One Way to Understand the Significance of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá

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Professor Matlary does a masterful job of capturing the main elements of Blessed Josemaría Escriva's teaching about work as a path to holiness: the centrality of prayer for the sanctification of work; the difference between divine judgments and dominant contemporary cultural judgments about what sorts of work are significant; the distinction between work that is in fact sanctified and work that is merely sanctifiable; the idea that sanctified work is service and above all an expression of filial love for our Father God; and, finally—in the same vein—the intimate connection between sanctified work and the cross of Jesus Christ.

Since I accept the fundamental theological convictions on which Matlary's paper is premised and find little else to contest, I want to spend my allotted time reflecting on a few points occasioned by the autobiographical remarks she makes about the joyfulness of her discovery of the writings of Josemaría Escrivá and about her progressively more penetrating understanding of those writings. Her remarks strike a deep chord with those many of us who have had similar experiences, even if we cannot articulate them as well as Matlary has. My goal is to provide a philosophical and historical context within which to understand the effect Josemaría Escrivá has had on our lives.

As is evident from the Acts of the Apostles, at the very beginning of Church history, the Gospel was preached mainly as the fulfillment of the aspirations of the people of Israel. But as the Holy Father points out in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the search for the the way, the truth, and the life has been common to all times and cultures. And so once the Apostles and early Fathers began to come into contact with intellectually sophisticated Gentiles, it was not long before the Gospel was being presented to the pagan world as the fulfillment of the aspirations of the many philosophical movements which had sprung up around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. Jesus Christ himself was now being portrayed as the true Philosopher, the one who teaches and guides us to genuine wisdom.

Within the world of the Roman Empire, for an earnest seeker after wisdom to embrace a philosophy or philosophical school was for him to adopt not only an expansive theoretical account of the world's origins and destiny and of the human condition, but also a set of practices meant to bring him to human fulfillment as understood by that theoretical account. These practices were in intent both positive, including especially the cultivation of good habits, and negative, aimed at rooting out bad habits and preparing the aspirant to avoid typical pitfalls and to withstand typical temptations. The ideal was that there should be a perfect complementarity between theory and practice: The theoretical framework was meant to validate and sustain the practices, and the cultivation of the practices was meant in part to deepen the aspirant's intellectual grasp of the theoretical framework. In short, the philosophy of a serious-minded lover of wisdom constituted a comprehensive way of life and required extensive doctrinal and moral training.

So, for instance, when Augustine became inflamed with the love for wisdom by his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, he did not react by simply taking a few philosophy courses at his local college. Instead, he joined the Manicheans as a catechumen, submitting himself to the discipline of the Manichean way of life, replete with its demanding doctrinal and moral formation. Afterwards, when he

grew closer to Christianity, he did not go off on his own, but joined together with other like-minded men in a communal life of study and prayer.

In the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes that Christianity is "Platonism for the masses." Without giving a blanket endorsement to Nietzsche's sometimes insightful and sometimes bizarre ruminations about Christianity, and keeping in mind that at least Stoicism can in some sense claim a similarly wide appeal (as Tom Wolfe reminds us rather comically in *A Man in Full*, in which Epictetus plays a central role), we can at least acknowledge that the Christian faith makes available to people of all stripes what, according to many of the classical philosophical schools, would otherwise have been available only to those with a highly unusual combination of intellectual and moral excellence—namely, the pinnacle of human fulfillment. More specifically, the Christian ideal of the life of the saint, which supplants the classical ideal of the philosophical life, is available to the simple as well as to the intellectually gifted, to the poor as well as to the leisured elite. In fact, according to Christian revelation, the pagan ideal of intellectual and moral excellence was never really possible for human beings left to our own resources. It was only through the inner transformation of grace, elevating us from the status of mere creatures to that of, literally, sons and daughters of our Father God, that the pagan dream could be realized. For only this transformation, made available to us through the merits of Jesus Christ, effected by the Sacraments of the Church, and nurtured through prayer and good works, could heal and elevate our minds and hearts in such a way as to make genuine human fulfillment possible.

So right from the beginning of the Church's existence, the Christian way was presented as a full-fledged alternative to the culturally indigenous sapiential ways of the philosophers—be they Platonists or neo-Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Manicheans, or whatever.

What I have said so far is, of course, an oversimplification, because as a matter of fact the Church is a "big place," as we say, and the history of the Church has witnessed the development of a wide variety of so-called 'spiritualities', all of them centered around sound doctrine, the sacraments, and prayer, but each with its own distinctive emphases and customs tailored to the particular style of life characteristic of its adherents. We have probably all at least heard of Carmelite spirituality, and Dominican spirituality, and Franciscan spirituality, and Benedictine spirituality, and Ignatian spirituality, among many others. In essence, these 'spiritualities' were providing their adherents with a precise analogue of the detailed ways of life proposed by the pagan schools of wisdom, but now within the framework of revealed Christian faith and morals.

