

Josemaría Escrivá, Christians and the Temporal City

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Introduction

In the 19th and 20th centuries, many Catholics rejected the world that grew up out of liberalism and the industrial revolution. Some of them expressed nostalgia for an idealized Middle Ages and in Spain for the Golden Age of the Catholic Kings. Many took up positions outside the modern age and attempted to build a new society based on Christian principles.

In this article François-Xavier Guerra, a professor of history at the University of Paris I – Sorbonne applies to four of Escrivá’s published works the tools of linguistic analysis in an effort to determine the attitude of the founder of Opus Dei to the “modern world.”

Guerra finds that in Escrivá’s writings the word “modern” “does not have any negative connotations at all, but is equivalent rather to ‘contemporary.’” For Escrivá “the ‘modern world’ ... does not refer to a universe that is hostile to Christianity but simply to the world in which the modern Christian lives and in which he is not at all an outsider.” Similarly, in sharp contrast to many of Escrivá’s contemporaries, Guerra does not find in his writings “any allusion to a golden age or to a time or a society that represents the ideal of Christianity.” Escrivá’s ideal is that Christians embrace the world in which they live and animate it from within with the doctrine of Christ.

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Despite its title, this is not a philosophical or theological study of Saint Josemaría’s thought. Rather, it is a preliminary analysis of the historical context in which he lived, his views on both the individual and society and on the kinds of temporal action that Christians can carry out that flow from those views. Its goal is not to contribute to the history of ideas, but merely to offer a contribution to cultural and political history that will situate Josemaría Escrivá within his historical context and examine the similarities and

differences between him and his contemporaries with regards to his attitude to what is called “the modern age.”

Our main tool is linguistic analysis: a quantitative study of the words Escrivá uses and a reconstruction of the constellations of meaning associated with those terms. We will also try to get some grasp of Escrivá’s mental landscape, looking not only at what is explicitly expressed but also at the broader interior universe manifested by the imagery that he uses and his choice of vocabulary, the allusions and implicit references found in his texts, and even the absence of certain themes and terms commonly used by other authors.

We have based our analysis on a body of work published while Josemaría Escrivá was still alive – *Camino [The Way]* (1939)[\[1\]](#), *Conversaciones con Monseñor Escrivá de Balaguer [Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá]* (1968)[\[2\]](#), *Es Cristo que pasa [Christ is Passing By]* (1973)[\[3\]](#) – to which we have added the posthumous book *Amigos de Dios [Friends of God]* (1977), composed of homilies preached between 1941 and 1968, some of which were published elsewhere during Escrivá’s lifetime.[\[4\]](#)

Based on this corpus, we elaborated a list of terms that we considered relevant to our study, and analyzed the frequency with which they are used. The table at the end of this article summarizes our findings.

As one can see from the list, there is considerable variation in both the literary genres of these books and the age of the author at the time at which they were written. *The Way* is not in any way a theoretical treatise, but represents rather a collection of short considerations aimed at helping people pray. It was published in 1939 when Josemaría Escrivá was 37 years old. *Conversations* is a collection of interviews published in the press in the 1960s which represent an articulated and developed reflection on the spirituality of Opus Dei framed in the terminology of the post-conciliar period. *Christ is Passing By* and *Friends of God* are collections of homilies that have an intermediary status.

In choosing the title for this essay, we have preferred to speak of “Christians and the temporal city” and not “Christians and politics” for several reasons. In the first place, Josemaría Escrivá himself rarely uses the term “political” and, when he does, it is to say that he is not talking about politics and wishes to avoid any confusion between politics and religion. In the second place, for Josemaría Escrivá the Christian’s role in the world is far from being centered, either directly or indirectly, on what we call “politics.” The expressions “city” or “temporal city” which he uses evoke a broader vision, that of the relationship between Christians and the world they live in, which is closely linked to Escrivá’s view of history.

HISTORICAL STEREOTYPES

A good part of the thinking and activity of Catholics in the 19th and 20th centuries was dominated by a confrontational attitude towards what they called “the modern world.” The meaning of this expression has evolved over time. For our purposes, the modern

world refers to the product of successive developments beginning with the French Revolution, moving through the social transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution and economic liberalism, to which one must add the spread of communism in the world following upon the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

Outside of the English-speaking world, these new developments were experienced in European and Latin American countries as a profound break with preceding times[5]. In the 19th century many people felt them to be a transition into a new era which overturned not only the social and political order but also the place of religion in public life.

Indeed, the new political situation and the proclamations of human rights were consequent upon the weakening of the old political order, that of the Old Regime, and eventually brought about the complete secularization of the state. Previously seen as a constituent element of the body politic and an essential part of the common good, religion saw itself tendentiously relegated to the domain of private belief, completely separate from the public sphere governed by the state[6].

The changes that this brought with it concerning the presence of religion in the various aspects of social life in the public sphere are perhaps even more important than the changes it introduced into relations between church and state. Further issues resulted from the extension of the sovereignty of the people into the realm of values[7].

Other concerns were added to these basic problems. A virulent form of anticlericalism, which in earlier times was limited to a certain portion of the elite, took root in other social strata and led to an apparent dechristianization of certain social groups, among them the budding working class. The concern of Christians for the “social question” – as the social impact of the Industrial Revolution was called at the end of the 19th century – was further fuelled by feelings of injustice in the face of the misery and marginalization of the working class and, after the Paris Commune, by the fear of socialism, which was being promoted by the revolutionary worker movement.

