

"Passionately Loving the World" St. Josemaria Escriva

(Also available in the book [In Love with the Church, St. Josemaria Escriva, Scepter Publishers, 2007](#))

You have just been listening to the solemn reading of the two texts of Sacred Scripture for the Mass of the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost. Having heard the Word of God you are already in the right atmosphere for the words I want to address to you: words of a priest, spoken to a large family of the children of God in his Holy Church. Words, therefore, which are intended to be supernatural, proclaiming the greatness of God and his mercies towards men; words to prepare you for today's great celebration of the Eucharist on the campus of the University of Navarre.

Consider for a moment the event I have just described. We are celebrating the holy Eucharist, the sacramental sacrifice of the Body and Blood of our Lord, that mystery of faith which binds together all the mysteries of Christianity. We are celebrating, therefore, the most sacred and transcendent act which we, men and women, with God's grace can carry out in this life: receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord is, in a certain sense, like loosening our ties with earth and time, so as to be already with God in heaven, where Christ himself will wipe the tears from our eyes and where there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor cries of distress, because the old world will have passed away.

This profound and consoling truth, which theologians usually call the eschatological meaning of the Eucharist, could, however, be misunderstood. Indeed, this has happened whenever people have tried to present the Christian way of life as something exclusively spiritual — or better, spiritualistic something reserved for pure, extraordinary people who remain aloof from the contemptible things of this world, or at most tolerate them as something that the spirit just has to live alongside, while we are on this earth. When people take this approach, churches become the setting par excellence of the Christian way of life. And being a Christian means going to church, taking part in sacred ceremonies, getting into an ecclesiastical mentality, in a special kind of world, considered the ante-chamber to heaven, while the ordinary world follows its own separate course. In this case, Christian teaching and the life of grace would pass by, brushing very lightly against the turbulent advance of human history but never coming into proper contact with it.

On this October morning, as we prepare to enter upon the memorial of our Lord's Pasch, we flatly reject this deformed vision of Christianity. Reflect for a moment on the setting of our Eucharist, of our Act of Thanksgiving. We find ourselves in a unique temple; we might say that the nave is the University campus; the altarpiece, the University library; over there, the machinery for constructing new buildings; above us, the sky of Navarre...

Surely this confirms in your minds, in a tangible and unforgettable way, the fact that everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians. Your daily encounter with Christ takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.

This I have been teaching all the time, using words from Holy Scripture: the world is not evil, because it comes from the hands of God, because it is his creation, because Yahweh looked upon it and saw that it was good. It is we ourselves, men and women, who make it evil and ugly with our sins and unfaithfulness. Don't doubt it, my children: any attempt to escape from the noble reality of daily life is, for you men and women of the world, something opposed to the will of God.

On the contrary, you must realize now, more clearly than ever, that God is calling you to serve him in and from the ordinary, secular and civil activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.

I often said to the university students and workers who were with me in the 'thirties that they had to know how to materialize their spiritual lives. I wanted to warn them of the temptation, so common then and now, to lead a kind of double life: on the one hand, an inner life, a life related to God; and on the other, as something separate and distinct, their professional, social and family lives, made up of small earthly realities.

No, my children! We cannot lead a double life. We cannot be like schizophrenics, if we want to be Christians. There is only one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is that life which has to become, in both body and soul, holy and filled with God: we discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.

There is no other way, my daughters and sons: either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or we shall never find him. That is why I tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the apparently trivial events of life their noble, original meaning. It needs to place them at the service of the Kingdom of God; it needs to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ.

The genuine Christian approach — which professes the resurrection of all flesh — has always quite logically opposed 'dis-incarnation' without fear of being judged materialistic. We can, therefore, rightly speak of a Christian materialism, which is boldly opposed to those materialisms which are blind to the spirit.

What are the sacraments, which people in early times described as the footprints of the Incarnate Word, if not the clearest expression of this way which God has chosen in order to sanctify us and to lead us to heaven? Don't you see that each sacrament is the love of God, with all its creative and redemptive power, given to us through the medium of material things? What is this Eucharist which we are about to celebrate if not the Adorable Body and Blood of our Redeemer, which is offered to us through the lowly matter of this world (wine and bread), through the elements of nature, cultivated by man as the recent Ecumenical Council has reminded us.

It is understandable, my children, that the Apostle should write: All things are yours, you are Christ's and Christ is God's. We have here an ascending movement which the Holy Spirit, poured into our hearts, wants to call forth in this world: upwards from the earth to the glory of the Lord. And to make it clear that in such a movement everything is included, even what seems most commonplace, St. Paul also wrote: in eating, in drinking, do everything for God's glory.

This doctrine of Sacred Scripture, as you know, is to be found in the very core of the spirit of Opus Dei. It should lead you to do your work perfectly, to love God and your fellowmen by putting love in the little things of everyday life, and discovering that divine something which is hidden in small details. The lines of a Castilian poet are especially appropriate here: "Write slowly and with a careful hand, for doing things well is more important than doing them."

