Pensiero sociale cristiano e società post-moderna*, Editrice A.V.E., Rome, 1997; and directed by the same author, *Sociologia del terzo settore*, Nis, Rome, 1996.

27. See in this sense JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 46 and 49. With reference to this encyclical, and to the conception proposed in it of the “subjectivity of the social,” we would like to clarify, among other things, that we are not referring here to the “corporatism” defended by some currents of social thought of Christian inspiration. This “corporatist” idea never appears in the writings of the founder of Opus Dei.

28. In regard to what is said about the perception of the “specificity of social realities,” there is no contradiction between this concept and Blessed Josemaría’s insistence in his writings on the personal character of salvation and of liberation from sin, which is in opposition to those who would reduce Christianity to a matter of changing social structures. It was not uncommon after the 1960s that some Catholic theological sectors began to show themselves to be receptive to Marxist social analysis as a principle of theological hermeneutics. Following the teachings of the magisterium of the Church, Blessed Josemaría insisted on the incompatibility of Marxism with the Catholic faith, at the same time that he manifested his conviction that “it is within Christianity that we find the light that will enable us to answer all problems: all you have to do is to strive sincerely to be Catholics” (*Friends of God*, no. 171). He set in motion, especially in countries in which he saw the existence of notable social inequalities, various works of social improvement in the areas of professional formation of young people, farm workers, manual laborers, and so on.

29. *Conversations*, no. 77.

no. 275 of *Furrow*: "Do not forget that in human affairs other people may also be right: they see the same questions as you but from a different point of view, under another light, with different shades, with other contours. —Only in faith and morals is there an indisputable standard: that of our Mother the Church."³⁰

This sense of the limitation of every specific human project to bring about the realization of the good shaped his understanding of the principle of freedom. It also influenced his opposition to the imposition of a single criterion in problems admitting of various solutions, each equally compatible with a Christian conscience. "Limitations on the freedom of the children of God, on the freedom of consciences and legitimate initiatives, are arbitrary and unjust," he wrote in 1940. "Limitations proceed from an abuse of authority, from the ignorance or error of those who believe they can allow themselves the abuse of discriminating in an unreasonable way. This way of acting is both unjust and contrary to nature, because it goes against the dignity of the human person. It can never be the path to human cooperation, since it stifles the right of a person to act according to his conscience, the right to work, to associate with others, to live in freedom within the limits of the natural law."³¹

The principle of freedom has already been alluded to, although from a very limited perspective. The founder's awareness of the exclusively spiritual character of his priestly mission and of the purpose of *Opus Dei* led him to refrain from expressing opinions or suggesting solutions to concrete problems. Those who followed him or heard him were free to hold any opinion compatible with Christian faith and morals. This line of conduct was reinforced by a sense of the autonomy and intrinsic value of temporal realities and by the inevitable contingency and uncertainty of the practical solutions that can be applied to any particular problem. But to truly understand the meaning of the principle of freedom in the thought of Blessed Josemaría, several further steps are required.

Freedom is seen in his writings as a great good that is indissolubly united to the principle of responsibility, and therefore to participation and solidarity. Highlighting the principle of responsibility enables one to understand that freedom is for him neither a merely formal value nor solely procedural, nor much less the expression of an individualistic-atomistic conception of man. By seeing responsibility as inseparably united to the principle of freedom, he rejects any kind of social measure that injures or suppresses "subjectivi-

30. *Furrow* was published posthumously (Rialp, Madrid, 1986; Scepter, London, 1988).

31. *Letter*, March 11, 1940, no. 65.

ty” in social groupings, that is to say, that represses freedom or gives rise to irresponsibility. Therefore, any synthesis of Blessed Josemaría’s thought on the social and political activity of the Christian must be built on the indissoluble connection between personal freedom and a corresponding personal responsibility.

