

"The Greatest Revolution of All Times"

Murray Hill Institute Conference

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***"If we Christians really lived in accordance with our faith, the greatest revolution of all times would take place. The effectiveness of our co-redemption depends on each one of us. You should meditate on this."*¹**

Murray Hill Institute has set for itself a high goal: to summon women to the task of Transforming Culture. Our culture indeed needs a great revolution to be transformed into that civilization of love that we have pondered during the Conferences of 2000 and 2001. And so it is with great gratitude that I am here to speak to you about how that revolution was envisioned by Saint Josemaria Escriva, who is one of the brightest lights to shine in the Church of the 20th century, and for me, in a very particular way, a Father.

I want to express my gratitude to the organizers of this event for inviting me, and above all to him, for the enduring inspiration and encouragement that I received from him and his teachings during my maturing years.

As you know, he was born in 1902 and God called him to heaven in 1975: 73 years of a saintly life, which the Holy Father, John Paul II has recognized and proposed to the universal Church for veneration on this past October 6, in a ceremony of canonization at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Perhaps many of you were there: and perhaps it struck you that what unfolded those days was indeed a revolution: a quiet, bloodless and powerful revolution. Let me quote another one of my favorite points from his writings:

"Today it is not enough for men and women to be good. Moreover, whoever is content to be merely good, is not good enough. It is necessary to be ``revolutionary".

***Faced by hedonism, faced by the pagan and materialistic wares that we are being offered, Christ wants objectors! - rebels of Love!"*² Furrow 128**

¹ St. J. Escrivá, Furrow n. 945

² Ibid n. 128

The title of this year's Conference is "Finding God In and Through Everyday Work." It suggests the monotony of one's daily struggles, the succession of days that are very much like the one before and after, hardly exciting and not at all revolutionary. Can we reconcile these two apparently conflicting concepts? Don't revolutions call for disruption, strikes, loud manifestoes, etc.? What St. Josemaría calls us to is a turn-around within ourselves. He wants us to take a look at our lives and recognize that God wants to do great things with and through us. The money changers' tables that must be kicked upside down and thrown out of the temple are those strongholds of comfort, the remnants of selfishness that still linger in our hearts, so that we can join in the task of transforming this world of ours. Early in his priesthood, St. Josemaría put together a little book of Spiritual Considerations (as he called it), which later on would become a best seller as *The Way*. In the very first point of the book the reader meets a challenge: ***"Don't let your life be barren. Be useful. Make yourself felt. Shine forth with the torch of your faith and your love.***

With your apostolic life, wipe out the trail of filth and slime left by the corrupt sowers of hatred. And set aflame all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you bear in your heart"³ *The Way* 1. He taught that each person receives at Baptism the call to holiness, and that this call implies the responsibility to transform our world into the place that God originally intended it to be, and that He portrays for us in the sermon on the mount, "encapsulated", so to speak, in the eight Beatitudes. We are to restore all things in Christ, by bringing him through our work and effort to the very top of every human activity. St. Josemaría has been acknowledged as a Precursor of Vatican II's teachings, and rightly so. Since 1928, when God led him to see what we now know as Opus Dei, the Founder's message anticipated what years later would be universally taught by the Council as the role of the laity in the world and the Church, and has since been repeated in numerous writings and pronouncements of the Holy Father. The close connection that exists between one's efforts to correspond to God's grace in his or her daily life, and the transformation of our world, was again stressed by John Paul II, speaking to a large gathering of men and women who assembled in Rome to celebrate the centennial of Opus Dei Founder's birth, last January, ***"Sanctifying his own work, with respect for objective moral norms, the faithful lay person contributes effectively to***

³ St. J. Escrivá, *The Way* n. 1

*building a society more worthy of man and to freeing creation, which groans in travail while awaiting the revelation of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:19-22). He cooperates in that way in shaping the face of a humanity attentive to the requirements of the person and of the common good. (...) Show with daily effort that the love of Christ can inform the entire range of existence, making it possible to reach the ideal of that unity of life which (...) is fundamental of the effort to evangelize contemporary society"*⁴

We gather here these days to reflect on his words and example, with the desire to take his invitation to heart. As you have heard, I had the good fortune of meeting him as a teenager, and then later on in the following decades.