Faced with all these diverse problems, the attitude of Catholics fluctuated significantly during this period. However, beginning in the second half of the 19th century one saw in the Catholic world a global rejection of the “modern world,” considered as a closed system opposed to Christian principles. Liberalism, both in itself and as a political, economic and philosophical movement, was viewed as the origin of all of these evils. After the revolutions of 1848 and the threats against the papacy in Italy, theoretical anti-liberalism dominated in the Catholic world, a position known in French-speaking countries as “intransigent Catholicism.”[8] This led people to forget that many Catholics had participated in the beginnings of liberalism[9] and to marginalize any Catholics who did not reject the new regime outright or who had a positive view of “modern freedoms.” Anti-liberal attitudes, which existed in the form of counter-revolutionary and traditionalist stances, took on other forms in the time of De Maistre and Bonald. Restoration of the Old Regime was no longer really an objective, but from Louis Veillot and Donoso Cortes on until the early Maritain of *Anti-modern*[10], rejection of the modern world, the

Renaissance, the Enlightenment and liberal revolutions were common among the great majority of Catholics.

As numerous studies have shown, there is an obvious relation between these attitudes and later phenomena which might appear quite different on the surface: the social Catholicism of the end of the 19th century, Catholic Action, Christian Democrat parties[11], and more recently liberation theology. In various ways, all of these movements sought to mobilize Catholics for the construction of a new world regenerated by Christianity and opposed to the world born of the various revolutions[12].

In a certain way Catholics took up a position outside of modern society and attempted to create a counter-society by implementing Gospel principles within it. The problematization of the relation between Christians, society and politics is an explicit sign of this dichotomy. Even though it was not an all-embracing, homogenous project – uniformity has never existed among Catholics in this sphere – a number of experiments in the social and political spheres sowed the seeds for the vision of this future ideal Christian society and motivated concerted action by Christians.

The rejection of modern society went hand in hand with nostalgia for a Christian Europe, viewed as the ideal incarnation of Christianity. References to former Christian periods, in general the Middle Ages or, in Franco's Spain, the 16th-century Catholic kings, was a constant theme, much like myths of the Golden Age. The “new Christendom” of the later Maritain,[13] although it has a different relation to modern politics, continues to propose this ideal.[14] This attitude also explains the hostility, or at least the mistrust, towards many aspects of modern society and economic activity – commerce, industry, finance, economic development of natural resources, agriculture and the rural world. In opposition to individualism, Christians proposed a corporate ideal and subsequently a communal ideal.[15]

In comparison to the features of the dominant trends of Catholic thought in the first half the 20th century which we have just presented in simplified form, the views of Josemaría Escrivá, inasmuch as we can reconstruct them through discourse analysis, are quite unique.

First of all, the whole problem of the “modern world” is never alluded to, either explicitly or implicitly. The term “modern” occurs very infrequently in his writings and when used does not have any negative connotations at all, but is equivalent rather to “contemporary,” as in “the modern apostle” or “modern science”[16]. The same is true of the phrase “the modern world,” which for Escrivá merely means the contemporary world, our own historical period[17]. The “modern world” thus does not refer to a universe that is hostile to Christianity but simply to the world in which the modern Christian lives and in which he is not at all an outsider:

[O]ne cannot speak of adaptation [of Christians] to the world or to modern society. No one adapts himself to what is part and parcel of himself: with respect to what is proper to himself he simply is.[18]

The occurrence of this meaning of the word “world,” signifying the environment in which the majority of Christians live, is very frequent and refers to the central core of his message, the sanctification of Christians in the middle of the world.

This does not mean that Josemaría Escrivá did not have a very clear awareness of the fact that there are many things in the world that are far from God. But this fact is not a consequence of modernity but rather of man’s freedom and is consequently a constant phenomenon running through all human history. The frequent use of the word “world” – without the adjective “modern” – in the sense of “that which is far from God” or “that which separates people from God” is simply a manifestation of the classical multiplicity of meanings of this term in Christian writing and not a reference to any particular historical period[19].

The same thing is true of references to the adversaries of Christianity. Whenever the terms “the enemies of God” or “the enemies of Christ” appear, they are always used in an indeterminate plural form. One finds no occurrences of certain terms which are everywhere in Catholic writings of the 19th and 20th centuries: “revolution,” “liberalism,” [20] “individualism,” “socialism,” “communism.” There is only one reference to Marxism – described as “a very serious error” in a 1963 homily[21]. In Escrivá’s eyes, evil originates not from the system but from man’s misuse of freedom:

We love this time of ours because it is in this time when we are called to achieve our personal sanctification. We will not admit naive longings that lead nowhere – the world has never been any better. From the very beginning, from the cradle of the Church, in the times when the twelve Apostles were still preaching, violent persecutions had already begun, the first heresies were springing up, lies were being spread and hatred was unleashed.[22]

That is why one does not find in Josemaría Escrivá’s writings any allusion to a golden age or to a time or a society that represents the ideal of Christianity. This is truly unique and original if one considers the frequency with which the theme of “a new Christianity” was mentioned by Catholic authors in the 1930s and 1940s and in the Catholic Action movements being organized at that time. Neither are there any allusions to the Middle Ages, which were an idealized reference point for many authors,[23] nor to the Catholic kings or to Imperial Spain, which played a similar role in Franco’s Spain. Contrary to the reference to Spain made by the Bishop of Vitoria in the introduction to *The Way* in 1939 (“Spain will return to the old grandeur of its saints, of its sages and of its heroes”), the author of *The Way* himself never speaks in his writings either of Spain or of any period of that country’s history[24]. This is even more surprising in light of the fact that *The Way* was published at the end of the Spanish Civil War, which the official media, and the clergy along with them, explicitly portrayed as a “Crusade”[25]. From the very outset, the audience that Escrivá is addressing is not from any particular country, but rather made up of Christians in general, with no idea of a golden age or a chosen nation[26].

