

## **Faith, Work, Culture. The possibility of a Christian Modernity in the message of Saint Josemaría Escrivá**

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When I was asked some months ago to write something about the contribution of **Saint Josemaría Escrivá** to the ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the proposal left me somewhat perplexed. After all, Saint Josemaría was no professional thinker, nor did he ever try to be one. He prided himself only on being a priest, with a spiritual message to deliver, which he regarded as “old as the Gospel and as the Gospel ever new”.

And yet, if we consider his spiritual message against the background of contemporary culture, it could be regarded in fact as revolutionary, just because it involves the idea of living a fully Christian life in the midst of the secular world. It is precisely this that I take to be of interest, not only as an important idea of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but also as a lasting inspiring force for the lives of every ordinary man and woman far beyond this century.

It is this perspective what I have tried to present to you. In preparing this talk, I have first tried to show that our present culture reflects the crisis not of modernity itself, but of a secularist account of modernity, which regards religion just a private matter. Against this view, I argue that the consistency of any culture depends on letting religion inform culture in a natural way, that is, through the lives and work of ordinary people. After arguing for the special role that Christianity has still to play in our culture, I refer to the teachings of Saint Josemaría Escrivá, as particularly relevant for the challenges we

confront nowadays.

### **The crisis of modern secularism**

About sixty years ago, in his well known “Notes for the definition of Culture” British poet **T.S. Eliot**, pointed out the restlessness that religious people may feel when they perceive the sharp contrast between their beliefs and the culture surrounding them. Surely, it could be said that, in one way or another, this contrast has always existed. To a certain extent, it belongs to the human condition, which never finds fully realized in practice what it longs for in the intimacy of the heart.

However, it could also be argued that this contrast has found a special expression in western culture, due to what we know as the “process of secularization”<sup>1</sup>. A particular characteristic of western history, indeed, is that it alone has given place to a state of affairs where the discrepancy between faith and culture is usually resolved by means of a simple separation: faith should find its place in the private realm, while culture remains godless.

Now, as it has been pointed out by contemporary critics of the standard liberal view, the demand for a neutral public space is not entirely unproblematic. Thus, **Charles Taylor** has observed that in the lack of social recognition of what constitutes one’s deepest identity, namely, one’s beliefs, lies the major problem of a conception which makes public neutrality its chief dogma<sup>2</sup>. For –as the Romantic thinkers highlighted against the background of one of the main achievements of the Enlightenment-, man is not just a free

being, but a being in need of expression and recognition<sup>3</sup>.

Although, generally speaking, the communitarian view expressed by **Taylor** is not without problems either, it seems to me that, at least in this case, it hits clearly upon the core of **Eliot**'s discomfort, provided that this need of expression and recognition is understood not so much as a political but as a cultural demand. For it is in culture, and not merely in politics, where man's subjectivity finds its natural expression.

But man's subjectivity can be filled with very different contents. Accordingly, neither culture nor cultural diversity by itself will necessarily reflect the moral aspirations and dignity of man. While diversity can be praised as a sign of freedom, it can also reflect a certain distortion of man's subjectivity<sup>4</sup>. And, generally speaking, culture can reflect both man's grandeur or man's misery. Thus, while a modern philosopher such as **Kant** was still confident about the possibility of getting a sublime image of our moral self, contemporary man shows far less optimism about his own self. To notice this, it suffices to take a look at his image in the current culture, that is, the so-called "mass culture". What I have called "process of secularization" has become in the last decades almost identical with that kind of "cultural imperialism", which, focusing on man's drive for money, pleasure and power, reduces every spiritual manifestation of his subjectivity almost to nothingness.

Confronted with the present cultural situation, one could surely say that, *instead of promoting an enlightened and neutral public sphere, the privatization of religion has left the public realm exposed to another kind of influence which, in the last account, has put not only*

*religion but humanity itself in jeopardy.* For, as **Hannah Arendt** observed, it is usually in the public sphere where we find the ordinary light we need to illuminate our privacy. So, when the latter is filled merely with the references provided by the mass-media, or colonized by the instrumental rationality proper of economic transactions, this is all the light one is going to get: In order to lead an “ordinary” life, all you need is to become a workholic, or take up jogging, or perhaps take some lessons in spiritual enlightenment and, just in case, behave more or less like those people on T.V. Now, isn’t this a refined kind of social pressure? Where is actually our realm of private freedom? It has been completely immersed in the conventions imposed by the recent culture industry. So, nobody should be surprised that the modern defense of the private realm ends up in those generalized and solicited public confessions of intimate secrets on a TV talk show<sup>5</sup>. In this way, the subject becomes an object.

