

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO SANCTITY

On one occasion, St Josemaría Escrivá quoted the Letter to the Ephesians 1:4, *Elegit nos in ipso ante mundi constitutionem ut essemus sancti et immaculati in conspectu eius, He chose us in himself before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his presence*. He then stated in characteristically strong, clear tones: *There is nothing greater than this!*¹ It was St Josemaría's way of expressing that the heart of the message he had come to proclaim was the universal call to holiness.

The People of Israel knew for certain that they were called to holiness because God is holy (cf. Lev 19: 2). However, it was only after many centuries that the highway to holiness was opened up, with the coming of the Messiah, when our Lord became incarnate. The Apostle St Thomas asked what the way was, and Jesus answered, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me* (John 14:6). With Baptism every Christian is called to holiness and apostolate by being incorporated into Christ's life – each and every Christian down through the centuries. For Christians, the universality of the call to holiness, which is central to the Gospel, shines a defining light on the whole of their lives. Through a special grace from God, that call was preached by St Josemaría from 1928 onwards. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed it solemnly: “All the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image, seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour.”²

1. Only God is holy

“Tu solus Sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus Altissimus, Iesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris –You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.” Proclaiming the divinity of Jesus Christ, the *Gloria* says that God alone is holy. Strictly speaking no human being is holy while still here on earth; we are on the way to the holiness that God wants to give us. Jesus Christ launched the call in these words: *You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matt 5:48). St Paul takes up this teaching when he writes to Timothy that God our Saviour *desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4). Perfection, eternal salvation, truth: all of these words lead back to God, He who alone is thrice holy, as the Hebrew superlative expresses it (cf. Is 6:3). This means that holiness is a share in God's life. God wants us to reach that holiness. It is God's doing, with each Christian's full, personal response. *Certainly our goal is both lofty and difficult to attain. But please do not forget that people are not born holy. Holiness is forged through a constant interplay of God's grace and the individual's response.*³

In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, the oldest document in the New Testament, St Paul was writing to recent converts who were suffering persecution. He told them, *This is the will of God: your*

¹ This incident, recalled by Mgr. Pedro Rodríguez, is corroborated by “*Notas de una meditación*”, 8 February 1959, AGP (General Archives of the Prelature), P06, II p. 669.

² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 40; cf. 39 and 41; Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, 35, 38, 48 etc. It should be pointed out that *Lumen Gentium* is dated 21 November 1964.

³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 7.

sanctification (1 Thess 4:3). This may sound startling. In full agreement with St Paul’s teaching (cf. Phil 4:13, *I can do all things in him who strengthens me*), St Josemaría, when describing the path to holiness, taught us to abandon ourselves quite simply into God’s hands. This attitude of childlike abandonment is fundamental. Jesus instilled it in his disciples in lots of ways, for example in these enchanting words:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day” (Matt 6: 25-34).

When he was on a spiritual retreat in Segovia, Spain, in October 1932, St Josemaría, then a young priest, noted that his confessor had suggested that he should ask himself, *What grade of perfection is God asking of me?*⁴ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo added a comment to this phrase in St Josemaría’s “*Intimate Notes*” as follows: “The ‘grade of perfection’, whether first class or second class or third class, was not something that interested St Josemaría. What he wanted was to do God’s Will in everything, and for our Lord to lead him to whichever level of perfection He desired for him; and so, letting himself be led to that height, whatever it was, our Father was happy, because he was fulfilling God’s Will.”⁵

God has *saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago* (2 Tim 1:9). Holiness is a share in Jesus Christ’s life. When we are grafted on to the life of the Son of God who became incarnate to save us, not only do we reach moral perfection, but at the same time we also share in Christ’s very being. This astonishing ontological fact led St John Paul II to state, “Through the grace received in baptism man participates in the eternal birth of the Son from the Father, since he becomes an adopted son of God: a son in the Son.”⁶

2. What is holiness?

Benedict XVI taught that “holiness is measured by the stature that Christ achieves in us, by the degree to which, with the strength of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life according to his.”⁷ Accordingly, there are three different aspects of the word “holiness”, or “sanctity”, as applied to human beings. A person is “holy” from baptism onwards, because they have received a sharing in the divine nature.⁸ Secondly, if they act uprightly and virtuously, they have “holiness of life”, or a holy moral life. And thirdly, holiness can be seen as a goal, since nobody is holy in this life – there are no saints here on earth.