The only historical reference found in his writings – and it is everywhere – is to the very beginnings of the church, which was precisely not a period of Christian domination or of a

Christian society[27]. The occurrence of the phrase “the early Christians” is very frequent and it is they who are presented as the model for all Christians:

Just as observant religious are eager to know how the first of their order or congregation lived, so as to have their model to follow, you too – Christian layman – should also seek to know and imitate the lives of the disciples of Jesus, who knew Peter and Paul and John, and all but witnessed the Death and Resurrection of the Master.[28]

The life of the first Christians is a model not only because of their closeness in time to Christ and the apostles, but also because they sanctified themselves without leaving their place in society, in contrast to the hermits and monks of later periods[29]. In addition, the model of the first Christians is much more in harmony with the society in which people are living in the 20th century than with medieval society or that of the Old Regime. Like the first Christians, present-day Christians live in societies which in the best of cases are not – or no longer are – majoritarian Christian and so they have to bear witness to Christ.

The similarities between the two periods do not stop there. In both cases, the societies are highly urbanized with citizens exercising various trades and professions. Even though Josemaría sometimes refers to work on the farm, he usually gives an enumeration of all of the various kinds of human endeavor:

... [God] wants the vast majority to stay right where they are, in all the earthly occupations in which they work: the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains.[30]

As this quote shows, and the frequent occurrence of the word “street” confirms, the author’s world is that of the city with all its agitation, its comings and goings, its variety of social classes. Whenever he speaks of union with God in ordinary life, the expressions that come spontaneously to his pen are phrases like “streets and squares,” “in the middle of the street”:

... when you least expect it, in the street, in the midst of your everyday activities, in the hustle and bustle of the city, or in the concentrated calm of your professional work, you find yourself praying ...[31]

He shows no longing for rural society, with its tranquility and immobility, for the calm passage of time, of the seasons, of the slow and plodding work in the fields. His world and his apostolate concern primarily modern society with its diversified activities: factories, workshops, laboratories, shops, services. The society that one glimpses through his writings is a mobile, open, diversified society – a society made up of individuals.

In keeping with this vision which does not seek to restore some long-lost Christian society, one does not find in his writings any program for setting up an ideal society. The theme of “the kingdom,” which in many writings of the same period evokes this ideal, is viewed quite differently by Escrivá. “The kingdom of Christ” or “the kingdom of God” of which he speaks does not have any particular social or political form:

We are celebrating today the feast of Christ the King. And I do not overstep my role as a priest when I say that if anyone saw Christ's kingdom in terms of a political program he would not have understood the supernatural purpose of the faith, and he would risk burdening consciences with weights which have nothing to do with Jesus ...[\[32\]](#)

The word "kingdom" which appears so often in his works refers to a constellation of meanings found in the Gospels and which is classical in Christian writing[\[33\]](#). "The kingdom of God" is a reality that is both contemporary and eschatological: even though it begins on earth, it is not achieved definitively until the very end of time in heaven. It is a kingdom which is established in the heart of those who follow Christ: "let us not think of human kingdoms.... His kingdom is a kingdom of peace, of joy, of justice"[\[34\]](#); a kingdom which Christians spread by their apostolate and which, by transforming people, reshapes human relations and facilitates people's encounter with God little by little:

Jesus reminds all of us: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself." If you put me at the center of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment, in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality! [\[35\]](#)

The power of these words contrasts sharply with the reflections of many authors of his time speaking about the involvement of Christians in society. In Escrivá's case, he is not offering a theoretical reflection on a social program but a certainty of faith, based on a mystical experience that he had at the beginning of the 1930s and which has been described by his biographers[\[36\]](#). However, as in the Gospel, the precise form that the kingdom of Christ will take cannot be described. The Christian's mission is characterized both by the effort to build and spread "the Kingdom" and by the certainty that it is only in heaven that it will be definitively achieved:

God did not create us to build a lasting city here on earth, because 'this world is the way to that other, a dwelling place free from care.' Nevertheless, we children of God ought not to remain aloof from earthly endeavours, for God has placed us here to sanctify them and make them fruitful with our blessed faith, which alone is capable of bringing true peace and joy to all men wherever they may be[\[37\]](#).

THE PRIMACY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The society presupposed by this way of speaking is made up of individuals. Contrary to the group mentality, whether it be corporative or communal, and to the anti-individualism of a good number of Catholic thinkers of his time, Escrivá is not afraid to use the word "individual," which is interchangeable in his vocabulary with the word "person." He sees individuals as acting by themselves or in association with other individuals, and not as members of a "corporation" or of a "body," these terms being completely absent from his writings[\[38\]](#).

A comparison of the use of the adjectives “personal” and “individual” with those of the words “collective” and “community” is striking. In our corpus, the first represent nearly 20% of the total, the second less than 1%. It must be added that, except for the word “Church” which is extremely frequent, collective terms represent but a tiny minority compared to plural terms referring to groups of singular individuals: “Christians,” “everyday people,” “men and woman,” “apostles,” “faithful”. Escrivá speaks to – and about – singular persons and not to groups or communities. This is because it is in the conscience of each person that man’s essential struggle is carried out:

We are answerable to God for all the actions we freely perform. There is no room here for anonymity. Each person finds himself face to face with his Lord, and he can decide to live as God’s friend or as his enemy[39].