4. Freedom, responsibility, participation, and solidarity

This theme is best approached by means of a text that provides a synthesis of various aspects of the principle of freedom, clearly affirming the natural and Christian value of freedom joined to responsibility: “There is one value that [the Christian] must particularly cherish: personal freedom. Only if he defends the individual freedom of others — with the personal responsibility that must go with it— only then can he defend his own with human and Christian integrity. I will keep on repeating that our Lord has gratuitously given us a great supernatural gift, divine grace, and another wonderful human gift, personal freedom. To avoid this degenerating into license, we must develop integrity, we must make a real effort to conform our behavior to divine law, for where the Spirit is, there you find freedom. The kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of freedom. ... Without freedom, we cannot respond to grace. Without

freedom we cannot give ourselves freely to our Lord, for the most supernatural of reasons, *because we want to*. Some of you listening to me have known me for a long time. You can bear out that I have spent my whole life preaching personal freedom-with personal responsibility. I have sought freedom throughout the world and I’m still looking for it, just like Diogenes trying to find an honest man. And every day I love it more. Of all the things on earth, I love it most. It is a treasure which we do not appreciate nearly enough”³²

Immediately after this he assures the reader that he is not speaking in political terms: “When I talk about personal freedom, I am not using it as an excuse to discuss other very legitimate questions which are not of my competence as a priest. I know that it is not proper for me to discuss secular and current topics which belong to the temporal and civil sphere—subjects which our Lord has left to the free and calm discussion of men. I also know that a priest’s lips must avoid all human, partisan controversy. He must open them only to lead souls to God, to his saving doctrine and to the sacraments which Jesus Christ established, to lead souls to the interior life which brings us closer to God, so that we see we are his children and therefore brothers to all men without exception.”³³ And finally, he deals with the

32. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 184.

33. *Ibid.*

unfolding of the principle of freedom in the area of participation and of community life: "Let us really love all men; let us love Christ above all; and then we cannot avoid loving the rightful freedom of others, living in harmony with them."³⁴ Below we will consider in greater detail these aspects of his understanding of freedom.

a) Freedom, responsibility, pluralism

For Blessed Josemaría, love for freedom necessarily implied loving "the pluralism that freedom brings with it."³⁵ Pluralism is not synonymous with conflict and tension. "I have only one prescription: strive to live together in harmony and to understand and pardon each other. The fact that someone thinks differently from me (especially in matters which are open to personal opinion) in no way justifies an attitude of personal enmity, nor even of coldness or indifference. My Christian faith tells me to have charity for everyone, including those who do not have the grace of believing in Jesus Christ."³⁶ When it is a matter of finding solutions for specific social and political problems, the scope of possible opinions is quite broad. "It is true," he wrote in 1948, "that your faith has to guide you, when you make judgments about events and contingent

situations on earth." However it is also true that "Catholic doctrine does not impose specific, technical solutions to temporal problems; but it does ask you to be sensitive to these human problems and to have a sense of responsibility to confront them and to find a Christian solution for them."³⁷ In this last text, which reflects a position commonly accepted today but not in 1948, one can see how the defense of freedom in opinionable matters is always joined to responsibility.

The relationship between freedom and responsibility is even more explicit in another document, which also emphasizes that a Christian's freedom has limits, since not everything is open to opinion. "You should, therefore, feel free in everything that is a matter of opinion. *This freedom will give rise to a holy sense of personal responsibility*, which will make you serene, upright, and a friend of truth, and prevent you from falling into error: because you will sincerely respect the legitimate opinions of others. ... Nevertheless, we will always reject whatever is contrary to all that the Church teaches. For it is precisely our love for the truth and rectitude of intention that leads us to want to be *fortes in fide* (1 Pet 5:9), strong in the faith, with a joyful and firm fidelity."³⁸

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Conversations*, no. 98.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Letter*, October 15, 1948, no. 28.

38. *Letter*, January 9, 1951, nos. 23-25 (the first italic is ours).

