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Homily: "Passionately Loving the World"

A 1967 homily by the founder of Opus Dei that encapsulates his teachings, taken from "Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá," Scepter, 2002.

03/03/2006

(Homily given by Saint Josemaría Escrivá at the University of Navarra on October 8, 1967)

You have just listened to the solemn reading of the two texts of Holy

Scripture which correspond to the Mass of the 21st Sunday after Pentecost. Having heard the Word of God you are already in the atmosphere in which I wish to situate the words I now address to you. They are intended to be supernatural, proclaiming the greatness of God and His mercies towards men. Words to prepare you for the wonder of the Eucharist, which we celebrate today on the campus of the University of Navarra.

Think for a moment about what I have just said. We are celebrating the Holy Eucharist, the sacramental Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of our Lord, that Mystery of Faith which links all the mysteries of Christianity. We are celebrating, therefore, the most sacred and transcendent act which man, with the grace of God, can carry out in this life. To communicate with the Body and Blood of our Lord is, in a certain

sense, like loosening the bonds of earth and time, in order 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 (cf. *Rev* 21:4).

This profound and consoling truth, which theologians call the eschatological significance of the Eucharist could however, be misunderstood. And indeed it has been, whenever men have tried to present the Christian way of life as something exclusively “spiritual,” proper to pure, extraordinary people, who remain aloof from the contemptible things of this world or at most, tolerate them as something necessarily attached to the spirit, while we live on this earth.

When things are seen in this way, churches become the setting *par excellence* of the Christian life. And being a Christian means going to church, taking part in sacred ceremonies, being taken up with ecclesiastical matters, in a kind of segregated world, which is considered to be the ante-chamber of heaven, while the ordinary world follows its own separate path. The doctrine of Christianity and the life of grace would, in this case, brush past the turbulent march of human history, without ever really meeting 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 Navarra....

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 ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. There you have your daily encounter with Christ. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.

I have taught this constantly, using words from Holy Scripture. The world is not evil, because it has come from God's hands, because it is His creation, because "Yahweh looked upon it and saw that it was good" (cf. *Gen* 1:7ff). We ourselves, mankind,

make it evil and ugly with our sins and infidelities. Have no doubt: any kind of evasion of the honest realities of daily life is for you, men and women of the world, something opposed to the will of God.

On the contrary, you must understand now, more clearly, that God is calling you to serve Him *in and from* the ordinary, material and secular 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 “materialise” their spiritual life. I wanted to keep them from the temptation, so common then and now, of living a kind of double life. On one side, an interior life, a life of relation with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life, full of small earthly realities.

No! We cannot lead a double life if we want to be Christians. 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. We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.

There is no other way. Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him. That is why I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial

occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ.

Authentic Christianity, which professes the resurrection of all flesh, has always quite logically opposed “dis-incarnation,” without fear of being judged materialistic. We can, therefore, rightfully speak of a “Christian materialism,” which is boldly opposed to that materialism which is blind to the spirit.

What are the Sacraments, which early Christians described as the foot-prints of the Incarnate Word, if not the clearest manifestation 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, giving itself to us by way of material means? 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 (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 38).

It is understandable that the Apostle should write: “All things are yours, you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3:22-23). We have here an ascending movement which the Holy Spirit, infused in our hearts, wants to call forth from this world, upwards from the earth to the glory of the Lord. And to make it clear that in that movement everything is included, even what seems most commonplace, St. Paul also wrote:

“in eating, in drinking, do everything as for God’s glory” (cf. *1 Cor* 10:32).

This doctrine of Holy Scripture, as you know, is to be found in the very nucleus of the spirit of Opus Dei. It leads you to do your work as perfectly as possible, to love God and mankind 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” (Machado, A., *Poesías Completas, CLXI — Proverbios y cantares, XXIV*, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1940).

I assure you, my sons and daughters, 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 repeatedly, and hammered away once and again on the idea that the Christian vocation consists of making heroic verse out of the prose of each day. Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons and daughters, 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 idealism, fantasies, and what I usually call mystical wishful thinking: if only I hadn't married, if only I hadn't this profession, if only I were healthier, if only I were young, if only I were old.... Instead turn seriously 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 not flesh and bones, as you see that I have” (*Lk 24:29*).

Light is shed upon many aspects of the world in which you live, when we start from these truths. Think, for example, of you activity as citizens. A man who knows that the world, and not just the church, is the place where he finds Christ, loves that world. He endeavours to become properly formed, intellectually and professionally. He makes up his own mind with complete freedom about the problems of the environment in which he moves, and then he makes his own decisions. Being the decisions of a Christian, they result from personal reflection, in which he endeavours, in all humility, to grasp the Will of God in both the unimportant and the important events of his life.

But it would never occur to such a Christian to think or to 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 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. You must foster everywhere a genuine “lay outlook,” which will lead to three conclusions: be sufficiently honest, so as to shoulder one’s own personal responsibility; be sufficiently Christian, so as to respect those brothers in the Faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from those which each one of us maintains; and be sufficiently Catholic so as not to use our Mother the Church, involving her in human factions.

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 recognises. Personal freedom is essential to the Christian life. But do not forget, my children, 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 merely in time of emergency. A call to fulfil honourably your commitments as citizens, in all fields — in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job — accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence which corresponds to each one of you. A Christian “lay outlook” of this sort will enable you

to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism. To put it in a positive way, it will help you to live in peace with all your fellow citizens, and to promote this understanding and harmony in all spheres of social life.