Freedom’s natural locus is on the individual or personal level. This accounts for his rejection of anonymity in one’s personal relationship with God[40] and also helps explain one of the senses of the word “masses” in his writings. For him the “masses” or the “crowd” has a moral rather than a social meaning: it designates those who allow themselves to be led along by others, who do not exercise their freedom nor their sense of responsibility. These are the people whom the apostle must wake up, must cause to rise like leaven in the dough.[41]

This insistence on the person, on the particular individual, is not just a consequence of a writing style that addresses the reader directly, but the very goal of all of his preaching and his writing: to call each and every Christian to conversion, to correspondence to grace and apostolic activity. That is why his “heroes,” his models, are not men of action or government figures of the Church or the State, but the saints, and first and foremost the apostles – Peter, John, Paul and the others – and a few other saints that he refers to specifically,[42] and all the other saints in general.

The primacy of the individual is not limited merely to the fundamental realm of one’s personal relationship with God, but in Escrivá’s view extends also to the temporal activity of Christians, grounded on their freedom and personal responsibility. These two words – “freedom” and “responsibility”, along with the adjective “personal” – appear together very frequently in passages claiming the right to temporal freedom for Christians and rejecting any official concerted action of Catholics in the social or political fields:

(...) as Christians, you enjoy the fullest freedom, with the consequent personal responsibility, to take part as you see fit in political, social or cultural affairs, with no restrictions other than those set by the Church’s Magisterium [43].

To be sure, Maritain had already formulated the distinction between “acting **like** a Christian and not **as** a Christian” – although this distinction was not always so clear in the actions of his Christian Democrat disciples. Josémaría Escrivá’s rejection of any concerted political or social action by Catholics, however, was both loud and constant. A somewhat peculiar terminological practice of his illustrates this point. In Escrivá’s writings the use of the adjective “Christian” is far more frequent than that of the term “Catholic”. In our

opinion, the main reason for this is to be found in the fact that the word “Christian” contains a direct reference to Christ, to the fact of following Christ, to the disciples’ being transformed into “*alter Christus, ipse Christus*, another Christ, Christ himself!”[\[44\]](#) It is also possible however that this usage is a reaction against the instrumentalization of the term “Catholic” for goals which were not strictly religious and in some cases of doubtful repute. Thus alongside highly positive uses of the word “Catholic” in its original sense of ‘universal,’[\[45\]](#) one finds others with a negative connotation rejecting the label “Catholic”:

When you see people of uncertain professional standing acting as leaders at public functions of a religious nature, don’t you feel the urge to whisper in their ears: Please, would you mind being just a little less Catholic? [\[46\]](#)

The greatness expressed by the adjective “catholic” – ‘universal’ – leads the author to reject its use to designate any group, because by definition and even with the best intentions a group will always be particular and can easily mutate into a faction. If this were to happen to the Catholic Church, however, it would undermine the freedom of Catholics and, even worse, introduce a separation between them and their fellow citizens:

[...] I do not usually like to speak of Catholic workers, Catholic engineers or Catholic doctors, as if describing a species within a genus, as if Catholics formed a little group set apart from the others. For that creates the impression that there is a wall between Christians and the rest of society[\[47\]](#).

FREEDOM AND CITIZENSHIP

A corollary of this premise is the frequency of words such as *freedom*, *citizens*, and *rights* in St Josémaría’s works. Few religious writings deal with the theme of freedom, which in the final analysis has a theological foundation. God created man free and therefore able to love, and therein lies our greatest resemblance to Him. To this original freedom is added the freedom that Christ won for us:

The sacrosanct respect for your opinions, as long as they do not lead you away from the law of God, is not understood by those who are unaware of the real meaning of the freedom that Christ won for us on the Cross, *qua libertate Christus nos liberavit* (Gal 4: 31), by sectarians of all stripes: those who seek to impose their temporal opinions on others as if they were dogmas[\[48\]](#).

Absent from *The Way* due to its literary genre, the word *freedom* pervades all three of the other books. The historical, civil and ecclesiastical context accounts for Escrivá’s denunciation of “people who have a one-party mentality, in the political or the spiritual realm.”[\[49\]](#) This type of phrase refers primarily to the political situation in Spain: above all to the totalitarian pretensions of the Falange in the 1940s[\[50\]](#), as well as to the instrumentalization of the faith by the regime – National-Catholicism – and to the tendency of some Catholic groups to use political power as a sort of secular arm. In the sixties, the plea that Josemaría made for freedom corresponds to a defense of the

freedom of political choice of members of Opus Dei who held important political positions in the second Franco period – often known as “the technocrats” – or who openly opposed the régime[51].

It is undoubtedly this historical context that explains his increasing use of terms referring to civil rights, citizenship and pluralism[52] during these years. But his defense of freedom was not primarily due to a specific historical context, nor limited to demanding freedom only for Catholics. As we have already said, to be free is the highest attribute of man’s dignity. Freedom must be granted to everyone, both believers and non-believers, because we have all been created free by God:

We have a duty to defend the personal freedom of everyone, in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the one who won freedom for us all (Gal 4: 31); if we do not defend others’ freedom, by what right can we claim our own? [...] Conscience, true conscience, discovers the imprint of the Creator in all things[53].

Behind this kind of statement there lies a radical optimism regarding the natural openness of the human soul to God and the value of freedom, which stands in stark contrast to the covert or overt fear of the misuse of civil liberty found in many anti-liberal writings by Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; on the other hand, there is an affinity between Escrivá’s views and the arguments of nineteenth-century Catholic liberals.