The sense of personal freedom and responsibility informs all of our efforts to make "Christ's love and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life,"³⁹ and leads to a discovery of the "reciprocal interpenetration" that exists between "apostolate and the ordering of public life on the part of the state."⁴⁰ This interpenetration opens up important apostolic horizons, but it has to be put into practice "with personal freedom and personal responsibility."⁴¹ Thus the sincere intention to shape temporal activities in a Christian way does not authorize one to identify the solution that one considers best with the Catholic or Christian solution as such (except in exceptional circumstances when the legitimate authority of the Church counsels otherwise), or to think that all Catholic citizens have the moral duty of accepting it, and therefore of carrying it into practice monolithically.

In a text that stands out for its clarity, Blessed Josemaría spoke of well-intentioned Christians: "It would never occur to such a Christian to think or say that he was stepping down from the temple into the world to represent the Church, or that his solutions are 'the Catholic solutions' to the problems. ... That would be clericalism, 'official Catholicism', or whatever you want

to call it. In any case, it means doing violence to the very nature of things. You must foster everywhere a genuine 'lay outlook', which will lead to three conclusions: be sufficiently honest so as to shoulder one's own personal responsibilities; be sufficiently Christian so as to respect those brothers in the faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from those which each one of us maintains; and be sufficiently Catholic so as not to *use* our Mother the Church, involving her in human factions."⁴²

This last consideration deserves fuller analysis but is outside of the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, some may contend that Blessed Josemaría here weakens the presence of Christians—and the values that are important to them—in social and political life. What is said below about participation and solidarity will show that that is not the case. In any event, Blessed Josemaría's words cited above are inspired by an aversion to "a one-party mentality" that attempts to impose a single opinion regarding contingent matters. Such a mentality tends to disunite Christians in those things that are truly fundamental to the faith. "It happens frequently," he wrote in 1946, "that one sees Catholics who feel a much greater ideological affinity with other

39. *Furrow*, no. 302.

40. See *Letter*, January 9, 1932, no. 41.

41. *Ibid.*, no. 40.

42. *Conversations*, no. 117.

men—even with enemies of the Church— than the bond of faith they feel with their brother Catholics; and who, at the same time as they dissimulate the essential differences that separate them from persons of other religions or those of no religion, do not know how to take advantage of their *common denominator* with all Catholics in order to live together with them and not exaggerate their possible differences of opinion in contingent matters.”⁴³

b) Freedom and Christian Formation

The emphasis placed by Opus Dei's founder on the principle of personal freedom and responsibility presupposes a desire to acquire a solid formation, so as to be able to make a positive contribution to the right ordering of social life. As early as 1932 he wrote about the need to give this formation to everyone: “In this connection, I will tell you my great hope. I would like to see in the catechism of Christian doctrine for children a clear teaching of just what those firm points are that one may not give way on when acting in public life, and at the same time a clear teaching on the duty of acting, of not abstaining, taking an active part in serving the common good with loyalty and personal freedom. This is a great desire of mine, because I see

that in this way Catholics would learn these truths from childhood, and would know how to put them into practice later when they become adults.”⁴⁴

This desire has now become a reality, for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other national catechisms are now giving the proper attention to social and political subjects.⁴⁵ This is of capital importance, because it is the proper formation of the laity that will determine whether or not their presence in public life will result in the Christian ordering of the world, and not the secularization of Christians, as Blessed Josemaría remarked on one occasion to a group of Fathers and experts of the Second Vatican Council who had come to speak with him.

It is important to stress that formation is not the communication of specific, prefabricated, and unchangeable solutions that are closed to constructive dialogue. Rather to form someone is to promote a sensitivity toward the demands of the common good, and to stimulate thinking under the light of faith that will enable one to better understand reality and social change. Opus Dei's founder saw in such formation a source of solidarity, that is, of a unified participation in the collective

43. *Letter*, April 30, 1946, no. 21.