I must confess, though, that I do not much care for the term 'spirituality'. It is symptomatic, I believe, of a distortion in our way of thinking about distinctively Christian ways of life, a distortion that rends asunder what Thomas Aquinas, synthesizing the writings of his predecessors, had joined ineluctably together—namely the pursuit of human fulfillment or perfection, on the one hand, and conformity with, or obedience to, the will of God, on the other. In his magisterial work *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Servais Pinckaers argues that the post-reformation period witnessed an ominous split between 'morality', conceived of as obedience to divine law, and 'spirituality', conceived of as the pursuit of perfection or holiness, along with a concomitant split at the level of theory between moral theology and so-called 'spiritual' or ('ascetical') theology. (My own good bishop has a doctorate in the latter.) As with so much else in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the historical explanation for this split is complex and controversial. (Let me just register my disagreement with various aspects of Pinckaers's own explanation.) But there is little gainsaying the effect itself, and it is an effect that helps to illuminate both the resistance that Josemaría Escrivá met in trying to establish Opus Dei as a canonical part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and also the magnitude of his accomplishment.

Given the split in question, the so-called 'moral life' easily comes to be conceived of as the observance of obligations and prohibitions that themselves easily come to be thought of as merely externally related to the reward of heavenly bliss. An analogy: Suppose that in a moment of exasperated weakness, I say to my 11-year-old son, "OK, clean your room and you can have some ice cream." Cleaning his room doesn't transform him into the sort of person who appreciates ice cream; nor in this case does it help him become someone who loves his parents more deeply. Rather, the ice cream serves as an inducement for obeying an unpleasant paternal demand, a bribe that appeals to his antecedent self-interested desires. So, too, moral uprightness can come to be seen as merely the unpleasant requirement for getting an eternal reward, the desire for which requires no deep internal transformation. The special concern of moral theology then tends to become what one has a right to expect as a minimum from an ordinary Christian motivated by narrow self-interest. Given such a background, casuistry takes precedence over theory: "How far can I go without committing a sin?" But, the story continues, there will be some people who are dissatisfied with merely being morally upright. Like the rich young man of the Gospel story, they seek more; they want perfection or holiness, if you will. And this is where 'spirituality' comes in. Spiritual theology becomes the study of the various ways of life available to those few who wish to dedicate themselves to the attainment of perfection.

I do not want to give the wrong impression here. What I have just said is admittedly tendentious and one-sided as a comment on post-reformation Catholic moral theology. Still, it captures what I remember from my now distant youth to have been a widespread mentality. This mentality fit well with the fact that each of the 'spiritualities' mentioned above was tied to a religious order. And it is no surprise that for a long time anyone who exhibited a desire for perfection was presumed to have a religious vocation or at least a clerical vocation. The historical consequence was that, outside of a few hardy lay people who attached themselves to religious congregations through "third orders" that provided them with diluted versions of the spirituality of those congregations, lay people were generally thought to be ill-positioned to pursue Christian perfection. There were contrary voices, of course, the most notable being Francis De Sales in *An Introduction to the Devout Life*. But as I recall from my youth, the gospel story of the rich young man was generally interpreted in exactly the way I indicated above. The young man was doing enough to get to heaven, but Jesus asked of him something more than one could or should expect of a layman. (Old attitudes die hard: A priest of a young and very vibrant religious order was heard not long ago to remark that "Opus Dei expects too much of lay people.")

Well, things have changed, at least in the explicit teaching of the Church. Due in no small measure to the influence of Josemaría Escrivá, Vatican II affirmed the universality of the call to holiness, and the present Holy Father is leading the charge, so to speak. To my mind, the most startling indication of this occurs in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. The first chapter of this encyclical is an extended meditation on that very story of the rich young man and ties together in unmistakable fashion human fulfillment on the one hand and loving obedience to God's will on the other. But what really jolted me when I first read the encyclical was paragraph #18, which completely overthrows the exegesis I had learned in my youth. It's worth quoting in part:

> "This vocation to perfect love is not restricted to a small group of individuals. *The invitation*, 'go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor,' and the promise 'you will have treasure in heaven,' *are meant for everyone*, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, 'Come, follow me', is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God. Both the commandments and Jesus' invitation to the rich young man stand at the service of a single and indivisible charity, which spontaneously tends towards that perfection whose measure is God alone: 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (*Mt* 5:48)."

Like a modern day Catholic Epictetus, Josemaría Escrivá set down a way of life, described in some detail by Matlary, explicitly intended for ordinary lay people—a way grounded firmly in the teachings of the Church and yet flexible enough in its particulars to be adaptable to a life marked by the various demands of professional and family life. It is demanding, but love is demanding, as anyone with a family well knows. The Church teaches that all of us, including lay people, long deep down for more, just as the rich young man did. But unlike the rich young man, many of us, under the influence of Josemaría Escrivá, have not walked away sad. Like Matlary, we have been filled with joy at this piece of good news about the Good News.

Other ways for lay people to pursue holiness are possible and, indeed, the twentieth century saw the burgeoning of many lay movements, each making its own attempt at a 'lay spirituality'. Some will survive, others will not; by their fruits you will know them. But they all owe a debt of gratitude to Josemaría Escrivá, who not only recovered and promoted the lay vocation to holiness when it seemed like a novel idea, but, just as importantly, ultimately succeeded in making the personal prelature a permanent fixture in the canonical structure of the Church. But the latter is a tale for another time.