I assure you, my children, that when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God. That is why I have told you so often, and hammered away at it, that the Christian vocation consists in making heroic verse out of the prose of each day. Heaven and earth seem to merge, my children, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives...

I have just said, sanctify your everyday lives. And with these words I refer to the whole program of your task as Christians. Stop dreaming. Leave behind false idealisms, fantasies, and what I usually call mystical wishful thinking: If only I hadn't married; if only I had a different job or qualification; if only I were in better health; if only I were younger; if only I were older. Instead, turn to the most material and immediate reality, which is where our Lord is: Look at my hands and my feet, said the risen Jesus, be assured that it is myself; touch me and see; a spirit has no flesh and bones, as you see that I have.

Light is shed upon many aspects of the world in which you live, when you start from these truths. Take your activity as citizens, for instance. A man who knows that the world — and not just the Church — is the place where he finds Christ, loves that world. He endeavors to become properly trained, intellectually and professionally. He makes up his own mind, in full freedom, about the problems of the environment in which he moves, and he takes his own decisions in consequence. As the decisions of a Christian, they derive from personal reflection, which strives in all humility to grasp the will of God in both the unimportant and the important events of his life.

But it never occurs to such a Christian to think or say that he was stepping down from the temple into the world to represent the Church, or that his solutions are the Catholic solutions to the problems. That would be completely inadmissible! That would be clericalism, official Catholicism, or whatever you want to call it. In any case, it means doing violence to the very nature of things. What you must do is foster a real lay mentality, which will lead to three conclusions:—be honorable enough to shoulder your own personal responsibility;— be Christian enough to respect those brothers in the faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from yours; and,— be Catholic enough not to make a tool of our Mother the Church, involving her in human factions.

It is obvious that, in this field as in all others, you would not be able to carry out this program of sanctifying your everyday life if you did not enjoy all the freedom which proceeds from your dignity as men and women created in the image of God, and which the Church freely recognizes. Personal freedom is essential for the Christian life. But do not forget, my sons, that I always speak of a responsible freedom.

Interpret, then, my words as what they are: a call to exercise your rights every day, and not just in times of emergency. A call to fulfill honorably 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 shouldering the personal independence which is yours. A Christian lay outlook of this sort will enable you to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism. To put it positively way, it will help you live in peace with all your fellow citizens, and to promote understanding and harmony in the various spheres of social life.

I know I have no need to remind you of something which I have been saying for so many years. This doctrine of civic freedom, of understanding, of living in harmony with other people, forms a very important part of the message spread by Opus Dei. Must I affirm once again that the men and women who want to serve Jesus Christ in the Work of God, are simply citizens the same as everyone else, who strive to live their Christian vocation to its ultimate consequences with a deep sense of responsibility?

Nothing distinguishes my children from their fellow citizens. On the other hand, apart from the faith they share, they have nothing in common with the members of religious congregations. I love the religious, and I venerate and admire their apostolates, their cloister, their separation from the world, their *contemptus mundi*, which are other signs of holiness in the Church. But the Lord has not given me a religious vocation, and for me to desire it would not be in order. No authority on earth can force me to be a religious, just as no authority can make me marry. I am a secular priest: a priest of Jesus Christ who is passionately in love with the world.

These are the men and women who have followed Jesus Christ in the company of this poor sinner: a small percentage of priests, who have previously exercised a secular profession or trade; a large number of secular priests from many dioceses throughout the world, who in this way confirm their obedience to their respective bishops, their love for their diocesan work and the effectiveness of it. Their arms are always wide open, in the form of a cross, to make room in their hearts for all souls; and like myself they live in the hustle and bustle of the workaday world which they love. And finally, a great multitude made up of men and women of different nations, and tongues, and races, who earn their living with their work. Most of them are married, many others single; they share with their fellow citizens in the important task of making temporal society more human and more just. And they work as I have said, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow men, experiencing with them successes and failures in the noble struggle of daily endeavor, as they strive to fulfill their duties and to exercise their social and civic rights. And all this with naturalness, like any other conscientious Christian, without considering themselves special. Blended into the mass of their companions, they try at the same time to detect the flashes of divine splendor which shine through the commonest everyday realities.

Similarly the activities which are promoted by Opus Dei as an association have these eminently secular characteristics: they are not ecclesiastical activities — they do not in any way represent the hierarchy of the Church. They are the fruit of human, cultural and social initiatives of ordinary citizens who try to make them reflect the light of the Gospel and to bring them the warmth of Christ's love. An example which will help to make this clear is that Opus Dei does not, and never will, undertake the task of directing diocesan seminaries, in which bishops instituted by the Holy Spirit train their future priests.

Opus Dei on the other hand, does foster technical training centers for industrial workers, agricultural training schools for farm laborers, centers for primary, secondary and university education, and many other varied activities all over the world, because its apostolic zeal, as I wrote many years ago, is like a sea without shores.

But what need have I to speak at length on this topic, when your very presence here is more eloquent than a long address? You, Friends of the University of Navarre, are part of a body of people who know it is committed to the progress of the broader society to which it belongs. Your sincere encouragement, your prayers, sacrifices and contributions are not offered on the basis of Catholic confessionalism. Your cooperation is a clear testimony of a well-formed social conscience, which is concerned with the temporal common good. You are witnesses to the fact that a university can be born of the energies of the people and be sustained by the people.