Now, the objectification of the subject, as well as the collapse of the difference between the private and the public sphere in our late capitalist societies, already constitute clear signs that the modern order has been undermined by its own development. Our cultural atmosphere, indeed, resembles very much what the German philosopher **Robert Spaemann** once described as “banal nihilism”. Throughout the last century, modern faith in man and his dignity has been replaced by the most subtle dissolution of humanity, the most comfortable capitulation to meaninglessness. Instead of the modern exaltation of the human subject, we now bear witness to his post-modern fragmentation. Thus, the autonomy of the subject seems to come about only in some arbitrary ways of self-reconstruction. The contemporary obsession with securing one’s personal identity against

the current models available in society, for instance, can be seen as a reaction to this dissolution of the self. Madonna's changing identities along her career provide the clearest example; and the fixation on the various ways that one's uniqueness can be reflected in one's own body –a fixation that we can perceive in the practice of piercing and tatoos- provides another one. Hence, we can certainly say that the process of secularization has gone far beyond the exaltation of man's autonomy and is actually moving towards man's deconstruction.

Now, are modernity and the values it stands for identical with the last stages of the process of secularization I have quickly sketched? To put it another way: is post-modernity the logical conclusion of modernity? In my opinion, the answer to this question depends on whether we can speak of a modern culture which is certainly secular, but not necessarily secularist. I make this difference to stress the fact that in the ongoing debate about secularization it all depends on how we conceive secularity: as a realm opposed to the sacred or rather as complementary to it –in the same way as the ordinary and the extraordinary complement each other.

Certainly, from an historical point of view, it is not without irony that the process of secularization may partially find its roots in Christian religion itself. After all, it is **Christ** himself who urges us to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, advocating in this way the desacralization of political power. That human beings, even many of the ones who have followed him along the centuries, have not always been prepared to understand the full meaning of His words is perhaps a conclusion that we can draw now, after some centuries

have gone by, and we all have experienced how good it is, both for religion and for public life, for each to keep their proper place. The problem, ever since, has been to understand correctly the meaning of “proper place”.

For sure, Christ’s words are not meant in any way to expel God from the lives of ordinary men and women, nor are they intended to make God a foreigner in human society. Far from it! He often speaks of the small seed that has to grow, of the yeast that has to ferment the dough. Christianity was never meant to become a political program, but rather an invitation to accept God’s Word and make it effective not only in the intimacy of one’s conscience, but in one’s entire life at all times, in all places. As a natural consequence, God would not be a foreigner among human affairs.

This exclusion of God, however, is the program that secularist thought has been trying to accomplish since the beginning of modern times. Very often drawing its force from bitter historical experiences, the secularist argument runs basically as follows: belief in God has been only a stage in human history, a concept showing the self-alienation of man, whereby man alienated himself from the world, yet man and world belong together. Modernity, in turn, demands that we leave this minority of age era, and, daring to use our reason, take nature and society under our own responsibility. From this perspective, every human progress, every achievement in the scientific or technical field, further, every claim for political freedom, would be a consequence of this emancipation from the ancient and primitive idea of God.

I am sure that Americans will find this picture a little overstressed. After all, America has been from its birth a modern country and, at the same time, has tried to look for its foundations in God, in a way unprecedented in history. Following **Taylor** we could say that, while in the traditional societies the presence of God and the sacred was focused on certain *loci* –in a reminder of the *natural loci* proper to ancient Aristotelian physics-, modern society, in accord with Newton’s physics, was meant to follow a “rational design”<sup>6</sup>. The U.S. Constitution represents such a design. Written in a time when most people were believers, it was supposed to reflect the conviction that America was “a Nation under God”, in a way that should make possible the peaceful cohabitation of modernity and religion –something that **Tocqueville**, coming from the old continent, found very surprising.

And yet, throughout the last century, the secularist program, especially through the power of mass media, has found its way into American culture, too. Certainly it has found its way into what counts as American culture to many people all around the world. But also inside America, there is a current debate about how to reconcile the relationship between religion and national identity. Now, it seems to me that this debate is misled as long as it is taken only as a political matter. Because, ultimately, culture, as a way of life, cannot be reduced to politics.