I would like to share with you a little of my personal experience, which hopefully will encourage you to get to know him better yourself! I first heard about St. Josemaria from my mother who left a copy of *The Way* by my night table. It sat there for three years until, on a retreat right after high-school graduation, I decided to open it, and could not close it until I had read the whole thing. By the time I was 18, having seen my vocation and asked for admission to Opus Dei, I was asked to go to Opus Dei's headquarters in Rome to study. I spent nearly a year there. We had many opportunities to meet him and receive directly from him the essential points of his message: advice on how to live as children who truly love their Father God. It was during those months that I first discovered his tremendous love for Our Lord, and his ability to make one want to love Him just as much. It was contagious: he put before you such a panorama of what life is all about. With immense faith in divine providence, a deep conviction that "*for those who love God, all things work together unto good*"⁵ and therefore we could face life with great optimism and hope.

He had a way of saying things that was direct, simple, clear, and with such certitude that one could turn those words into a personal conviction without hesitation. Mainly, because one could see that his whole life gave proof of their validity.

He loved what he called "*the freedom of the children of God*". His example moved you to be daring, without hesitation for fear of what "others" would think, once you knew that your line of action was in keeping with God's will for you. That was the only "proviso", which would truly "set you free". Sincerity was the virtue he loved above all

⁴ John Paul II: *The Supernatural Dimension of the Ordinary*, 3-4, 1/12/02

⁵ Romans 28.8

other human qualities of the soul, and he insisted on the need to be sincere with God, with oneself and with others: sincere in our thoughts, words and actions. But perhaps the quality that was most apparent to me in dealing with him was his capacity for affection.

Once he heard someone tease me because I looked too young to be there. He immediately came to my defense, and after saying that I need not worry, because youth is an ailment that gets cured with time... he added that God had called him when he was 26 years old, and he envied those of his children who had been called at 16, since that allowed us to give those many more years to Our Lord.

His generosity knew no limits. Above all when it came to the worship of God: for instance, when trends seemed to go in another direction, he commented that the day men in love gave a sack of cement or a bar of steel to the women they were to marry, that day he would change his practice: in the meantime, the best in precious metals and gems would be appropriate to give our God, present in the Blessed Sacrament. One learned what it means to be magnanimous, to love people of all races and conditions. He spoke with such enthusiasm about the beginnings of Opus Dei's work in Japan and Kenya, which were taking place during that year! You could see his eyes sparkle when he told us about all that would be done in those countries, and all over. Predictions which came true in time, but in those days only existed in his heart, passionately in love with God and with the whole world.

Those months went by too fast, and when I thought I was getting ready to go back home, I got a message from him asking if I would be willing to come to America, where we were about to open three new students residences. I knew not a word of English, but that was no obstacle, and I left Rome in 1959 on my way to Washington DC. 1968 brought me back to Rome, in the first of several visits I had the opportunity to make between then and 1975, when I returned to Rome after his unexpected death. Due to my job in the direction of the women's apostolate of Opus Dei in this country, those visits allowed me to talk to St. Josemaria about what we were doing. More importantly, it gave him the chance to speak to me about what he expected from us, and to open up new vistas. He saw our work projected in years to come, with a fullness and reach that made me dizzy as I listened! I was astonished at the perception he had in regard to American life and potential. He had great hopes for this country: he appreciated its position as the

new leader at this time in history, comparing it to Rome at the time of Christ, to Spain at the time of Columbus' discovery of America, or the great colonizing powers of Portugal, France and England at different times in history.