When the Lord called his disciples to be perfect, he did not mean it in any vague or symbolic way. His words cannot be watered down. Before telling them “You must be perfect,” he taught them to love their enemies: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust* (Mt 5:44-45). We can find many lights in his words. For example:

- Holiness demands a certain degree of heroism in the practice of the virtues: loving our enemies means being very close to God, learning to forgive, and wanting to redeem the world.
- Holiness is the fullness of charity, which is the greatest virtue; St Paul calls it *the fullness of the Law*

⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Intimate Notes*, 1692 (10 October 1932), quoted by Pedro Rodríguez in *The Way*, Critical-Historical Edition, Scepter (UK) Ltd., London & New York, 2009; comment on point 754, note 5, p. 890.

⁵ BLESSED ALVARO DEL PORTILLO, comment on *Intimate Notes*, 1692.

⁶ ST JOHN PAUL II, Homily, Norcia, 23 March 1980.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Audience, 13 April 2011.

⁸ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

(Rom 13:10) and *the bond of perfection* (Col 3:14). By ‘bond’, St Paul means something that joins things together, like the ligaments of the body, the thread of a necklace, or a chain: love is the divine bond that unites believers and, as the *Catechism* says, “the practice of all the virtues is animated and inspired by charity.”⁹ St Josemaría explained charity as follows: *If you want to achieve holiness – in spite of your personal shortcomings and failings, which will last as long as you live – you must make an effort, with God’s grace, to practise charity, which is the fullness of the law and the bond of perfection. Charity is not something abstract. It entails a real, complete self-giving to the service of God and all men and women; to the service of that God who speaks to us in our silent prayer and in the noisy world; and of the people whose lives are interwoven with our own.*¹⁰ St Josemaría also exclaimed: *How well the early Christians practised this ardent charity, which went far beyond the limits of mere human solidarity or natural kindness! They loved one another, through the heart of Christ, with a love both tender and strong. Tertullian, writing in the second century, tells us how impressed the pagans were by the behaviour of the faithful at that time. So attractive was it both supernaturally and humanly that they often remarked: ‘See how they love one another!’ (Tertullian, Apologeticus, 39: PL 1, 471).*¹¹

- *So that you may be sons of your Father*, says Jesus Christ in the text from St Matthew that we are considering. Perfection and divine sonship go together. Indeed, holiness is nothing other than the fullness of divine sonship. The more we believe and love, the more we are God’s children in Christ.
- Being identified with Christ necessarily involves learning about his life. *When you open the Holy Gospel, think that what is written there – the words and deeds of Christ – is something that you should not only know, but live. Everything, every point that is told there, has been gathered, detail by detail, for you to make it come alive in the individual circumstances of your life. –God has called us Catholics to follow him closely. In that holy Writing you will find the Life of Jesus, but you should also find your own life.*¹²
- Consequently holiness is inseparable from the Cross, which means fulfilling God’s will out of love, and brings with it both suffering and joy.

To take another angle, it should be recalled that Jesus Christ taught us the commandment of love. St John writes that *We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also* (1 Jn 4:19-21). As a result, the universal call to holiness is also a call to apostolate. The Christological basis for this is obvious: *There is no way to separate interior life from apostolate, just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as redeemer.*¹³ Holiness and apostolate are two sides of the same coin. *A clear sign that you are seeking holiness is – allow me to use the expression – ‘the healthy psychological prejudice’ of thinking habitually about others, while forgetting yourself, so as to bring them closer to God.*¹⁴ Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love.”¹⁵

3. God’s gift and ascetical struggle

Holiness is built up over time by means of a demanding struggle. St Paul happily explains this to the Philippians with the image of a prize awarded for races in a stadium: *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward*

⁹ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1827.

¹⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 62; cf. critical-historical edition compiled by JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES & ALFREDO MÉNDIZ, Rialp, Madrid 2012.

¹¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 225.

¹² ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 754.

¹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 122.

¹⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 861.