Culture is a very complex reality. I said before that it is a reflection of human subjectivity. Now I said it is also a way of life. If you go over a book of French gastronomy you could read a lot about the “culture of cheese”. In a very similar fashion, now and then,

one hears about “the culture of fast-food”. In both cases you are suggesting that a whole “way of life” arises from, or is reflected in, the production, marketing and consumption of either cheese or fast-food. Now, the web of meanings, relations, tacit agreements, dealings, etc, embodied in and fostered by those practices goes far beyond the economic interests involved in them. Culture is the realm of the human, and the human cannot be reduced to particular material interests without losing its specific significance. At the same time, culture is not something merely spiritual either, because it must also take into account our given nature as the soil to be cultivated, that is, humanized. In this way culture makes up also what we call a “world”, as something distinct from plain “nature”.

In this context, to speak about a secular world or a secular culture is to mean a way of life where God is not present anymore, a world where people would have learned to live without God, or –as in the title of **Douglas Coupland’s** book: to lead a “Life after God”. For many, indeed, this “life after God” is an achievement –more, the essential achievement- of modern times, a further step in the self-affirmation of man, a final sign of maturity.

Now, as I said above, all this has become quite problematic. Will we perhaps find the mature man in the person of the childish adult who sits every day in front his T.V. enjoying the latest T.V. sitcom? The proclaimed “maturity” of man is confronted today with man’s deconstruction. “Modern Man” –that invention of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century according to **Michel Foucault**- has been under attack throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Modern faith in man’s reason has given place to post-modern skepticism. Man’s freedom has been lost long ago, in the various versions of psychological or social determinism. Modern expectation of a

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rational control over society has become almost a joke, after a century which has gone through two world wars and is still suffering innumerable regional conflicts. Likewise, the expectation of a technical dominion over nature has seriously been challenged, given the disastrous effects of an irresponsible ecological behaviour. Indeed, man's control over nature, as **Robert Spaemann** has pointed out, is recently resulting in man's control over man, as can be seen in the expectations that many harbour regarding the biotechnological progress of the last decades. Man's dignity, in short, is thought to be nothing other than an interesting theoretical construction designed to privilege man above other living beings, if not even a burdensome concept, itself the last hurdle to complete freedom.

Once again, what has become of modern culture? One could well say that what remains of it is only the skeleton, the structure, institutions such as the modern state and the market –both of them under suspicion, too. Perhaps a solid structure, but lacking life, or at least healthy life. As Spanish philosopher **Alejandro Llano** observed nearly two decades ago, it is not in the system constituted by the state and the market –and the media, we could add- where we should look for the answer to this crisis. To begin with, there is no such answer, but there are rather many countless, little answers: the answers of ordinary people who make up with their lives what **Edmund Husserl** used to call the “Lebenswelt”, the “life-world”: that world which cannot be reduced either to the objectivity of scientific knowledge nor to a purely subjective experience, because it is previous to them, and embraces them. That is what I have been calling culture.

### **Culture and Cult**

Now, it is precisely at this point where I would like to recall, along with **Fernando Inciarte**, the etymological connection between “culture” and “cult”, a connection likely to be dismissed by the secularist account of culture –especially in its materialistic versions- but which could well be at the very heart of the cultural crisis we are facing nowadays. I want to argue, in other words, that man’s endeavours fall short in generating and sustaining a culture –that is, a way of life- which can be truly human.

The thesis, in short, would be this: many accomplishments of modern culture, both on the philosophical and political level, were perhaps achieved in a spirit of opposition to traditional religion, *but they were still supported by a Judeo-Christian culture, and owed their solidity to that culture, that is, to the lives of many ordinary men and women who lived inspired by the Christian spirit.* Accordingly, in a moment when modern values are under attack, we would rather look beyond the secularist account of those values, towards their religious inspiration. If bitter historical experiences could partly explain the secularist reaction, more recent experiences do suggest, in turn, that man is too important to be placed in man’s hands only, and the world is too precious to be entrusted to a godless master.

From this perspective, it is not without logic that religion has become again a topic for philosophers in recent times<sup>7</sup>. The connection between religion and culture, indeed, cannot be despised as something belonging to the past. It should be noted that cultures that last are cultures which have firm roots in religion<sup>8</sup>. Now, among all religions, Christianity alone has shown a particularly intense drive towards universalism. This drive, which has found its

natural expression in missions all over the world, is also at the core of what **Edmund Husserl** considered one of the two characteristic features, which, along with self-criticism, have defined Western culture. Universalism, in fact, is still alive in our culture, only that now religious mission has been replaced by a “mass culture” mission, so often with a deleterious effect on local cultures.