44. *Letter*, January 9, 1932, no. 45.

45. A similar preoccupation can be seen in JOHN PAUL II's Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, nos. 59-60.

enterprise of the search for truth. "In this matter of each helping the other, an important place is held by contributions to discovering and knowing the truth. Our intellect is limited. We can only by effort and dedication reach the point of being able to grasp a small parcel of reality. But there are many things that escape us. One more manifestation of solidarity among men and women is that of making knowledge common, helping others participate in the truths that we have managed to discover, thus creating this common patrimony that is called civilization, culture."⁴⁶

c) Freedom and participation

The connection between the principles of freedom and participation is central to Blessed Josemaría's reflections about social and political matters. He returns to this again and again, presenting it from different points of view depending on the context. But he always seems to be aware of the temptation to passivity, laziness—the attitude of "don't worry about it"—since working for the common good requires effort and sacrifice. "Your love for all men," he wrote in 1948, "has to impel you to confront temporal problems courageously in accordance with your conscience. Don't be afraid of sacrifice, nor of taking up burdensome tasks. No human event should be indiffer-

ent to you. On the contrary, everything should be an occasion for doing good to souls and making the path to God easier for them."⁴⁷ And on another occasion, explaining the apostolic responsibility intrinsic to professional activity: "You cannot remain aloof—this would be a criminal omission—from the assemblies, congresses, exhibits, meetings of scientists or workers, seminars, in a word from any initiative in scientific, cultural, artistic, economic, athletic, or other fields. At times you should promote them yourselves; more often they will be organized by others and you will simply take part. But, in every case, you must make the effort not to just take part passively. You must feel the burden, the lovable burden, of your responsibility. You should try to make yourselves necessary—by your prestige, your initiative, your drive—so that you are able to give a proper tone and instill a Christian spirit in all of those organizations."⁴⁸

This active presence was not, to his way of thinking, an "apostolate of penetration," although he courageously accepted the risk that some might understand it that way. His own understanding of it was very different: "I hope the time will come when the phrase 'the Catholics are penetrating all sectors of society' will go out of circulation because every-

46. *Letter*, October 24, 1965, n. 17.

47. *Letter*, October 15, 1948, no. 28.

48. *Letter*, January 9, 1959, no. 20. See *The Forge*, no. 718.

one will have realized that it is a clerical expression. In any event, it is quite inapplicable to the apostolate of Opus Dei. The members of the Work have no need to 'penetrate' the temporal sector for the simple reason that they are ordinary citizens, the same as their fellow citizens, and so they are *there already*. When God calls someone who works in a factory or a hospital or in the government to Opus Dei, it means that person henceforward will be determined to make use of the means necessary for sanctifying his job with the grace of God. In other words he will become aware of the radical demands of the Gospel message, as they apply to the specific vocation he has received." 49

Nor does this presuppose any tactic, imposed as it were from above. The first Christians, he explained in 1959, did not have any specific social programs they sought to carry out. "But they were penetrated by a spirit, by a conception of life and of the world, which could not help but have consequences for the society in which they lived." 50

The founder of Opus Dei always had in mind the citizen who carries out his civic duties and exercises his rights, 51 freely associating with others, whether Christians or not, who share his ideals and are ready to carry them out. When he spoke of "partic-

ipation," he was not referring to those few citizens who dedicate themselves professionally to politics, nor did he mean that one should necessarily dedicate oneself to this specific field. "I am speaking about the participation that is incumbent upon every citizen aware of his civic obligations. You should feel yourselves moved to act, with personal freedom and responsibility, for all the reasons and the same reasons that move your fellow citizens. But, in addition, you should feel yourselves moved in a special way by your apostolic zeal and your desire to foster peace and understanding in all human activities." 52

He regretted that "it is quite common to find, even among apparently responsible and upright Catholics, the error of thinking that they are only required to fulfill their family and religious duties, while scarcely any mention is made of civic duties. It is not a question of selfishness. It is simply a lack of formation. No one has ever told them clearly that the virtue of piety, which is part of the cardinal virtue of justice, and the Christian sense of solidarity are also expressed by being present in society, by being aware of and contributing to solve the problems affecting the whole community." 53

Blessed Josemaría stresses the

49. *Conversations*, no. 66.