¹⁵ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1827.

call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:12-14). St Josemaría stresses the tenacity needed for this struggle: *Holiness is attained with the help of the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell in our souls, through grace given us by the sacraments and as a result of a constant ascetical struggle. My son, let us not have any false illusions about this. You and I – I will never tire of repeating it – will always have to struggle, always, until the end of our lives. So we will come to love peace, and we will spread peace around us, and we will receive our everlasting reward.*¹⁶

The *Catechism* teaches that “The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle (cf. 2 Tim 4). Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes: ‘He who climbs never stops going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end. He never stops desiring what he already knows’ (St Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Cant.* 8).”¹⁷

Holiness, therefore, is the combined work of grace and our personal struggle, in the knowledge that grace always precedes, accompanies and follows our efforts. We can understand why St Josemaría included in the *Preces* of Opus Dei a prayer taken from the Latin liturgy, the Collect of the Mass of Thursday after Ash Wednesday in the Missal of Pope Paul VI. It is an ancient prayer that is also found in the Missal of St Pius V and in the Gregorian Missal, and it says: “*Actiones nostras, quaesumus Domine, aspirando praevieni et adjuvando proseguere: ut cuncta nostra oratio et operatio a te semper incipiat, et per te caepta finiatur*”: “Prompt our actions with your inspiration, we pray, O Lord, and further them with your constant help, that all we say and do may always begin from you, and by you be brought to completion.”

We should give priority to God’s action. Discussing the meaning of the words “Opus Dei”, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger underlined the fact that God had acted through St Josemaría. And, reflecting on holiness, he said,

“In this light one can understand even better what holiness means, as well as the universal calling to holiness. Knowing a little about the history of saints, and understanding that in the causes of canonization there is an inquiry into ‘heroic’ virtue, we almost inevitably have a mistaken concept of holiness: ‘It is not for me,’ we are led to think, ‘because I do not feel capable of attaining heroic virtue. It is too high a goal.’ Holiness then becomes a thing reserved for some ‘greats’ whose images we see on the altars, and who are completely different from us ordinary sinners. But this is a mistaken notion of holiness, a wrong perception which has been corrected – and this seems to me the central point – precisely by Josemaría Escrivá.

Heroic virtue does not mean that the saint performs a type of ‘gymnastics’ of holiness, something that normal people do not dare to do. It means rather that in the life of a person God’s presence is revealed – something man could not do by himself and through himself. Perhaps in the final analysis we are rather dealing with a question of terminology, because the adjective ‘heroic’ has been badly interpreted. Heroic virtue properly speaking does not mean that one has done great things by oneself, but rather that in one’s life there appear realities which the person has not done himself, because he has been transparent and ready for the work of God. Or, in other words, to be a saint is nothing other than to speak with God as a friend speaks with a friend. This is holiness.

To be holy does not mean being superior to others; the saints can be very weak, with many mistakes in their lives. Holiness is this profound contact with God, becoming a friend of God: it is letting the Other work, the Only One who can really make the world both good and happy. And if, then, Josemaría Escrivá speaks of the calling of all to be saints, I think that he is actually referring to this personal experience of his of not having done incredible things by himself, but of having let God work. And thus was born a renewal, a force for good in the world, even if all the weaknesses of mankind will remain ever present. Truly we are all capable, we are all called to open ourselves up to this friendship with God, not to leave the hands of God, not to neglect to turn and return to the Lord, speaking with him as if speaking with a friend, knowing well that the Lord really is a true friend of everyone, including those who cannot do great things by themselves.”¹⁸

¹⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 429.

¹⁷ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2015.

¹⁸ JOSEPH RATZINGER, “Letting God work”, article published in *L’Osservatore Romano* for the canonization of Josemaría Escrivá, 6 October 2002.

Holiness is achieved with God's help and *a constant ascetical struggle*,¹⁹ St Josemaría always taught. He speaks of *interior struggle*²⁰ to highlight the fact that it is a struggle against ourselves: against temptations, against sin. And at the same time our struggle is that of a child of God, and therefore full of confidence; which means we should always struggle for love. *You fulfil a demanding plan of life: you rise early, you pray, you frequent the sacraments, you work or study a lot, you are sober and mortified... but you are aware that something is missing! Consider this in your conversation with God: Since holiness, or the struggle to achieve it, is the fullness of charity, you must look again at your love of God and your love of others for his sake. Then you may discover, hidden in your soul, great defects that you have not even been fighting against: your not being a good son, a good brother, a good companion, a good friend, a good colleague. And that, since you love 'your holiness' in a disordered manner, you are envious. You 'sacrifice' yourself in many small personal details, and so you are attached to yourself, to your own person. Deep down you do not live for God or for others, but only for yourself.*²¹