Certainly, this “mass culture” has also found a way to combine sheer material aspirations with a kind of individual spiritual interest and tranquility: for example, even the “Material Girl” can show certain spiritual interests in different religions, except, of course, her original Catholicism. Far from being a single case, this is a quite general trend. Now, isn't it a kind of cultural hypocrisy? For the truth is that not every spirituality can challenge the current culture and transform it into a human one. At this point, it seems to me that the only way to confront the heartless side of our culture is to recover the universal drive of the Christian faith. For Christian mission, even if sometimes it has been ill-performed, consists essentially in the transmission of a spiritual message, of itself able to take different forms in different cultures, while “mass culture mission” has nothing other in mind than potential customers, whom it very often attracts in ways directly offensive to their traditions. In this way, that particular sort of universalism called globalization has become dangerous.

From this perspective, then, it should not be strange that its current advocates are also regarded as a danger by local people, who then hold fast to their traditions, even in a fanatical way, that is, without paying attention to reason. This is, indeed, the main problem

of fanatical attachment to one's own tradition. If reason makes possible the openness to humanity beyond one's particular culture, fanatical traditionalism closes this access. But this happens, to a certain extent, because of the failure to recognize and develop the reason *embodied* in every cultural tradition. As a result, instead of fostering universal values from within –which is the work of a spiritual mission–, one is forced to an insuperable dialectic between abstract universalisms and particular traditionalisms. A true spiritual mission, by contrast, finds its way through the local culture, and gives place to different ways of living the same faith. Furthermore, as faith itself can only be free, this spiritual mission must necessarily live together with religious diversity, encouraging every effort to find a common ground for mutual understanding, at the private as well as at the social level.

These reflections could lead anyone to consider seriously the possibility of a “Christian modernity”, as a way to preserve those values, which once were advanced by the secularist thought, but are now losing their humanistic accent, just to become empty words, meant only to reassure the self-generation of the system –as **Luhmann** would put it. While this could be surely said of some contemporary appeals to democracy and human rights, here I will refer specially to concepts such as human dignity, identity and freedom, and, more particularly, to the central position of work in modern life not only as means of external cultural progress, but as the ordinary way of fulfilling one's personal vocation.

Indeed, in speaking of “work” in terms of “vocation”, we are using very modern language. We would look in vain for a positive appraisal of work in ancient philosophers such as **Aristotle**. For him work was a limited-servitude, improper to free citizens. Free

men were supposed to lead a theoretical or a political life, and never to get too involved in activities directed to the satisfaction of the basic needs of human life. For many reasons –among them, perhaps, a misled identification of the theoretical life with the Christian appraisal of contemplation-, the Aristotelian view was to influence Western culture until modern times, nourishing an aristocratic appraisal of human activities: some, as the intellectual tasks, would be more valuable than others, meaning manual tasks.

The modern approach, by contrast, could be read against this context, as a re-evaluation of work as opposed to contemplation, of the worldly against the spiritual. Certainly, the important place of work in the life of the Protestant Reformers, was not meant to be an exaltation of the worldly; it was rather a way to lead a Christian life in the world. However, the consideration of work that we can find, for instance, in **Luther** was not entirely positive either. Although Luther certainly encouraged work, he held it to be a consequence of sin, and, therefore, bearing a negative burden within it, which would be to infect every cultural realization. Even **Calvin**, while seeing in prosperity achieved by hard work, a sign of predestination, would not take work as such as something supposed to make man more perfect<sup>9</sup>. In fact, it could only make men more stressful about the fact of achieving external success.

Perhaps that's the reason why the existentialist approach to work as "self-realization" sounded as a novelty for many. In the wake of **Marx**, who had already pointed to the relevance of work, though in materialistic terms, for the shaping of man's identity, the French existentialists stressed the idea of work as the real place of fulfillment of one's

most inner expectations. Now, leaving aside the fact that this account, when absolutized, is also unable to give meaning to human failures, talking in terms of “self-realization” has something “narcisistic” about it: it suggests the kind of obsession with one’s self which goes along perhaps with post-modern radical individualism, but not with the solidarity that we hold also as a legacy of the modern times.

It is not easy, indeed, to hold together those ideals proclaimed in a popular way by the French revolution –freedom, equality, fraternity-, without making reference to the Christian spirit which was at their root. This is something that even **Richard Rorty** has acknowledged. Unlike him, however, I do not think that Christianity must be regarded as an impracticable and undesirable solution to these problems. To think this way, supporting one’s judgment in the present state of affairs, is to think very little of the possibilities of human freedom. Confronted with the same problems, I prefer to think of a “Christian Modernity” as a meaningful response to our cultural dilemmas.