The insistence on the freedom of all men and the rights of the citizen place the author squarely in the modern political world where individuals are free to hold and support diverse political opinions, aspire to public office, and criticize the government. But it also refers to justice considered first and foremost as respect for the dignity of the human person and his rights: the right to one’s reputation, to the impartiality of the courts, to equality of all before the law. Social justice follows from this dignity and is built on respect for others’ individual rights:

We must uphold the right of all men to live, to own what is needed in order to lead a dignified life, the right to work and to rest, to choose a particular state in life, to found a family, to bring children into the world within marriage and to raise them, to enjoy security during periods of sickness and old age, to have access to culture, to join with other citizens to achieve legitimate ends and, above all, the right to know and love God in perfect liberty [...] [54].

Respect for individual rights applies equally to civil society and ecclesiastical society. A large number of the occurrences of the word “freedom” in *Conversations with St Josémaría* concern the defense of freedom of association of the faithful in the Church, including clerics, “the equal dignity and complementarity of the tasks of men and women in the Church, the need to build legitimate public opinion within the People of God.”[55]

The Christian is a citizen of two cities, the temporal and the eternal (the latter being prefigured by the Church). But this double citizenship does not imply any mixture

between the two spheres, and even less any manipulation of temporal matters by the clergy:

All those who exercise the priestly ministry in the Church should always be careful to respect the autonomy which the Catholic faithful need in order not to be in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis their fellow laymen and to effectively carry out their specific apostolic task in the middle of the world. To attempt the opposite, to try to instrumentalize lay people for ends that exceed the proper limits of our hierarchical ministry, would be to fall into a lamentably anachronistic clericalism[56].

The expression “a lamentably anachronistic clericalism” reflects not only painful personal experiences of St Josémaría himself, but also a view of history that rejects the symbiosis between the political and the religious spheres, along with any form of imposed unanimity among Catholics in temporal matters. More than to the Old Regime, these words seem rather to refer to a not-so-distant period when Catholic Action served as the *longa manus* of the hierarchy in temporal affairs[57]; Escrivá expresses the wish that there be “[...] among Catholics themselves, [...] genuine pluralism of opinion and judgment in areas that God leaves open to the free discussion of men [...].”[58]

The rejection of even indirect interference by priests in the temporal activity of the laity implies also a rejection of the concerted action of the two. This view is reflected in Escrivá’s pastoral practice; it is also visible in the social universe in which he moved and the kind of social action he was involved in. Although this is not the place to discuss a subject that deserves more extensive development, a few points may be noted. The universe that is Escrivá’s in the 1920s is not that of social Catholicism or Catholic Action. If we adopt the typology and chronology of Yvon Tranvouez,[59] his pastoral activity before and during the early years of the founding of Opus Dei was carried out in lay foundations – the Foundation for the Sick of the Apostolic Ladies, the Foundation of St Isabelle. He dedicated his efforts to assisting the poor and the sick and teaching catechism to children. Compared to the typical career path of his day, it was strange for a young secular priest with a university degree – a rare thing at that time – who was in contact with the Society of Jesus and engaged in their ministry, not to be involved in any of the numerous associations aimed at forming the Catholic secular elite for social and political action. His refusal in 1933 to accept the position of spiritual director of the “Councillor’s House” where most of the top ecclesiastical brass of the newly emerging Catholic Action movement were to be trained[60] is due above all to his determination to devote himself entirely to his mission as founder of Opus Dei. But it was also no doubt motivated by his rejection of any form of clericalism, very much present in the ambiguous status of the laity in the apostolate of Catholic Action: laypeople involved in this movement were not only in a subordinate position with respect to the hierarchy, but also due to their special “mandate” in a position of superiority with respect to the rest of the lay faithful. The means that Escrivá used at the beginning of the Work, and which have hardly changed since then, were aimed at developing the character of the participants on the human, spiritual and apostolic levels: preached meditations, retreats, visits to the poor and the sick, theology courses. While all of these activities had a doctrinal content, their primary

focus was increasing the intensity of the attendees' relationship with God and encouraging their apostolate, so that each person could exercise his responsibilities as a Christian and a citizen. This type of activity did not lead to the formation of associations, but rather to the creation of informal bonds of friendship animated by a spirit of Christian brotherhood[61]. Here there is no trace of the methods of social Catholicism based on collective reflection in order to “see, judge, and act,” and leading to concerted action by members. Citizenship in both cities implies personal autonomy, free exercise of one's rights, taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions:

Fulfil honourably your commitments as citizens, in all fields – in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job – accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence that is yours[62].

The vocabulary that Escrivá uses is very modern: personal autonomy, rights, pluralism, opinions, freedom, citizenship. Along the same lines as the “Christian materialism” to which he refers in one of his most famous homilies, one could also speak of “Christian individualism”[63].

THE EARTHLY CITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

This emphasis on what is individual and personal betokens a view of human relations which is the polar opposite of a group mentality, be it corporate or communitarian. This is evident when one analyzes the terms that Josemaría Escrivá uses to express relationships between people and their bond with the community. The most frequent terms are “relationship,” “relationships,” “life of relationships.” The frequency of these terms is very high in books published after *The Way* and they refer to all sorts of different relationships, from the most sublime and intimate to the most common and ordinary. A “relationship with God” or with “the three Divine Persons” occupies first place on the scale, with a lexical register that includes “spending time together,” “intimacy” and “friendship” – an eminently interpersonal relationship similar to the bond between husband and wife. Radiating out in concentric circles from this center, there are other types of relationships involving kinship, friendship, the workplace, one's neighborhood, cultural or political affiliations, membership in associations ... The type of community which is pictured here is in fact a “civil society” and not an organic whole, a fabric of relations which, although it has permanent core groups such as the family and one's circle of friends, is essentially mobile, fluid, voluntary:

You who are celebrating with me today the feast of St Joseph are men who work in various human professions; you have your own homes, you belong to many different countries and speak different languages. You have been educated in lecture halls or in factories and offices. You have worked in your profession for years, built professional and personal friendships with your colleagues, helped to solve the problems of your companies and your communities[64].