Therefore this struggle is a positive fight to keep very close to God and to grow in virtues, making the talents he has given us bear fruit. St Josemaría invited us to place the faculties God has granted us at the service of others, to help them with all our talents: with our minds, and our scientific, literary, artistic, sporting or any other abilities. He said that we have to become saints with our defects, which we will always have.

God can make us saints, and he uses the passage of time in the process, because it is up to us to exercise our responsibility freely – God wants us to love him in full freedom. St John Paul II called St Josemaría “the patron saint of ordinary life” for proclaiming the call to holiness in the middle of the world, for “the man in the street”. We could add that St Josemaría invited people to discover the vocational meaning of their lives. Every person has a vocation, and needs to follow the path that God traces for them with their cooperation. Each person builds their own vocation, even when they are not aware of any such thing and have not made any formal commitment. That vocation is both light and the strength to go forward. The person who was personal secretary for many years to St John Paul said of him, “One day I heard him saying very softly, ‘*Opus Dei – donum Dei*’ (‘Opus Dei – gift of God’), which in Polish can be made into a play on words: *dany zadany*, meaning ‘gifts are at the same time tasks’.”²² Indeed, anything done by a baptised person should be done through Jesus Christ our Lord, as the liturgy says.

4. In the middle of the world

St Josemaría wrote in a letter on the supernatural mission of Opus Dei: *We have come to say, with the humility that comes of knowing ourselves to be sinners and of no worth – homo peccator sum (Luke 5:8), we say with Peter – but with the faith that comes of allowing ourselves to be led by God's hand, that sanctity is not only for the privileged few. The Lord calls us all, he expects Love from us all; from everyone, wherever they may be; from everyone, in whatever situation, profession or job. Because that normal, ordinary life, which does not show, can be a means to sanctity. To seek God, there is no need to abandon our place in the world, if our Lord hasn't given us a religious vocation. All the paths of the earth can be an occasion for an encounter with Christ.*²³

St Josemaría perceived the universal call to holiness, and his own mission to spread it, clearly in his soul. He proclaimed that perfection can be achieved in each person's own state in life. That is the radical nature of the Christian way of life: it is total, all-embracing, to the point of heroism. The then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained this in 1993, referring to something St Josemaría had said about Jesus' years

¹⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 429.

²⁰ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, chapter “Interior Struggle”, 707-733; *Christ is Passing By*, homily “Interior Struggle”, 73-82.

²¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 739.

²² CARDINAL STANISLAW DZIWIŃSKI, “Dono e compito”, in *Pontificia Università della Santa Croce. Dono e compito: 25 anni di attività*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2010, 94.

²³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 24 March 1930*, 2, quoted in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, I. *The Early Years*, Scepter, New York, 2001, 225.

of hidden life in Nazareth:

“There are two things we can learn from these reflections on the life of Jesus, from the deep mystery of the fact that God not only became man but also took on the human condition, *making himself the same as us, except for sin* (Heb 4:15). First of all is the universal call to holiness, to whose proclamation Josemaría Escrivá made such a contribution, as Pope John Paul II recalled in his homily during the beatification Mass. But also, to give body to this call, there is the recognition that holiness is reached, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, through ordinary life. Holiness consists in this – living our daily life with our sights fixed on God; shaping all our actions to accord with the Gospel and the spirit of Faith. Each and every theological understanding of the world and of history derives from this core reality, as many passages in the writings of Josemaría Escrivá so clearly and incisively show.