### **A Christian modernity**

In speaking of a “Christian Modernity”, I take the expression from Pope **John Paul II**, who used it once to describe the christian experience of people committed to live the spirit and message of **Saint Josemaría Escrivá**. Convinced of the central place of Christ in the history of humankind, **St. Josemaría** preached constantly that every man and woman is called to be a saint, whereby the word “sanctity” is meant to imply not so much an abstract moral perfection, but rather sacramental and existential identification with Christ

himself and his redemptive *mission*.

In the context of this talk, where I am trying to argue how **Escrivá**'s account of the Gospel is particularly relevant for the revitalization of modern culture, I'd like first to point out the stress that **St. Josemaría** put on the notion of "divine call or vocation" as the radical answer to the question of the *meaning* of one's life (both in an ontological and in an existential sense<sup>10</sup>). The meaning of one's own life, indeed, cannot be drawn merely from one's social context, one's psychological or historical background; it cannot be drawn either merely from one's achievements, successes –or failures. Behind all these realities and sustaining them all is the notion of a divine vocation, of a transcendent destiny of man. And yet, the characteristic mark of **St. Josemaría**'s message is his special awareness that, for most men and women, the path to realize their divine vocation and become saints is precisely the sanctification of the ordinary, which in a very significant way could also be regarded as identical with the sanctification of work<sup>11</sup>.

As he used to put it, "your human vocation is a part –and an important part- of your divine vocation"<sup>12</sup>. Now, an essential part of this human vocation is our professional work. As it has been often pointed out, it is surely not by chance that the word "profession" is very close in meaning to the word "vocation" (in German "Beruf" and "Berufung" respectively). They are not identical, though. While the divine vocation makes up the frame where one's life finds its radical meaning, the professional vocation is the ordinary field where that divine vocation becomes real. But, unlike the former, which finds its roots beyond time, containing the real identity of a person –his or her real name-, the professional

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vocation takes shape throughout a person's life, and is highly dependent on many circumstances –familiar, social and the like-. For *a person's identity cannot be, in any way, equated with a particular role or with the particular task he or she can perform in a given moment. Nor with professional success. Indeed, one can definitely succeed in fulfilling his or her divine vocation, by way of learning to accept his or her own failures and breakdowns.* And yet, work –whatever it may be- is the ordinary stuff of man's life, and should be performed in a professional way, that is, with dedication.

Certainly, **St. Josemaría's** approach to work was not merely sociological, but theological. Thus, in the context of the Judeo-Christian doctrine about creation, he points out work as the *original* vocation of man, that is, as his vocation even before sin. This is to say that man's ordinary way of praising God, unlike that of angelic creatures, involves working which is also a way of taking the world under one's own responsibility.

This focus on the ordinary does not involve any negation of the liturgy, as an extraordinary –sacred- way of praising him. As **Stanley Rosen** has recently observed in a philosophical context, the ordinary and the extraordinary, explain each other and shed light on each other. They are not mutually exclusive terms, but complementary. From a theological perspective this is also the case. The ordinary is the secular, the extraordinary the sacred. Thus, **Escriva's** insistence on work, as the ordinary place to find God, is balanced with his insistence on the sacraments –particularly with his insistence on the centrality of the Mass in the life of Catholics.

While the latter claim could be held as relevant for Catholics only, I would like to highlight at least one anthropological dimension of it, which is certainly relevant for everyone. Some decades ago, in his short book *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, German philosopher **Josef Pieper** pointed out the danger involved in the overstressing of work, namely, the loss of the meaning of that very work. At that moment, he was thinking about the loss of the proper meaning of “leisure”, in the sense that **Aristotle** gave this word, which cannot be equated merely with “rest”. Aristotle, indeed, held that we rest in order to work better, while we work in order to have leisure. For him, leisure was tantamount to engaging in some spiritual activity. Now, spiritual activity has meaning by itself. In contrast, rest does not find its meaning in itself, but in its orientation to work.