50. *Letter*, January 9, 1959, no. 22.

51. See *The Forge*, no. 697.

52. *Letter*, January 9, 1959, no. 41.

53. *Letter*, January 9, 1932, no. 46.

obligation to give good example as citizens: "You have to make an effort to fulfill your duties and exercise your rights. When carrying out our apostolic activity as Catholic citizens, we observe the civil laws with the greatest respect and deference, and we try to always work within the limits of those laws."⁵⁴ He wanted to avoid the possibility that persons who dedicate themselves generously to activities without seeking personal gain, for example as volunteers, might feel themselves exempt from observing the legal restrictions by which the state regulates those activities. But he wanted to see these legal limits become more just, at least in the sense that they recognize the public worth of initiatives fostering improvements in society.

In 1959 he noted that the growing expansion of the state bureaucracy—something that not everyone gave importance to at that time—was due in good part "to the inhibitions of citizens, to their passivity in defending the sacred rights of the human person. This inactivity, which has its origin in mental laziness and inertia, is found among Catholic citizens who are not aware that there are other sins—and graver ones—than those committed against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue."

Confronting this deformation,

still frequent today, he insisted on the need for involvement "in social activities that spring from the very fact of living in society and that impart a direct or indirect influence on it. You should infuse spirit and life into schools, organizations for parents of large families, unions, the press, artistic, literary and sports associations and competitions, and so on." At the same time he once again stresses the principle of personal freedom and responsibility. "Each one of you should participate in public activities in accordance with your own proper social condition and in the way that is most suitable to your personal circumstances, and, of course with the fullest freedom, both when you act individually and in collaboration with other citizens."⁵⁵

The founder of Opus Dei also addressed the question of freedom of education on a number of occasions. Commenting on the words of Pope Pius XI, he saw it as "a great mistake, perhaps the fruit of a deformed mentality among some, to make education... be and exclusive right of the state: first, because this would gravely injure the rights of parents and the Church (see Pope Pius XI, encyclical letter *Divini Illius Magistri*, December 31, 1929); and because education is an area, similar to many others in social life, in which citizens have the right to act freely if they so desire, and with

54. *Letter*, January 9, 1932, no. 35.

55. *Letter*, January 9, 1959, nos. 40-41.

due guarantees in regard to the common good.”⁵⁶

Under the guise of freedom of education, there still exists today the notion of a “double” school system: state schools for the poor, and private schools for the rich. But when considered objectively there is no reason why the state, with the enormous amount of public money that it administers, should only be capable of operating poor schools for the poor —unless one is assuming that public funds are necessarily poorly administered. Experience shows that there are many non-public schools, of great public benefit, that offer academic or professional training to students from low income families at practically no cost to them. Of course there is always the possibility that in isolated cases abuses might arise, which the state should correct for the common good. But it is always an abuse if parents, in seeking a particular kind of education for their children, are penalized by the necessity of paying for that education twice: first by taxes, and then by the tuition that private schools must charge to provide a service that is in the public interest.

A study of Blessed Josemaría’s writings shows that he saw this problem as primarily one of freedom and justice. “The right to found educa-

tional centers is only one aspect of freedom in general. I consider personal freedom necessary for everyone and in everything that is morally lawful. Hence, every person or association in a position to do so should have the possibility of founding centers of education under equal conditions and without unnecessary obstacles. The function of the state depends upon the social situation and this will differ from Germany to England, from Japan to the United States, to mention countries with very different educational systems. The state has clear duties in terms of encouragement, control and supervision of education. And this demands equality of opportunity for both private and state undertakings. To supervise is neither to obstruct nor to impede nor restrict freedom.”⁵⁷ And addressing specific issues related to university education, he added: “Some of the signs of an effective autonomy could be these: the freedom to select its professors and administrative staff; the freedom to establish its curricula; scope for building up and administering its own endowment: in a word, all the necessary conditions for a university to be able to lead its own life, as a service to society as a whole.”⁵⁸

Blessed Josemaría defended the right of the Catholic Church to provide educational facilities, while

56. *Letter*, October 2, 1939, no. 8.