This world of ours, he proclaimed in a homily, *is good, for so it came from God’s hands. It was Adam’s offence, the sin of human pride, which broke the divine harmony of creation. But God the Father, in the fullness of time, sent his only-begotten Son to take flesh in Mary ever Virgin, through the Holy Spirit, and re-establish peace. In this way, by redeeming man from sin, adoptionem filiorum recipemus (Gal 4:5), we receive adoption as sons. We become capable of sharing the intimacy of God. In this way the new man, the new line of the children of God (cf. Rom 6:4-5), is enabled to free the whole universe from disorder, restoring all things in Christ (cf. Eph 1:9-10), as they have been reconciled with God (cf. Col 1:20) (Christ is Passing By, 183).*

In this splendid passage, the great truths of the Christian faith (the infinite love of God the Father, his goodness which is responsible for creation, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, divine filiation, identification of the Christian with Christ...), are linked up to shed light on the life of Christians, particularly Christians living in the midst of the world, with all their complex secular involvements. Underlying dogmatic insights are projected onto everyday life, and that life is encouraged to rethink, to really take to heart, the Christian message in its entirety; a spiral movement is set in motion, which involves and supports theological reflection.”²⁴

To travel towards holiness, no other consecration is needed beyond those of Baptism and Confirmation, as St Josemaría said. *Apostles – that is what Christians are, when they know that they have been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in Baptism. They have been given the capacity to carry on the battle in Christ’s name, through Confirmation. They have been called to serve God by their activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes them share in some way in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood – though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood – gives them the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help others in their journey to God, with the witness of their word and their example, through their prayer and work of atonement.*²⁵ Indeed, explains the founder of Opus Dei, *the layman’s specific role in the mission of the Church is precisely that of sanctifying secular reality, the temporal order, the world, ab intra, from within, in an immediate and direct way.*²⁶

Priests have the common priesthood of the faithful, plus also the ministerial priesthood. They have to serve their brothers and sisters in the faith to help them to respond to the call to holiness and apostolate, and they do so especially by preaching God’s Word and celebrating the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, to which all the other sacraments are orientated, and which is *the centre and root of a Christian’s spiritual life.*²⁷ St Josemaría asks this rhetorical question in a homily that became famous: *What are the Sacraments, which early Christians described as the footprints 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*

²⁴ JOSEPH RATZINGER, message for the symposium “Holiness and the World” on the founder of Opus Dei. Theological symposium organised by the Faculty of Theology of the Roman Atheneum of the Holy Cross (today the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross), 12-14 October 1993. Published in M. Belda, J. Escudero, J. L. Illanes and P. O’Callaghan, *Holiness and the World*, Midwest Theological Forum, 1997, 25-30 (quotation pages 29-30).

²⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 120.

²⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 9.

²⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 87. The Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* uses this expression at no. 14, although, obviously, applying it to priests, the subject of the document.

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)?²⁸ The Eucharist leads us to live a life of love; the sacrament of Penance leads us to return to the Love of God who cleanses us, forgives us, and transforms us. Holiness and sacramental life are inseparable. This is why, speaking of the People of God, the Second Vatican Council lists the seven sacraments and then concludes, "all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in their own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect."²⁹

St Josemaría often preached about the early Christians as ordinary faithful, married or celibate, who sought holiness in all the activities of this earth. *If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world just as they did before they joined. There is nothing false or artificial about their behaviour. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his or her faith.³⁰*

In the *Letter to Diognetus*, an unknown pagan reflected honestly on what seemed to many an abominable race of men,³¹ or at least, in its origins, an Oriental superstition: Christianity. The author of the *Letter*, writing around the year 150, described simply what he had observed: "For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. [...] although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. [...] To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world."³²

St Josemaría often referred to this testimony. To illustrate the greatness of the Christian vocation, in *Friends of God* he took up the quotation from the *Letter to Diognetus* about the early Christians: *Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body. They live in the world but are not worldly, as the soul is in the body but is not corporeal. They live in every town and city, as the soul is in every part of the body. They work from within and pass unnoticed, as the soul does of its essence. . . They live as pilgrims among perishable things with their eyes set on the immortality of heaven, as the immortal soul now dwells in a perishable house. Their numbers increase daily amid persecutions, as the soul is made beautiful through mortifications. . . And Christians have no right to abandon their mission in the world, in the same way that the soul may not voluntarily separate itself from the body.³³*

Today nobody would actually deny outright the fact that everyone is called to holiness. But in practice, for many Christians, the idea that they can be holy is something that they refuse to take seriously here and now – they put off thinking about it, perhaps until the end of their lives. And there are many people who, deep down, do not really think it is possible. St Josemaría was very much aware of this ignorance, whether in theory or in practice, and stressed that everyone needs to realise that God wants each person to be a saint in their actual day-to-day lives. *Holiness: how often we can say this word as if it were an empty sound. For many it is even an unattainable ideal, something to do with ascetical theology – but not a real goal for them, a living reality. The early Christians didn't think that way. They very often used the word 'saints' to describe each other in a very natural manner: 'Greet*

²⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 115.

²⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 11

³⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 24; cf. critical-historical edition compiled by JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES & ALFREDO MÉNDIZ, Rialp, Madrid 2012.

³¹ Cf. TACITUS, *Annales*, 15, 44.

³² *Epistola ad Diognetum*, V.

³³ *Epistola ad Diognetum*, VI, as quoted by St Josemaría in *Friends of God*, 63.

[...] *all the saints*' (Rom 16:15); '*Greet every saint in Christ Jesus*' (Phil 4:21).³⁴

5. The concept of holiness in the history of the Church

The history of the Church has provided many answers to the evangelical call to holiness. After the early Christians, the second century saw the appearance of hermits, who went to the desert to combat the devil. A little later, St Anthony the Great, in Egypt, returned to live with others after living alone, in order to guide them in their spiritual lives. Religious life in common developed widely with the emergence of monasteries from the fourth century onwards. St Benedict, born at the end of the fifth century, wrote a "Rule" for the monks of Monte Cassino, establishing that they should make three public promises: "stability, conversion of manners, and obedience".³⁵ Today almost all monasteries in the Western world follow his Rule, including the 20 or more Benedictine congregations.

In the thirteenth century the first religious orders were founded, with St Francis of Assisi and St Clare, and St Dominic. Accordingly, the ideal of Christian life as generally perceived, began to consist of the renunciation of the things of this earth which is one of the elements that define the religious state.³⁶ The Second Vatican Council teaches that religious should bear in mind that "by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin (cf. Rom 6:11) but also renouncing the world, they may live for God alone."³⁷ This self-surrender has a compelling aspect: "leaving all things for the sake of Christ (cf. Mk 10:28), religious are to follow Him as the one thing necessary."³⁸ By this testimony of the religious, wrote St John Paul II, "the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven."³⁹ How much good has been, is and will be done by huge numbers of religious throughout the world! As well as their genuinely disinterested work of evangelisation, often sealed by martyrdom, it is to many religious orders, congregations and other institutes that we owe gigantic advances in culture, in the fields of art, education and science.⁴⁰ Added to this is all their work for the poor and sick; in Europe until recent times it was most often nuns who ran the hospitals, and in some places the current drop in the numbers of nuns is cruelly felt for this reason. The needs of evangelization gave rise in the sixteenth century to regular clerics such as St Ignatius of Loyola's Jesuits. St Francis de Sales wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life* in 1609, to teach people living in the world how to practise religious devotion.

Beginning in the twentieth century there has been a certain degree of rapprochement to the world among religious, which in some cases has led them to dress like lay-people and take ordinary jobs. However, they continue to belong to the "religious state". Additionally, secular institutes began to be set up from 1947 onwards.

The point here is that the religious, with their difference and separation from the world (which is compatible with the many activities they carry out in the world for the good of the Church and society) fulfill a holy and fruitful function in the Church through their specific state. As *Lumen Gentium* says, "by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes."⁴¹ St Josemaría used to tell how he himself became aware that he needed to be generous to God on seeing the sacrifice offered up by a Carmelite friar walking barefoot in the snow.⁴² He also led different people to embrace the religious state and had many friends who were religious,⁴³ from the 1930s onwards,⁴⁴ including founders of new

³⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 96

³⁵ ST BENEDICT, *Rule*, 58, 17.

³⁶ Thus, for example, the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience made by religious manifest their resolve to renounce riches, the concupiscence of the flesh, and self-will.

³⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ ST JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, 1.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. BENEDICT XVI, Speech at the Collège des Bernardins, Paris, 12 Sept 2008: "What gave Europe's culture its foundation – the search for God and the readiness to listen to him – remains today the basis of any genuine culture."

⁴¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

⁴² Cf. ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, I. *The Early Years*, Scepter, New York, 2001, 69-70.