From this perspective we can appraise better the deep anthropological meaning of **Escriva**’s words. Without denying the value of “leisure” for human life –spaces where we can reflect on the meaning of ordinary life, for instance, but also praise God and fill ourselves directly with his action: prayer and liturgy-, he went far beyond the somewhat instrumental appraisal of work of **Aristotle**, in order to affirm clearly that work is the ordinary place where we are to find God. Further: that unless we find God in our ordinary lives we won’t find him ever<sup>13</sup>. In this way, while we can certainly find in his teaching a complementary account of the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the secular and the sacred, the secular realm stands out as the place where most men and women find God and fulfill their deepest vocation<sup>14</sup>.

Accordingly, he would encourage everyone to discover the divine dimension and

meaning involved in his or her ordinary life. This discovery would lead one to “turn work into prayer”, as he used to express it, virtually forgetting about secular distinctions between contemplative and active life. Indeed, very often **Escrivá** condensed his message speaking of “being contemplatives in the midst of the world”, or even of a “Christian Materialism”, “audaciously opposed to those other materialisms closed to the spirit”<sup>15</sup>. In doing so, he would but draw the last practical conclusion of Christian faith in the Incarnation: of the mystery of God becoming man and thereby entering into history, in a particular time, in a particular place with a particular language; of God living a family life, working with human hands and developing human friendships. Christian affirmation of the primacy of the spirit over matter does not involve the rejection of matter, but its dignification.

The proposal of a Christian materialism, in this sense, involves a positive appraisal of human realities. This appraisal, however, would be grounded by **Escrivá** himself also in God’s original plan for Creation. Thus, in a significant way, he gave the title of “Passionately loving the world” to one of his most representative homilies. Here I would just like to emphasize the fact of this love for the world. Very often Christianity has been criticized for having led people to forget about the world, for leading people to see their faith as incompatible with a true care for worldly affairs. That was **Marx’s** criticism, and, in a different way, it has been also **Hannah Arendt’s**. Surely, there can be historical reasons for this reproach. But then it has been due to personal and historical shortcomings in the understanding of the Christian message, for it is in no way a necessary conclusion from it. Far from that, there is a distinctively Christian love for the world, which is nourished precisely by God’s Love for his Creation, especially for the human being. That is the kind

of Love which **St. Josemaría Escrivá** puts at the root of his concern for the world, at the center of the specific mission that, after Adam's sin, God has entrusted to his children, namely, to restore the world to its original beauty.

This restoration, however, has nothing to do with the return to a hypothetical idle state. According to **Escrivá**, there was never such a state. The original state was already a state where man was supposed to work, and, consequently –we can add- to generate culture. Now, in stressing the vocation of work as something prior to sin, **Escrivá** was regarding the entire world of culture as something radically positive, in clear contrast to **Luther**. According to **Escrivá**, indeed, the consequence of sin was not work but suffering and death<sup>16</sup>. As **Amalia Quevedo** has pointed out, **Escrivá's** positive appraisal of work contrasts also with that of post-modern philosopher **Baudrillard**, for whom work is the way man has to forget about the fact of having to die. For **Escrivá**, on the other hand, work –every work- is a way to take a share in God's creation and redemption, a way to lead God's creation towards a most perfect –human- state, and a way to redeem the world from its alienation from God.

Certainly, the very fact of speaking of “sanctification of work” in a general way has also a deep significance. **St. Josemaría** does not want to make distinctions among works according to human criteria. Human criteria are always somewhat aristocratic. From a theological perspective, in contrast, every work is equally valuable, regardless of its being intellectual or manual, regardless also of the income it provides and its social appraisal<sup>17</sup>. According to **Escrivá**, the only real difference among works cannot be judged from the

outside, for it refers to the love with which it is performed by the person. A love which, if it is to be real, must lead one to perform the work also in the most perfect possible way<sup>18</sup>.

In the performing of one's duties out of love, we find the real proof of one's faith: for then faith shows itself to be strong enough to encourage and inspire every noble human endeavour. This is also a consequence of an idea coined by **Escrivá** which is of special relevance in our times: the idea of "unity of life". By contrast with the fragmentation of one's identity that I mentioned in the first part of this talk, "unity of life" means to lead one life only: to behave in every moment, in public as well as in private, in accord with one's deepest identity.

Unity of life presupposes the idea of a divine vocation, as something completely other than the different *roles* one happens to perform in a given society: that of worker, that of father, that of friend and so on. Like the thread that goes through and beyond social conventions, rescuing the divine dimension involved in one's own circumstances, the divine vocation provides our lives with the kind of unity that prevents the fragmentation of one's personality. "There is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life which has to become, in both soul and body, holy and filled with God"<sup>19</sup>. Those words make already clear that, in **Escrivá's** mind, the idea of "unity of life" has a theological ground<sup>20</sup>, namely, the consciousness of our divine filiation. This faith in being a child of God is at the heart of the spiritual legacy of **St. Josemaría**. For him this was not a simple idea. It was a conviction which permeated his ordinary life, filling it up with a profound sense of confidence and simplicity<sup>21</sup>.