He understood the influence of the media and entertainment, so developed and universally accepted by the early 60s. He said that what we exported would affect what we would now call "the global" culture, as in fact it has. And at the core of this, **he appreciated that Americans work, work hard, and work well.** The spiritual energy, the incredible force for the good that that work would be, when done for God's glory and the good of souls, with a spirit of service towards all, without discrimination, and not guided only by "the bottom line"!! it was mind boggling. It still is! However, whenever groups of Americans were present, he would speak about heart: about loving one another, the importance of family life, and making sure that work never became the aim of one's life: it's only a means. Work does not come first: holiness does. Holiness is not "productivity", something you can measure in visible results; but holiness is not an abstraction: it requires deeds, done for love. And this is the opportunity work provides for us. Work done for love of God: work that is never an obstacle to, but an occasion for seeking God's presence in our day, for serving others -our family in the first place- and for improving ourselves. In contrast, work that is self-seeking and that causes us to neglect our other, primary duties, is disordered work, incapable of sanctifying us or of being sanctified. What we seek is indeed *"work, which is transformed and becomes an instrument of sanctity and apostolate" ...that contributes to the defense "of human dignity, human life from conception till natural death, justice, personal rights and those of the family, the great causes of humanity"*⁶.

This is indeed a revolutionary concept. How often do people appreciate and evaluate work on the basis of spiritual considerations? And yet, the aim of our life is God's love. There is no consideration that would give to our lives greater significance than our supernatural destiny confers on it. Therefore, what leads us to the fulfillment of that goal is the most useful, thus the most practical consideration! That's why Bishop del Portillo, who succeeded St. Josemaria and was first Prelate of OD, said once that contemplatives were most truly practical people. It is a revolution to convoke ordinary

⁶ Javier Echevarria, at the opening of the international congress "The Grandeur of Ordinary Life" Rome, 1/08/02

citizens to bring Christ to the top of their professional field. To place the cross at the roof of their construction, as builders do with the flag on concrete structures or an evergreen in wood ones. And how would this take place? Bringing a large bottle of holy water and spraying your office each am? Covering the bulleting board with holy cards? Exhorting your fellow workers with pious sentiments? Of course not. By setting an example of responsibility, integrity, charity, and good humor. By smiling when it demands an effort. Examples of things I heard him say: seek what unites, be a sower of peace and love; love for “individuals” so no one feels like a piece of equipment or a number, but a person, with the dignity of a child of God. What a person does is not what defines a person’s dignity. Their love of God and their search for perfection –precisely because their work is offered to God and He deserves our best- is what will determine the worth of that work. When a Bishop congratulated him on the appointment of a son of his to a high ranking office, St. Josemaría answered: tell me that he is striving after holiness, tell me that he does his work well. I rather know he is sanctifying himself, even if he is a cobbler. He firmly believed that the persevering effort to work thus, befriending others and guiding them quietly through example, while vivifying the environment like leaven within the dough, would gradually change the climate in our place of work. Souls would be conquered, one by one, through friendship and trust, to become friends of Christ. We would soon enough instill in them –even those who did not think much about God- a curiosity about the source of our joy, our serenity even in the face of hardship and difficulties. People would eventually feel moved to share with us their deepest concerns, trusting that our advice will be selfless and honest.

Another one of St. Josemaría’s hopes for this country, underlines the importance he gave to family life for the good health -spiritual and moral, as well as physical- of society. It is how he perceived the role that women play in the world. He told us that the enemy of our soul knew the influence of women, and for that reason, sought to corrupt her: if she succumbed, the family would disintegrate first and then society would follow suit. This conviction had several practical consequences. To begin with, already in the early years of the life of Opus Dei, he had a little struggle with certain ecclesiastical authorities, in order to gain approval for the women of Opus Dei to earn officially recognized theological studies at pontifical university level. Eventually, his insistence obtained –not only for his daughters, but for women all over the world- the right to do so.

He clearly understood and defended women's involvement in social, civic, and professional life, and inspired several schools and other initiatives to promote the training of women, especially in countries on their way to development. He saw as well the need to give women a firm foundation in the science and arts of homemaking, and challenged his daughters to begin training schools at different levels -including university degrees- in several countries of the world. His vision had a prophetic depth to it. He emphatically taught that the role of women in the home cannot be neglected, because it would be tantamount to neglecting the care that each person needs to flourish and attain happiness.