⁴³ Cf. testimonies by monks, friars and nuns in *Testimonios sobre el fundador del Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid 1994. Cf. also JOSÉ CARLOS MARTÍN DE LA HOZ, *Un amigo de san Josemaría: José López Ortiz, OSA, obispo e historiador*, in *Studia et Documenta* 6 (2012) 67-90; ALDO CAPUCCI, *St Josemaría e il beato Ildefonso Schuster (1948-1954)*, in *Studia et Documenta* 4 (2010) 215-254.

religious or ecclesiastical institutions.⁴⁵ Added to all of this were the conversations he had with very many of them.⁴⁶

With the wisdom of Gamaliel (cf. Acts 5: 34-39), St Josemaría said, *I will never lift a finger to extinguish a light which has been lit in Christ's honour – that is not my mission. If the lamp oil isn't good, it will go out by itself.*⁴⁷ A handwritten note by him says, *A great mission we have is to make people love the religious.*⁴⁸ In full fidelity to this statement, the Prelate of Opus Dei, in his pastoral letter on the Year of Faith convoked by Benedict XVI, exalts the role of the family which, he says, “will nurture vocations of self-giving to God in the priesthood and in the whole spectrum of Church life, both in the secular sphere and in consecrated life.”⁴⁹ The universal call to holiness stirs up, in an unparalleled way, every kind of vocation, including vocations to the religious life, which in their turn help to spread this call still further. The religious life is also promoted by many “movements”⁵⁰ and all sorts of different new communities, whose contributions need not be reviewed in detail here. Nor is this the place to describe the way the term “religious” has been broadened to “consecrated life”, in a rich diversity that some authors consider is still continuing around the notion of “religious”.⁵¹

It is a fact, however, that the universal call to holiness has not always been stated with the same level of conviction. In fact, the proclamation of this reality has had a paradoxical history, says Jose Luis Illanes. “For a long time recognition and obscuring have gone on side by side.”⁵² Some authors fail to draw out all the consequences of the universal call to holiness, and even present the religious state as being higher. In this regard some speak of a “state of perfection” or “state of evangelical counsels”, referring to the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience – or rather, a specific way of practising these virtues; a way that is perfectly legitimate, but is not the only valid way to practise them in order to reach the fullness of the Christian ideal. In fact, it would obviously be a mistake, and would contradict what was stated by Vatican II, to think that Christian life is only lived fully and radically in religious orders and congregations.⁵³

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. JOSÉ LUIS GONZÁLEZ GULLÓN, *Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer en los años treinta: los sacerdotes amigos*, in *Studia et Documenta* 3 (2009) 41-106.

⁴⁵ Cf. e.g. *Testimonios sobre el fundador del Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid 1994, testimony by BL. JOSÉ MARÍA GARCÍA LAHIGUERA (1903-1989), archbishop, founder of the “Oblatas de Cristo Sacerdote” (Congregation approved in 1950). Other figures in the Church said similar things, e.g. MGR. JUAN HERVAS BENET (1905-1982), who helped establish the “Cursillos de Cristiandad” (1949): “The man of God [St Josemaría] intervened to encourage an initiative that was not his, and poured out his charity and understanding on a system of lay spirituality and apostolate that followed different paths from his.” See FRANCISCA COLOMER, “La relación personal entre san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Mons. Juan Hervás a través de sus cartas”, in *Studia et Documenta* 4 (2010) 185-213 (quotation page 202). Father Joseph-Marie Perrin told me in person how Mgr. Escrivá and Don Alvaro del Portillo helped him with his foundation.

⁴⁶ See for example, merely during the SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Carlo Pioppi, “*Alcuni incontri di san Josemaría con personalità ecclesiastiche durante gli anni del Concilio Vaticano II*,” in *Studia et Documenta* 5 (2011) 165-228.

⁴⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, in BLESSED ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Immersed in God*, interview with Cesare Cavalleri, Scepter Publishers, 1996, Chapter 5, 62-63.

⁴⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, handwritten note, facsimile published by the General Postulation of Opus Dei, *El beato Josemaría Escrivá, Fundador del Opus Dei*, Rome 1992, 117. This was the booklet for the beatification ceremony. It is pleasing to note that the miracle approved for St Josemaría's beatification was the cure of a tumour suffered by a Carmelite nun, Sister Concepción Bullón Rubio; that the proposer (1990-1991) was Cardinal Edouard Gagnon, a Sulpician father; and that the Relator for the Cause was the Dominican Fr Ambrogio Eszer.