Along with the Judeo-Christian tradition, the consciousness of one's divine filiation represents, for him, the ground for man's special dignity. But **Escrivá** holds it to be also the ground for a way of life which, embracing every human activity, grants it a transcendent significance<sup>22</sup>. From this perspective, indeed, while a man or a woman is working with their colleagues, sharing their concerns and natural anxieties, he or she must be aware of accomplishing his or her Father's mission<sup>23</sup>.

That **St. Josemaría** himself regarded this message as profoundly relevant for the shaping of a most human culture is something we can infer from his laconic statement: "These world crises are crises of saints"<sup>24</sup>. Those words, indeed, do not point at political or economic solutions for world crises. In them, a very simple but challenging idea is implied: the fact that *the human world loses its consistency if God does not occupy a central place, not so much in structures, as in the heart of human beings*. And, conversely, the suggestion that when a creature makes room for God in his heart, his/her whole external activity –the world he or she creates - must necessarily reflect that presence in a natural way.

Now, the fact that Escriva focuses on the human heart, rather than on structures, goes hand in hand with an essential aspect of his preaching, namely, his love for personal freedom, and its natural consequence: pluralism. **Escrivá** was not afraid of affirming human freedom, because God himself –as he used to say- has willed to run the risk of our freedom. Indeed, while being aware of the possibility of making bad use of it, he preferred to highlight the greatness of human freedom when man welcomes in his life the action of God.

This is certainly a distinctive mark of his message, which goes back to the very heart of the Gospel. It is not that **St. Josemaría** was not aware of the weakness of the human heart. It was, rather, that he was sure of his Father God. It is in this context, taking into account the positive affirmation of man's dignity, of man's freedom, of human progress, that, beyond the claims of a secular culture, one begins to think of God as the real safeguard of any authentic humanism. And of ordinary people, who try to live that faith in their daily lives, as the real hope for a new civilization.

If I had to summarize the contribution of Escrivá to the present culture, indeed, I would point directly to the notion of sanctification of ordinary work. Certainly, the way to overcome the deficiencies of the current culture involves the rediscovery of all the richness of the Christian faith. However, if we keep in mind that culture has its origin in human work, it is clear that the way we work will necessarily find an echo in the cultural realm. It is not a matter of being part-time spiritual, part-time materialistic. It is, rather, a matter of discovering the spiritual dimension of the most material tasks. In the fact that faith can lead us to this spiritual enrichment of our daily work, we have a proof of its capacity for transforming our personal world. That it gets to transform the whole culture, is, from this perspective, just a matter of time.

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## Notes

For an analysis of this concept, see Illanes, J. L., “Secularizacion”, in *Gran Enciclopedia Rialp*.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Ch., *Varieties of Religion today. William James Revisited*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, and to the extent that many people still consider themselves believers, Taylor is surely right when notices that “people go on feeling a sense of unease at the world of unbelief: some sense that something big, something important has been left out, some level of profound desire has been ignored, some greater reality outside us has been closed off”. Taylor, Ch., *Varieties of Religion today*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Surely, the ability to perceive the distortion of one’s own subjectivity is itself characteristic of our capacity of going both beyond ourselves and our reflection in the cultural realm; as such, it is a sign of self-transcendence. This self-transcendence has sometimes been described by means of a metaphor which goes back to Plato’s “allegory of the cave”: as a sort of awakening to reality. According to this metaphor, both our subjectivity and its cultural reflection, belong to a dream-world which lacks real consistency (like that of the film *The Matrix*). The real world, on the other hand, lies beyond our dreams. It is in this dream-world, though, where we lead our ordinary lives. And the truth is that we can live them in such a way that we get either a good or a distorted image of ourselves.

<sup>5</sup> See Zizek, S., *Welcome to the desert of the real*, Verso, 2002, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Ch., *Varieties of Religion today*, p. 65-7.

<sup>7</sup> Not only Taylor or Zizek (*On Belief*, Routledge, 2001). Even Vattimo (*Belief*, Standford University Press, 1999) speaks of a return of religion. In the particular return of Vattimo to religion, an important role has been played by Renè Girard’s books.