I know I have no need to remind you of what I have been repeating for so many years. This doctrine of civic freedom, of understanding, of living together in harmony, forms a very important part of the message of 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 serious 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 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 be a disorder. No authority on earth can force me to be a religious, just as no authority can force me to marry. I am a secular priest: a priest of Jesus Christ who is passionately in love with the world.

Who are the men and women who have accompanied this poor sinner, following Christ? 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 thus strengthen their obedience to their respective bishops, increase their

love for their diocesan work, and make it more effective. They stand with their arms open in the form of a Cross so that all souls may always find shelter in their hearts, and like me 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 professional work. The majority of them are married, many are single. They share with their fellow citizens the important task of making temporal society more human and more just.

They work, let me repeat, with personal responsibility, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow men and experiencing with them successes and failures in the noble struggle of daily endeavour, as they strive to fulfil 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 splendour which shine through the commonest everyday realities.

Similarly the activities which are promoted by Opus Dei, as an association, also 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, carried out by citizens who try to make them reflect the Gospel's light and to enkindle them with 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 the bishops "constituted by the Holy

Spirit” (Acts 20:28), prepare their future priests.

Opus Dei, on the other hand, fosters technical training centres for industrial workers, agricultural training schools for farm labourers, centres 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 prolonged discourse? You, Friends of the University of Navarre, are part of a body of people who know they are committed to the progress of the society to which they belong. Your sincere encouragement, your prayers, sacrifice and contributions are not offered on the basis of Catholic denominationalism. Your

cooperation is a clear testimony of a well-formed civic consciousness, which is concerned with the common temporal 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 the 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 gratitude, by non-Spaniards and even non-Catholics and non-Christians who have understood the intention and spirit of this enterprise and have shown it with their deeds.

Thanks to all of them this university has become a source, which grows day by day, of civic freedom, of intellectual preparation, of professional emulation, and a

stimulus for university education. Your generous sacrifice is part of the foundations of all this work which seeks the development of human knowledge, of social welfare and of the teaching of the Faith.

What I have just pointed out has been clearly understood by the people of Navarre, who also recognise 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 grow continually in enthusiasm and extent.

I continue to harbour a hope, which corresponds to justice and to the living experience of many countries, that the time will come when the Spanish government will contribute its share to lighten the burden of a task 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 for a moment, 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 merely to be permitted or tolerated alongside the true activities of the spirit, as might be insinuated by false spiritualism to which I alluded previously. I have

been preaching just the contrary, in speech and in writing, 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 marvellous divine way, a vocation, a path for a complete dedication to our God. What I have told you about doing things perfectly, about putting love into the little duties of each day, about discovering that “divine something” contained in these details, finds a special place in that vital sphere in which human love is enclosed.

All of you who are professors or students or work in any capacity in the University of Navarra, know that I have entrusted your love to holy Mary, Mother of Fair Love. And here on the university campus you have the shrine which we built with

devotion, as a place where you may pray to her and offer that wonderful pure love on which she bestows her blessing.

“Surely you know that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, Who is God’s gift to you, so that you are no longer your own masters?” (*1 Cor 6:19*). How many times, in front of the statue of the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of Fair Love, will you reply with a joyful affirmation, to the Apostle’s question: Yes, we know that this is so and we want, with your powerful help, to live it, O Virgin Mother of God!

Contemplative prayer will rise within you whenever you meditate on this impressive reality: 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, belongs to God... And this prayer will

be rich in practical consequences, drawn from the great consequence which the Apostle himself proposed: “glorify God in your bodies” (*1 Cor* 6:20).

On the other hand, you cannot fail to be aware that only among those who understand and value in all its depth what we have just considered about human love, can there arise that other ineffable understanding of which Jesus spoke (cf. *Mt* 19:11). It is a pure gift of God which moves one to surrender body and soul to our Lord, to offer him an undivided heart, without the mediation of earthly love.

I must finish now. I told you at the beginning that I wanted to announce to you something of the greatness and mercy of God. I think I have done so, in talking to you about sanctifying your everyday life. A holy life in the midst of secular reality,

lived without fuss, with simplicity, with truthfulness. Is this not today the most moving manifestation of the *magnalia Dei* (Sir 18:5), of those prodigious mercies which God has always worked, and does not cease to work, in order to save the world?

Now I ask you with the Psalmist to unite yourselves to my prayer and my praise: *Magnificate Dominum mecum, et extollamus nomen eius simul*: “Praise the Lord with me, let us extol His name together” (Ps 33:4). In other words, dearly beloved, let us live by Faith.

Let us take up the Shield of Faith, the Helmet of Salvation and the Sword of the Spirit, which are God’s Word, as St. Paul encourages us to do in the Epistle to the Ephesians (6:11ff), which was read in the liturgy a few moments ago.

Faith is a virtue which we Christians need greatly, 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 everyday life.

A living Faith in these moments, because we are drawing near to the *mysterium fidei* (1 Tim 3:9), to the Holy Eucharist; because we are about to participate in our Lord’s Pasch, which sums up and brings about the mercies of God among men.

Faith, my sons, in order to acknowledge that within a few moments upon this altar “the Work of our Redemption” is going to be renewed. Faith, so as to savour the Creed and to experience, upon this altar and in this Assembly, the presence of Christ, Who makes us *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32), one heart and one soul, a family, a Church which is One, Holy, Catholic,

Apostolic and Roman, which for us means the same as 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, by presenting to mankind the testimony of an ordinary life which is made holy, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and of holy Mary.

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(08/05/2025)