It is these relationships that Christians are called to sanctify, to christianize, to humanize – in a very natural way, free from any form of organizational imperialism, modelling human relationships according to the divine exemplar of interpersonal relations:

Just as Christ “went about doing good” throughout Palestine, so must you also spread peace in your family circle, in civil society, on the job, and in your cultural and leisure activities[\[65\]](#).

Escrivá’s oft-repeated assertion of the equal dignity of all human work has not only a spiritual meaning – the value of work in God’s eyes – but also a prominent social dimension. Temporal structures are not a rigid framework to which individuals must comply but the result of innumerable personal relationships. Therefore, when Christians strive to live their faith in their daily life they are already transforming social structures. Escrivá’s faith in the value of the most ordinary situations and actions sheds light on the role that politics plays in his preaching and, beyond the political arena, the importance of Christians’ being good citizens of the temporal city. The focus of his message is not the importance of politics in ordering and governing the earthly city, nor to remind Christians of their responsibility in this area. This is not only because of his rejection of anything that bears the slightest resemblance to direct or indirect interference in the political freedom of the laity by priests, but because what is truly important in his eyes is transforming the network of relationships that make up society is made up of. Although Christians must exercise all their rights as citizens, active participation in politics itself is seen as only one of many activities that Christians can pursue as a specific professional vocation. Unlike the stereotypical activist exalted in many Catholic movements, who was often very close to being a political activist, in Escrivá’s view the Christian apostle is an ordinary man or woman who is striving to attain holiness in areas that have little or nothing to do with the political arena:

The marriage union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify[\[66\]](#).

This view of citizenship involves an understanding of the temporal city which does not see it as an organic whole, unlike the ancient *polis* or the Old Regime. It is akin to the modern view of civil society and to the distinction between the conceptions of freedom held in the Ancient and Modern worlds, as formulated by Benjamin Constant in the early nineteenth century[\[67\]](#). Unlike the ancient republics and revolutionary republicanism, modern citizenship does not mean constant and active participation of everyone in the governance of temporal affairs. Modern participative government only requires of its citizens periodic political participation in elections and possibly in public debates. The rest of their lives takes place outside the sphere of politics, including their most important activities: family life, religious practice, participation in cultural events and in associations of various types.

There is consequently a kinship between the foundational principles of liberalism and modern civil society and the views of Josemaría Escrivá. In the first place, one might say, this is because he is not obsessed with the need for active, professional participation in politics. His preaching includes a call to Christians to exercise their rights as citizens and participate in civic affairs, but it is mainly an affirmation of the primacy of the social dimension of life: the importance of daily life and the potential that the most ordinary activities have for transforming society. In his eyes the “temporal commitment” of Catholic social action movements does not constitute the main thrust of Christians’ activity within society. *Mutatis mutandis*, we could say that Catholic militancy is more like an avatar of the old “Republicanism,” while Escrivá’s message belongs to the modern view of the primacy of civil society.

In the second place, there is also a kinship with liberal values in Escrivá’s constant rejection of any mixing of politics and religion and of any form of clericalism, not only that typical of the nineteenth century:

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. At the root of this kind of attitude is something not only lawful but even commendable: a desire to see the Church exercising a vital influence on the modern world. However, I very much fear that this is a mistaken way for, on the one hand, it can tend to involve and compromise the hierarchy in temporal questions (thus falling into a clericalism which, though different, is no less scandalous than that of past centuries) and, on the other hand, it may isolate lay people, ordinary Christians, from the everyday world, turning them into mere mouthpieces for decisions or ideas conceived outside the world in which they live[68].

The rejection of uniformity and the defense of pluralism among Christians goes hand in hand with a clear distinction between the spiritual and the temporal. The condemnation of “a clericalism which, though different, is no less scandalous than that of past centuries” is loud and clear, without however relegating religion to the realm of mere private belief:

[...] Have you ever stopped to think how absurd it is to leave one’s Catholicism aside on entering a university, a professional association, a scholarly society, or Congress, as if you were checking your hat at the door? [69]

While this view is quite far removed from mainstream liberalism in Latin countries, it is quite close to the liberal tradition in Anglo-Saxon countries, and more particularly in the United States[70].

A Christianity practiced all the way down to its ultimate consequences cannot but have a social impact on the ordinary life of a multitude of Christians, some publicly well-known but most unknown and unrecognized.

It is not surprising that when he wished to give an example how this invisible action works Saint Josemaría quoted one of the most eloquent documents of Christian antiquity, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, which can serve as a conclusion to this essay:

Savour these words of an anonymous author of those times, who sums up the grandeur of our vocation as follows: Christians, he writes, ‘are to the world what the soul is to the body. They live in the world but are not worldly, as the soul is in the body but is not corporeal. [...] They work from within and pass unnoticed, as the soul does of its essence. [...] They live as pilgrims among perishable things with their eyes set on the immortality of heaven, as the immortal soul now dwells in a perishable house. [...] And Christians have no right to abandon their mission in the world, in the same way that the soul may not voluntarily separate itself from the body.’ (*Epistola ad Diognetum*, 6, PG 2, 1175) [\[71\]](#)

By his insistence on the individual and his rights, by his vision of society as a fabric of interwoven relations constantly modified by the action of its members, by his rejection of any form of clericalism limiting Christians’ freedom of temporal action, Josemaría Escrivá was well ahead of his time. This is all the more true because his appeal to Christians’ civic responsibility was not accompanied by any fanatical call to “political involvement,” but aimed rather at the gradual transformation of the fabric of relations that modern society is made up of.