The way to accomplish this lies in good professional skills, the capacity to perform these tasks well, to raise their professional standing to a level commensurate to their importance. He had a special interest in what we would do about this in America, because he foresaw that women from other countries would look to the American women as models in their way to “progress”, and he wanted us to preserve in our society that which is truly feminine, which includes: upholding the dignity of work in the home, maintaining decency in fashion, and showing that professional excellence is never an excuse for neglecting the high standards needed to create bright and cheerful homes, a term he coined.

This is truly a tremendous challenge to women of all times and places, including single women. Let me quote him directly from one of his interviews: ***"I do not think there need be any conflict between one's family life and social life. Just as in a man's life, but with particular shades of difference, the home and the family will always occupy a central place in the life of a woman. For it is obvious that when she spends time on her family she is fulfilling a great human and Christian role. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility of her having other professional work - for housework is also professional work - in any worthwhile employment available in the society in which she lives. (...) if we systematically contrast work in the home with outside work, retaining the old dichotomy which was formerly used to maintain that a woman's place was in the home but switching the stress, it could easily lead, from the social point of view, to a greater mistake than that which we are trying to correct because it would be more serious if it led women to give up their work in the home"***.

(...). The home - whatever its characteristics, because a single woman should also have a home - is a particularly suitable place for the growth of her personality. The

attention she gives to her family will always be a woman's greatest dignity. In the care she takes of her husband and children or, to put it in more general terms, in her work of creating a warm and formative atmosphere around her, a woman fulfils the most indispensable part of her mission. And so it follows that she can achieve her personal perfection there."⁷ He anticipates these words of JP II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.(...) the moral force of women, which draws strength from this awareness and this entrusting, expresses itself in a great number of figures of the Old Testament, of the time of Christ and of later ages right up to our own day"(...) "our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that genius which belongs to women and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance."⁸ Let me continue with St. Josemaria's words:

"What I have just said does not go against her participating in other aspects of social life including politics. In these spheres, too, women can offer a valuable personal contribution, without neglecting their special feminine qualities (...). Both family and society clearly need this special contribution, (...) If she is a mature person, with a character and mind of her own, she will indeed accomplish the mission to which she feels called, whatever it may be. Her life and work will be really constructive, fruitful and full of meaning, whether she spends the day dedicated to her husband and children or whether,(...) she has given herself (...) to other tasks."⁹

The Founder of Opus Dei had the opportunity to demonstrate in deeds that he thoroughly stood by what he says in the above quote. Working with the first women who joined Opus Dei in their youth, many coming from countries where perhaps women and university studies were not yet a popular combination... he encouraged his daughters to pursue their careers and to aim at the highest degrees they could obtain. He suggested numerous initiatives which made them employ their talents, learn new skills and discover some they never knew they had. His trust was complete. I remember, after he entrusted

⁷ Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá n. 87

⁸ John Paul II: *Mulieris Dignitatem* n. 30

^{8 9} Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá n. 87

me with a responsible job in the government of Opus Dei in the USA, he asked my opinion about a change that had been suggested to him in its structure and location. I was surprised at his question, -I was in my twenties at the time- but he said: "***you are the one who works there and what you think is important to me.***"

Obviously, we grew up and took his trust seriously. On the other hand he taught us to depend on God's grace. He would say that yes, he was asking for the impossible. But the possible anyone could do. God –and prayer- could do the impossible. Trust in God and daring to embark in ambitious goals and projects was always combined with a deep humility: we are only instruments in God's hands. As long as you are willing to "let Him do", things will happen! But our cooperation is necessary. And so it is in every field of human endeavor. Go to it, not as a lone ranger, seeking to do "your thing". Accept the destiny God has planned for you from all eternity: accept the challenge to seek Him, to seek holiness and to be his instrument to bring about the transformation He wants to carry out in your place of work!