On this occasion, I want to offer my thanks once again for the cooperation lent to our University, by my noble city of Pamplona, by the region of Navarre, by the Friends of the University from every part of Spain and — I say this with particular feeling — by people who are not Spaniards, even by people who are not Catholics or Christians, who have understood the purpose and spirit of this enterprise and have shown it with their active help.

Thanks to all of them this University has grown ever more effective as a focus of civic freedom, of intellectual training, of professional endeavor, and a stimulus for university education generally. Your generous sacrifice is part of the foundation of this whole undertaking which seeks to promote the human sciences, social welfare and the teaching of the faith.

What I have just pointed out has been clearly understood by the people of Navarre, who also recognize that their University is a factor in the economic development and, especially, in the social advancement of the region; a factor which has given so many of their children an opportunity to enter the intellectual professions which, otherwise, would have been difficult and, in some cases, impossible to obtain. This awareness of the role which the University would play in their lives is surely what inspired the support which Navarre has lent it from the beginning — support which will undoubtedly keep on growing in enthusiasm and extent.

I continue to harbor the hope — because it accords both with the requirements of justice and with the practice which obtains in so many countries — that the time will come when the Spanish government will contribute its share to lighten the burden of an undertaking which seeks no private profit, but on the contrary is totally dedicated to the service of society, and tries to work efficiently for the present and future prosperity of the nation.

And now, my sons and daughters, let me consider another aspect of everyday life which is particularly dear to me. I refer to human love, to the noble love between a man and a woman, to courtship and marriage. I want to say once again that this holy human love is not something to be merely permitted or tolerated alongside the true activities of the spirit, as might be insinuated by those false spiritualisms which I referred to earlier. I have been preaching and writing just the very opposite for forty years, and now those who did not understand are beginning to grasp the point.

Love, which leads to marriage and family, can also be a marvelous divine way, a vocation, a path for a complete dedication to our God. Do things perfectly, I have reminded you. Put love into the little duties of each day; discover that divine something contained in these details. All this teaching has a special place in that area of life where human love has its setting.

All of you who are lecturers or students or who work in any capacity in the University of Navarre know that I have entrusted your love to Mary, Mother of Fair Love. And here, on the university campus, you have the shrine which we built so devoutly, as a place to receive your prayers and the offering of that wonderful and pure love on which she bestows her blessing.

Surely you know that your bodies are the shrines of the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to you, so that you are no longer your own masters? How often, before the statue of the Blessed Virgin, of the Mother of Fair Love, will you not reply to the Apostle's question with a joyful affirmation: Yes, we know that this is so and we want to live it with your powerful help, O Virgin Mother of God.

Contemplative prayer will rise within you whenever you meditate on this impressive truth: something as material as my body has been chosen by the Holy Spirit as his dwelling place... I no longer belong to myself... My body and soul, my whole being, belong to God... And this prayer will be rich in practical results arising from the great consequence which the Apostle himself suggests: glorify God in your bodies.

Besides, you cannot fail to realize that only among those who understand and value in all its depth what we have just considered about human love, can there arise another ineffable insight of which Jesus speaks: an insight which is a pure gift of God, moving a person to surrender body and soul to the Lord, to offer him an undivided heart, without the mediation of earthly love.

I must finish now, my children. I said at the beginning that I wanted to tell you something of the greatness and mercy of God. I think I have done so in speaking to you about sanctifying your everyday life. A holy life in the midst of secular affairs, lived without fuss, with simplicity, with truthfulness: is this not today the most moving manifestation of the *magnalia Dei*, of those prodigious mercies which God has always worked and still works, in order to save the world?

Now, with the Psalmist I ask you to join in my prayer and in my praise: *Magnificate Dominum mecum, et extollamus nomen eius simul* — praise the Lord with me, let us extol his name together. In other words, my children, let us live by faith.

Let us take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's Word. That is what St. Paul encourages us to do in the epistle to the Ephesians, which was read in the liturgy a few moments ago.

Faith is a virtue which we Christians greatly need, and in a special way in this 'Year of Faith' which our beloved Holy Father Pope Paul VI has decreed. For, without faith, we lack the very foundation for the sanctification of ordinary life.

A living faith in these moments, because we are drawing near to the *mysterium fidei*, to the Holy Eucharist: because we are about to participate in our Lord's Pasch, which sums up and effects the mercies of God towards men.

Faith, my children, in order to acknowledge that within a few moments the work of our Redemption is going to be renewed on this altar. Faith, to savor the Creed and to experience, around this altar and in this Assembly, the presence of Christ, who makes us *cor unum et anima una*, one heart and one soul and transforms us into a family, a Church which is one, holy, Catholic, apostolic and Roman, which for us is the same as saying universal.

Faith, finally, my beloved daughters and sons, to show the world that all this is not just ceremonies and words, but a divine reality, as we present to mankind the testimony of an ordinary life made holy, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and of Holy Mary.