Frequency of certain terms								
	<i>The Way</i>		<i>Conversations</i>		<i>Christ is Passing By</i>		<i>Friends of God</i>	
	1939		1968		1951-1971		1941-1968	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
world	46	21	105	12	115	14	81	14
structures			17	2	1	0		
society	2	1	60	7	16	2	10	2
state								
temporal			40	5	16	2	11	2
political					10	1	3	1
city	6	3	4		17	2	14	2
street	3	1	5	1	9	1	10	2
kingdom	6	3	5	1	40	5	11	2
Church	16	7	108	12	78	10	51	9
Christianity/Christendom								
Catholic(s)	6	3	32	4	5	1	4	1
Christian(s)	21	10	61	7	200	25	129	23
ordinary person							1	0
apostle(s)	47	22	2	0	7	1	3	1
saints	19	9	2	0	25	3	25	4
faithful	3	1	17	2	6	1	3	1

layperson/laypeople	1	0	4	0	1	0	1	0
lay	1	0	39	4				
person/personal	25	12	182	21	143	18	128	22
individual	2	1	11	1	7	1	6	1
collective			5	1	2	0		
community			8	1	4	0		
mass/dough	4	2	1	0	7	1	4	1
crowd	3	1	1	0	11	1	6	1
citizen			24	3	5	1	4	1
rights			26	3	7	1	8	1
civil/civic			6	1	4	0	1	0
freedom/liberty			79	9	36	4	47	8
relation(s)	1	0	27	3	22	3	10	2
Middle Ages								
revolution								
Communism								
Marxism							1	0
secularism							1	0
individualism					1	0		
modern	2	1	6	1			1	0
Total	214	100	881	100	802	100	573	100
NOTE: The first column of the table gives the absolute number values, the second the percentage of occurrences of the term with respect to the total number of occurrences of all the terms contained in the table. The figures are based on the original Spanish versions of the texts.								

ENDNOTES

[1] A shorter preliminary version of this book appeared under the title *Spiritual Considerations*, Cuenca, 1934. Our quotes come from the 1994 edition of *The Way, Furrow and The Forge*, Princeton, Scepter, 2000. We also refer the reader to the recent critical edition: J. Escrivá, *Complete Works, I, A, The Way. Critical-Historical Edition*, prepared by P. Rodriguez, New York, 2002.

[2] These interviews took place in 1967- 1968. We quote from the 2002 edition, *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, Princeton, Scepter.

[3] The homilies that make up this work were preached between 1951 and 1971, but we are working from the published versions which presumably differ to some degree from the original preaching. We quote from the 1974 edition of *Christ is Passing By* published by Scepter Publishers, Princeton, NJ.

[4] See Msgr Alvaro del Portillo, “Foreword” to J. Escrivá, *Friends of God*, London, Scepter, 1981.

[5] We refer to both European and American contexts because, although Latin American countries do show certain specific characteristics, they nevertheless share the overall pattern of Latin countries in general.

- [6] On the appearance of the modern division between the public and private spheres, see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962). On the limits of Habermas's model, see F.-X. Guerra, "Lo public y lo privado. Aportaciones, ambigüedades y problemas de un nuevo objeto histórico," in Fundación Mario Gongora, *Lo public y lo privado en la historia americana*, Santiago de Chile, 2000, pp. 13-39.
- [7] This problem will arise particularly in the 20th century. At that time, most of the components of the lay moral program were still quite close to those of Catholic morality, except for the question of divorce which presaged other conflicts in the future.
- [8] This term has been adopted as an analytical category in the literature, especially due to the writings of Emile Poulat; for the historical development of this author's thinking, see *Emile Poulat. Un objet de science, le catholicisme*, V. Zuber (ed.), Paris, 2001. Although in our opinion the use of this expression is relevant to describe the historical filiation of ideas, its use as a typological term appears more questionable. The refusal to relegate religion to the private domain and deprive it of any social influence does not always go hand in hand with political anti-modernity.
- [9] This phenomenon has been particularly strong in the Hispanic world where the liberal revolutions of the beginning of the 19th century did not cause any disruption in the religious sphere, with a strong presence of ecclesiastical figures in many political assemblies.
- [10] J. Maritain, *Anti-modern*, Paris, 1922.
- [11] E. Poulat, *Église contre bourgeoisie. Introduction au devenir du catholicisme actuel*, Paris, 1980.
- [12] See J.-M. Mayeur, *Catholicisme social et démocratie chrétienne*, Paris, 1986, ch. I.
- [13] The expression appears in his writing after the condemnation of French Action by Pius XI in 1926 in *Primeauté du spirituel*, Paris, 1927 and is further developed in *Humanisme intégral. Problèmes spirituels et temporels d'une nouvelle chétienneté*, Paris, 1936.
- [14] For French examples illustrating this topic, see Y. Tranvouez, *Catholiques d'abord. Approches du mouvement catholique en France XIX^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris, 1980, 2nd part.
- [15] See J.-M. Mayeur, *Catholicisme social et démocratie chrétienne*, Paris, 1986, ch. I.
- [16] *The Way*, nn. 35 and 338.
- [17] See, e.g., *Conversations*, nn.26, 59, 62.
- [18] *Idem*, n. 62.
- [19] See *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, Paris, Beauchêne, fascicles LXIV-LXV, p. 1626 ff.
- [20] There is just one use of the word "liberalism" in the plural, referring to outdated forms of anticlericalism: "That's for those who dig up musty, old-fashioned 'Voltairianisms' or discredited liberal ideas of the nineteenth century." *The Way*, n.849.
- [21] "Open to God and Men," November 3, 1963, *Friends of God*, n.171.
- [22] "Our Lord's Ascension into Heaven," May 19, 1966, *Christ is Passing By*, n.123.
- [23] This topic is still present in the 1930s in specialized Catholic Action movements like the Christian Agricultural Youth or the Christian Worker Youth, who in their ceremonies and rallies sang: "We want France to come back to Christianity (...) We are building the cathedral in which our ambitious gaze already sees the triumphant dawn of the people returning to God," quoted by Y. Tranvouez, *Catholiques d'abord^e siècle*, *supra* n. 14, p. 120.
- [24] Spain only appears as a geographical place.