<sup>8</sup> Or else those who make of politics a religion –as it has been usual in the republican tradition-, though the latter is a much more fragile foundation; it is also a dangerous one, because it entails the reduction of the religious dimension of life to a political option, thus making of political categories metaphysical ones. To make a religion out of politics easily ends up in a sort of totalitarianism. Conversely, a certain detachment of politics has always been a mark of true religious spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Pierpaolo Donati, “Senso e valore della vita quotidiana”, in *La grandezza della vita quotidiana. Vocazione e missione del cristiano in mezzo al mondo*, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, 2002, 2002, p. 229, 241.

<sup>10</sup> I bring on purpose here the word “ontological” to mean that the vocation, as St. Josemaría understands it, goes beyond the realm of one’s subjectivity, to signify the fundamental “Event” which definitely awakens us to reality, shedding light on every other event of our ordinary lives.

<sup>11</sup> “I dream –and the dream has come true- of multitudes of God’s children, sanctifying themselves as ordinary citizens, sharing the ambitions and endeavours of their colleagues and friends. I want to shout to them about this divine truth: if you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn’t mean Christ has forgotten you or hasn’t called you. He has invited you to stay among the activities and concerns of the world. He wants you to know that your human vocation, your profession, your talents, are not omitted from his divine plans. He has sanctified them and made them a most acceptable offering to his Father”. *Christ is passing by*, n.20.

<sup>12</sup> *Christ is passing by*, 46

13 See “Passionately loving this world”, in *Conversations with Mrgs. Escrivá*, 114

14 It should be noted, however, that in this appraisal of the secular, a theological assumption is already present. Namely, the greatness of the ordinary life lies not so much in its being ordinary, but in the fact of being the matter of one’s dedication to God. So, it is not work alone, but work offered up to God what has, beyond its human value, a redeeming dimension. For this, Escrivá took his inspiration from the Gospel, particularly from what he used to call “the hidden life of Christ”: his thirty years of ordinary life, before he began to preach. He could not conceive of those years in Christ’s life as void of supernatural, redeeming value.

15 See “Passionately loving this world”, in *Conversations with Mrgs. Escrivá*, 115.

16 “Work is part and parcel of man’s life on earth. It involves effort, weariness, exhaustion: signs of the suffering and struggle which accompany human existence and which point to the reality of sin and the need for redemption. But in itself work is not a penalty or a curse or a punishment: those who speak of it that way have not understood sacred Scripture properly”. *Christ is passing by*, 47. Redemption from suffering and death will follow in another world, after the redemption of sin operated by Christ has been effected in this world. In the meantime, every man and woman can have a share in this redemption. Work, performed in union with Christ, is the ordinary place to share in Christ redemptive work.

17 “It is time for us Christians to shout from the rooftops that work is a gift from God and that it makes no sense to classify men differently, according to their occupation, as if some jobs were nobler than others. Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one’s personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one’s family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity”. *Christ is passing by*, 47.

18 “It is well to remember that the dignity of work is based on Love. Man’s great privilege is to be able to love and to transcend what is fleeting and ephemeral. He can love other creatures, pronounce an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ which are full of meaning. And he can love God, who opens heaven’s gates to us, makes us members of his family and allows us also to talk to him in friendship, face to face. This is why man ought not to limit himself to material production. Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love”. *Christ is passing by*, 48.

19 “Passionately loving this world”, in *Conversations with Mrgs. Escrivá*, 114.

20 It should be added that the unity of life becomes possible both thanks to the practice of human virtues and to the recourse to supernatural means such as prayer and sacraments. In this context, however, I would like to stress its foundation, namely, the consciousness of one’s divine filiation.

21 “I understood that divine filiation had to be a fundamental characteristic of our spirituality: Abba, Father! And that by living from within their divine filiation, my children would find themselves filled with joy and peace, protected by an impregnable wall; and would know how to be apostles of this joy, and how to communicate their peace, even in the face of their own or another’s suffering. Just because of that: because we are convinced that God is our Father”. Letter 8 December 1949. Cited in A. Vazquez de Prada, p. 296.

22 “Passionately loving this world”, in *Conversations with Mrg. Escrivá*, 116.

23 This significance is stressed by the the fact that, for a christian, his or her divine filiation is, in the end, a share in Christ divine filiation. Thus, one’s deepest identity finds its roots in one’s identification with Christ, while the deepest meaning of one’s activity finds its roots in the meaning of Christ’s redeeming action.

24 *The Wav.* 301