⁴⁹ JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Pastoral Letter for the Year of Faith*, 29 September 2012, 25, at <http://opusdei.us/en-us/document/pastoral-letter-29-september-2012/>. Bishop Javier Echevarría returned to this point in his intervention during the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization in 2012. Cf. *Synodus Episcoporum*, Bulletin 12, 12 October 2012, 2-3: “this ministry [of Confession] will produce flourishing vocations for the seminary and the religious life, and vocations of good fathers and mothers of families.”

⁵⁰ Cf. JOSÉ LUIS GUTIÉRREZ GÓMEZ, *La Prelatura del Opus Dei y los movimientos eclesiales. Aspectos eclesiológicos y canónicos*, at <http://www.collationes.org/de-documenta-theologica/iure-canonical/item/436>.

⁵¹ Cf. CARLOS JOSÉ ERRÁZURIZ, *Corso fondamentale sul diritto nella Chiesa*, vol. I, Giuffrè, Milan 2009, 261-275.

⁵² JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *Tratado de Teología espiritual*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2007, 138.

⁵³ This is one of the weak points of the book *Christian State of Life* by Hans Urs von Balthasar. In “Riflessioni su un'opera di Hans Urs von Balthasar” (*Annales Theologici* 21 (2007) 61-100), Paul O'Callaghan shows the limited theological basis of Von Balthasar's arguments concerning the beginning of mankind; the identity of Christ and his first disciples; the paradigmatic nature of religious life; and the meaning of obedience and priestly celibacy (cf. <http://www.collationes.org/doctrinalia-ductu/themata-actualium/item/199-riflessioni-su-un%E2%80%99opera-di-hans-urs-von-balthasar>).

This relative obscuring of the call to holiness explains this point in *The Way: You have an obligation to sanctify yourself. –Yes, you too. –Who thinks that this task is only for priests and religious? To everyone, without exception, Our Lord said: ‘Be perfect, as my Heavenly Father is perfect.’*⁵⁴ In the history of the Church, the vocation of the religious has taken a succession of different forms, developing a capacity for growth and adaptation that proves its richness. But it is important to realise that Opus Dei is *not* a link in that chain, because right from the start it was essentially secular, being present in the world by its very nature. Its direct antecedent, as St Josemaría often pointed out, was the simple lives of the early Christians. Its essential features are sanctification in the middle of the world, in work, in family life, in all honest temporal activities, with full unity between being Christian and being human, and full secularity – which, as Jose Luis Illanes explains, is the spiritual attitude that affirms both the consistency and value of temporal things born from Creation, and the fact that the world is open to transcendence.⁵⁵

Ever since 1928, Opus Dei has aimed to remind all Christians about the universal call to holiness in the middle of the world; as St Josemaría loved to say, *the divine paths of the earth have been opened up.*⁵⁶ The doctrine he proclaimed was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, as St John Paul II recalled, addressing some Opus Dei faithful in a homily at Castelgandolfo. “The aim of your institution is to sanctify life by remaining in the world, in the workplace, in a job; to live out the Gospel in the world, living unquestionably immersed in the world, but transforming and redeeming it with love for Christ. Your ideal is a truly great one, which from its beginnings anticipated the theology of the laity which later characterised the Church of the Council and post-conciliar times [...] Living united to God in the world, in any situation, trying to improve yourselves with the help of grace and making Jesus Christ known through the witness of your life. What ideal could be more beautiful and exciting? Inserted and mixed in with this joyful and sorrowing humanity, you want to love it, enlighten it, and save it.”⁵⁷

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⁵⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 291. Cf. PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *The Way, Critical-historical edition*, Scepter (UK) Ltd., London & New York, 2009; comment on point 291.

⁵⁵ Cf. JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, “Secularidad”, in CÉSAR IZQUIERDO, JUTTA BURGGRAB AND FÉLIX AROCENA (eds.), *Diccionario de Teología*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2006, 926-932.

⁵⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 21.

⁵⁷ ST JOHN PAUL II, Homily, Castelgandolfo, 19 August 1979.