[25] There is only one reference to the war, considered as an opportunity for personal purification: "(...) War is the greatest obstacle to the easy way. But in the end we have to love it, as the religious should love his disciplines." *The Way*, n.311.

[26] See for example: "(...) How many glories of France are glories of mine! And in the same way, many things that makes Germans proud – and Italians and British and Americans and Asians and Africans – are also sources of pride to me. Catholic! A big heart, an open mind." *The Way*, n.525.

[27] The only occurrence of the word "Christiandom" refers precisely to this period: "early Christiandom," cf. *Conversations*, n.89.

[28] *The Way*, n.925.

[29] cf. J. L. Llanes, *The Sanctification of Work*, New York, 2003.

[30] "Christ's Presence in Christians," March 26, 1967, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 105.

[31] *The Way*, n.110.

[32] "Christ the King," November 22, 1970, *Christ is Passing By*, n.184.

[33] cf. See *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, Paris, Beauchêne, fascicles LXXXVI, LXXXVII, LXXXVIII, 1987.

[34] "The Eucharist, Mystery of Faith and Love," April 14, 1960, *Christ is Passing By*, n.93.

[35] "Christ the King," November 22, 1970, *Christ is Passing By*, n.183.

[36] See for example A. Vasquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, Vol I, The Early Years, Princeton, Scepter, 2001, pp. 220-231.

[37] "The Christian's Hope," June 8, 1968, *Friends of God*, n.210.

[38] The word "corporate" is only used in a technical sense to refer to Opus Dei's collective works of apostolate.

[39] "Freedom, a Gift from God," April 10, 1956, *Friends of God*, n.36.

[40] See for example *Idem*, nn.159, 160, 378.

[41] See for example *Christ is Passing By*, nn. 120 and 180. The Spanish word *masa* means both "mass" and "dough".

[42] St. Teresa of Avila, St. Teresa of Lisieux, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis Xavier,...

[43] "The Richness of Ordinary Life," March 11, 1960, *Friends of God*, n.11.

[44] "The Christian Vocation," December 2, 1951, *Christ is Passing By*, n.11.

[45] See for example: "Get rid of that 'small-town' outlook. Enlarge your heart till it becomes universal, 'catholic'. Don't flutter about like a barnyard hen when you can soar like an eagle." *The Way*, n.7.

[46] *Idem* n.371.

[47] "In Joseph's workshop", March 19, 1963, *Christ is Passing By*, n.53.

[48] "The Richness of Ordinary Life", March 11, 1960, *Friends of God*, n.11.

[49] *Conversations*, n.50.

[50] Regarding the hostility and surveillance to which he was subjected by the Phalange in the early 1940s, see for example J. L. Rodriguez Jimenez "Falange Spies", *El País*, 07.09.2000, from the archives of the Falange.

[51] See for example the testimony of Bishop A. Del Portillo in *Immersed in God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, Founder of Opus Dei, As Seen by His Successor, Bishop Alvaro Del Portillo*, by Cesare Cavalleri.

[52] A chapter “Citizenship” was added by the author to his manuscript of *Furrow*, which was published after his death.

[53] “Open to God and Men,” November 3, 1963, *Friends of God*, n.171.

[54] *Idem*.

[55] *Conversations*, n.21.

[56] *Idem*, 12.

[57] We are not referring here to public interventions in exceptional occasions, but to usual practice.

[58] *Ibidem*

[59] For this chronology, see Y. TRANVOUEZ, *Catholiques d’abord.... supra*, n. 14, Conclusion. The typology is similar for Spain, cf. GALLEGO J. A. and A. PAZOS, *Histoire religieuse de l’Espagne contemporaine*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1998.

[60] Cf. A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, *supra* n. 36, Vol. I, pp. 375-76.

[61] For examples of these activities in the 1930s, cf. the testimony of P. Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, London/New York, 2008, ch. 2, 4, and 5; P. Berglar P., *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder Josemaría Escrivá*, Princeton, N.J. 1994, ch. 5.

[62] *Conversations*, n.117.

[63] “Passionately Loving the World,” October 8, 1967 *Conversations*, n.115.

[64] “In Joseph’s Workshop,” March 19, 1963, *Christ is Passing By*, n.46.

[65] “Finding Peace in the Heart of Christ,” June 17, 1966, *Christ is Passing By*, n.166

[66] “Marriage, A Christian Vocation,” December 25, 1970, *Christ is Passing By*, 23.

[67] *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes*, [1819], in B. CONSTANT, *De la liberté chez les Modernes*, Paris, 1980.

[68] *Conversations*, n.59.

[69] *The Way*, n.353.

[70] The view of Catholicism as “intransigent,” as well as the association between rejecting the relegation of religion to the private sphere and mixing politics and religion, is found mostly in the Latin world, but does not apply to situations where political modernity and religious viewpoints have always been compatible.

[71] “Working for God,” February 6, 1960, *Friends of God*, n.63.