And now you could tell me, How does what you are telling us apply to us,

American women in the 21st Century? I would like to answer with a few questions.

Do you think that young women in our society need role models, yes or no? If the answer is, as I believe it is, YES, my second question is: who should be those role models? Someone exotic person, they will never succeed in emulating? Or someone whose life will inspire and uplift their own? You know the answer. We have a nation in search for its soul. We have young families that want to make it but need to learn how, need inspiring examples of what it means to give oneself, of sacrifice accepted gladly for those we love. Holiness is not doing things that are increasingly difficult, but doing the same things over and over, with greater love. How can we influence our world?

Transformation must begin within the heart of individuals. Are we willing to settle for less, if getting more would jeopardize our Christian life? Are we honest even when the consequences could create discomfort? In our professional work, are we known as a reliable, kind, competent, helpful persons? Do we say the right word, at the right moment, to the right person, but keep silent or turn a conversation a different way when appropriate? Do we show with our lives that it is well worth our time and effort to take care of those around us? And at the same time, teach and demand, forming those under us without compromise.

People speak about a crisis of faith. This gives place to a crisis of hope. And eventually it becomes a crisis of love. We are there already: individuals in our society seem to become ever more hopelessly self centered. As Christian women, with a vocation to greatness –because what could be greater than to be called to follow Christ?- we can make a difference, beginning in our own home and workplace. Each home is a focus of light and warmth that can reach out and light up those around it. And the respect you earn at work, regardless of what your profession is, will in turn guide those coming after you, inviting them to do likewise. All one needs, in most cases, is the example of someone who has gone ahead and proved that it is possible.

At times we think that “our circumstances” are different. That is all fine and wonderful for him: he was a priest; he was born in Spain when it was so Catholic!, he lived in Rome... he was surrounded by people with a vocation... He was a saint! Yes. All that is true, but he was not born a priest: he became one because he wanted to be available for God’s design. Are we willing to give up a personal plan, when God’s interests demand it? He was a priest in Spain during the civil war, when it was sufficient reason to be hung! And, as he repeatedly taught, we all have that vocation to holiness, inherent in Baptism. He was not a born saint: he became one. The challenge facing us is essentially the same that faced him. And he sets us an example on how to respond. Here is a warning he left for us: ***“A fundamental error against which you must be on guard is to think that the noble and just customs and needs of your times and environment cannot be directed and accommodated to the holiness of the moral teaching of Jesus Christ.***

Notice that I have specified that the customs and needs should be “noble and just”. If they are not, they lack the right to be adopted by citizens.”¹⁰¹⁰

Don’t be afraid to go against the current, and use your Christian principles as a guide: we must uphold our convictions. We must bring Christ’s Word to the public sphere, and recover for society the moral and spiritual climate that leads to God.

This is how John Paul II put it, during the homily delivered at St. Peter’s Square the day of the Canonization: *“This is a message that has abundant and fruitful implications for the evangelizing mission of the Church. It fosters the Christianization of the world “from within”, showing that there can be no conflict between the divine law and the*

^{10 10} St. J. Escrivá, Furrow n. 307

demands of genuine human progress. The saintly priest taught that Christ must be the apex of all human activity (cf. John 12:32). His message impels the Christian to act in places where the future of society is being shaped. From the laity's active presence in all the professions and at the most advanced frontiers of development, there can only come a positive contribution to the strengthening of that harmony between faith and culture which is one of the great needs of our time."

I have called this talk: "The Greatest Revolution of All Times". St Josemaría wrote: ***"Religion is the greatest rebellion of men, who refuse to live like animals, who are dissatisfied and restless until they know their Creator and are on intimate terms with Him"***¹¹¹¹ And I would like to finish quoting a phrase with which he greeted a group of young people who traveled to meet him in Rome, during Easter, 1973: ***"Si estáis aquí, es porque sois unos rebeldes encantadores."*** ***"Your being here means you are charming rebels!!"***

The End.

^{11 11} St. J. Escrivá, friends of God n. 38