57. *Conversations*, no. 79.

58. *Ibid.*

equally defending the right of the state. But neither for the Church nor for Opus Dei did he seek concessions that in any way would exceed the demands of justice. He encouraged parents who so desired to join together to found schools, but he never promoted secondary schools of an officially religious character, even if at times this lack entailed a clear economic disadvantage. Among the universities that he inspired, several have a certain "official" Catholic character only because the legislation of the country in question did not offer any other possibility. In every case, however, these institutions are open to students of any religious creed, including those without any religious faith. His main concern was always to safeguard the free activity of authentic "social subjects" such as the family and various other types of associations. This demand, inseparably bound up with a proper conception of the political common good, has an immediate and notable influence on the ethical quality of community life.

d) Participation, truth and charity

As has already been stressed above, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá considered a plurality of social and political options to be something healthy. Pluralism is a reality that

cannot be eliminated and that should be loved along with the human freedom from which it flows. Now we have to consider a different problem: the plurality of religious beliefs and moral views that are often found in the same country or city, and even in the heart of the same family. The teaching of the Catholic Church on the right to religious freedom,⁵⁹ on cooperation with evil,⁶⁰ and on how to act in the face of unjust laws,⁶¹ provides a solution for many of the situations that have to be confronted here.

The problems caused in history by religious and moral differences, combined with ideological factors, have led to a widespread belief that defending the existence of an ultimate truth necessarily leads to unjust relationships or, worse, to violence among peoples. Therefore some have asserted that democracy should embrace a certain degree of agnosticism and relativism, or at least view it as the lesser of two evils.⁶² This leads to the claim that it is better not to speak of ultimate truths in the public arena, and that a condition for any dialogue is the silencing of the beliefs that one personally holds dear. Those who refuse to do so are often accused of being bad citizens, even enemies of civic peace. Faced with this situation, many shun occasions for dia-

59. See VATICAN COUNCIL II, Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965.

60. See for example JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 74.

61. See *Ibid.*, nos. 71-73.

62. See the critical evaluation of this subject contained in the encyclical, *Centessimus Annus*, no. 46.

logue out of fear, or simply because do not want to submit to moral blackmail.

The founder of Opus Dei was aware of this problem. Two New Testament teachings formed the foundation of his reflections: Christ's words that no conflict exists between what is owed to God and what is owed to Caesar,⁶³ and St. Paul's teaching that the truth has to be expressed with charity, without wounding.⁶⁴

Blessed Josemaría repeatedly expressed his conviction that there was no "clash, no opposition, between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties and our religious ones; between the commitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on our way to our heavenly homeland."⁶⁵ He saw no difficulty in harmonizing the right to maintain one's own intellectual and spiritual identity and the duty to collaborate with those holding different ideas. "I always insist, so that you have this idea very clear, that the teachings of the Church are not compatible with errors against the faith. But can't we be loyal friends of persons who are victims of these

errors? If we remain firm in our conduct and our doctrine, can't we collaborate with them in so many areas?"⁶⁶

Working alongside persons of different beliefs provides an opportunity to spread the truth and undo prejudices and misunderstandings. Following the Gospel's teachings, a Christian should always be concerned "to dissipate any form of intolerance, coercion or violence in human relationships. In apostolic activity as well—or better, principally in apostolic activity—we can never allow the slightest trace of coercion. God wants to be served in freedom, and therefore an apostolate that failed to respect the *freedom of consciences* would be mistaken."⁶⁷

He distinguished with great clarity the intimate relationship between personal conscience and truth in personal dealings. The former is governed by the normative power of the truth, because one must always be consistent with what one in conscience judges to be true; the latter is governed by justice and the inalienable demands of personal dignity. Referring to the first, he liked to speak about "*holy intransigence*," a term that he used for consistency and sincerity. This he opposed to the dis-

63. See Mt 22:15-22.

64. See Eph 4:15; see *The Forge*, no. 559.

65. *Friends of God*, no. 165.

66. *Letter*, July 16, 1933, no. 14.

67. *Letter*, January 9, 1932, no. 66.

honesty of someone who, although convinced that two plus two equals four, insists out of weakness that it is three and a half. But he always added that intransigence regarding a doctrinal matter is never holy unless it is united to a charitable “transigence” towards the person holding a different, and to our mind erroneous, position.

It is worth citing at length a text dating from 1933, when it was not common to speak about the right to religious freedom: “Together with ‘holy intransigence’, the spirit of the Work of God also constantly asks of you ‘holy transigence’. Being faithful to the truth, defending the faith, is incompatible with a bitter heart, with the desire to destroy those who are mistaken. Perhaps some do act in this way, but it can’t be ours. We can never imitate that poor deranged fellow who, applying Scripture his own way, called down on his enemies *ignis, et sulphur, et spiritus procellarum* (cf. *Ps* 10:7): fire and brimstone and stormy winds.

“We don’t want anyone to be destroyed. Holy intransigence isn’t a rude and surly intolerance. Nor is it holy unless it is accompanied by holy ‘transigence’. I would even say that neither of them are holy if they aren’t accompanied by, in addition to the theological virtues, the practice of the

four cardinal virtues. ... We must carry out, in a word, a continuous conversation with our companions, with our friends, with all the souls who come close to us. This is holy ‘transigence’. We can of course call it tolerance, but to tolerate seems very little to me, because it is not simply a matter of accepting, as a lesser or inevitable evil, that others think differently or are in error.”⁶⁸

His attitude here did not admit of exceptions. He always considered intolerance an injustice. “Therefore, when someone tries to mistreat those who are in error, be assured that I feel an interior impulse to place myself at their side, to accept for the love of God whatever they may have to suffer.”⁶⁹ These teachings were much more than mere theory. In 1950 he obtained permission from the Holy See to permit Opus Dei to admit non-Catholics and even non-Christians as cooperators.⁷⁰ He said in 1967: “Last year I told a French journalist —and I know that the anecdote has been retold, even in publications of our separated brethren— what I once told the Holy Father John XXIII, moved by the affable and fatherly kindness of his manner: ‘Holy Father, in our Work all men and women, Catholics or not, have always found a welcome. I have not learned ecumenism from your Holiness’. He laughed, for he knew that

68. *Letter*, July 16, 1933, nos. 8 and 12.

69. *Letter*, May 31, 1954, no. 19.

70. See *Conversations*, no. 29.

way back in 1950 the Holy See had authorized Opus Dei to receive in the Association as Cooperators people who are not Catholics or even Christians.”⁷¹

All this shows clearly how Blessed Josemaría Escrivá encouraged open, loyal and sincere dialogue. He always saw it as a means of social cohesion and an opportunity for understanding and apostolate. He realized that the common good of society, and especially of today’s complex society, called for reconciling a number of different points of view that could not afford to shut them-

selves off from one another. But he saw above all that the condescension shown by God in wanting his Eternal Word to become also a human word, made human dialogue a requirement for a Christian.

Space limitations makes it impossible to go more fully into this topic. However, it is hoped that this all too brief article has shown why the principle of freedom and responsibility forms the core of Blessed Josemaría’s teaching on the formation of a Christian’s conscience in social and political matters.

71. *Ibid.*, no. 22.