

FOREWORD

The publication of the critical-historical edition of St Josemaría Escrivá's *Holy Rosary* fills me with special joy. I have been looking forward to it and I am especially grateful to the team who, under the direction of Professor Pedro Rodríguez, have produced it.

After *The Way*, St Josemaría's book which is most widely available, it was natural that the next would be the critical edition of *Holy Rosary*, which was published for the first time, in a very modest edition in 1934. In this study there is a detailed explanation of the genesis of what the author felt would be "*a booklet to help prayer*". This was the main reason which moved him to send to the printers the considerations which, after having celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, he had redacted at one sitting in the first few days of December 1931.¹ He wanted to transmit to every one, and especially those were being formed in the warmth of the spiritual message in those early years of Opus Dei, a little of his own experience, and more specifically, to show them an accessible way of doing contemplative prayer on the mysteries of the Rosary.

Although it is a work with not many pages, its goal has been and is being efficaciously achieved. With the help of these considerations, very many people, in the very diverse languages, have learned to "immerse" themselves in the life of Christ and his Most Blessed Mother Mary, as "*another character in the scene*". They have done true contemplative prayer, which is to say that they are not merely spectators of past history, but co-protagonists in the scenes recalled by the mysteries of the Rosary: men and women who bring the events of salvation history to life again in their spirit.²

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A renowned American biblical scholar, who reached Catholicism following long experience in an evangelical community in his country, has no doubt in stating that "the Bible always served as St. Josemaría's primary referential language. Though he was steeped in the teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, though he was fluent in scholastic theology, and though he kept current with trends in contemporary theology, it was to Scripture that he returned again and again in his preaching and writing, and it was to Scripture that he directed his spiritual children in Opus Dei."³ And this specialist adds: "St. Josemaría practised and preached a particular way to approach the Scriptures in prayer. His way is intensive rather than exhaustive. [...] With the reading of Scripture, then, comes the grace of transformation, of conversion. Reading the Bible is not a passive act, but an active seeking and finding."⁴

Another expert in biblical theology states that "the author involves the reader in getting closer to the biblical text. He demonstrates his personal experience to the reader and invites him to seek for himself ways of learning from Christ."⁵ Jesus, then, "is not an admirable figure which only a creative imagination can reconstruct from archaeological artifacts from more than two thousand years ago. For the risen Jesus is living now, and seeks in our own time disciples who will live close to Him and work at his side. He needs men and women who, identified with Him, will make Him present in the world."⁶

This is possible because, as the Founder of Opus Dei liked to repeat, savouring a text from the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ is not a figure of the past, relegated to a history book. On the contrary: *Jesus Christus heri et hodie idem, et in saecula!* (Heb 13:8). Jesus Christ lives now and always, and is the same for ever and ever. With his Holy Humanity risen and glorified by the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is present in all and in each one of the moments of the centuries which have gone by, the present and those to come, in the lives of men, and he directs us with his Providence until the end of time.

These reflections invite one to discover the theological depth in St Josemaría's preaching and writings. We see, too, the far reaching spiritual considerations of *Holy Rosary*, expressed with an original beauty in the modes of expression, as several specialists of preceptive literature have highlighted.

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Many writers and numerous readers have considered this book as a real jewel from the literary aspect, because of its style and its stimulating images: the clarity of its prose makes it accessible to all kinds of people, irrespective of their cultural or literary formation. The depth and simplicity with which the gospel scenes are described in a few words, give the text a note-worthy incisiveness.

A respected Spanish poet and literary critic expressed it in this way: "There are times when what we read in Monsignor

¹ Cf Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, vol I.

² Translated into many languages, *Holy Rosary* has helped peoples very distant from its original language to immerse themselves along the pathways of prayer. One may think, for example, of editions in Gujarati, Quechua (Andean areas of South America), Swahili and Tagalog.

³ S. Hahn, *Passionately Loving the Word: The Use of Sacred Scripture in the Writings of Saint Josemaría*, in "Romana" 35 (2002/2) 376.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 378-379.

⁵ F. Varo, *Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Reader of Sacred Scripture*, in "Romana" 40 (2005/1) 186.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Escrivá we seem to have just heard a little earlier. (When it comes down to it, we all manage with a handful of words which we have picked up badly from the Royal Spanish Academy.) But it is not what it seems to be. The easy prose of Monsignor Escrivá is not so easy. It becomes easy for us precisely because it has the rare virtue of deepening us along paths which seem to be within our reach. At times someone says: 'I had that on the tip of my tongue.' But we don't have the obvious at the tip of the tongue. It is in virtue of the one who writes well, that what is said seems to us to have been said a few moments earlier. But it has a transcendence for ever, since, because of his thinking, because of his desire to get people closer together, because of his power to make us human beings, at a particular moment we link our words with his."⁷

Another well-known Chilean literary critic, for many years a contributor to a newspaper respected culturally in Latin America, writes that, in contrast to *The Way*, *Furrow*, and *The Forge* – the trilogy of considerations in the form of aphorisms – the texts of *Holy Rosary* “are of literary value of the poetic-narrative type: poetic by the very quality of meaning, succinct and highly synthesized, and narrative, because, on their own, they are about events which form a plot [...]. Here a single narrator takes the lead, with concise strokes, recreating historical salvific events by antonomasia, so that they sparkle at the one time with dogma, emotion and exhortation, thus helping Christians to practise the corresponding traditional devotions: to pray and move their souls to share these inexhaustible events of the Life of our Lord and of the Virgin Mary.”⁸

Another specialist in preceptive literature, exploring the characteristics of *Holy Rosary*, has highlighted the fact that “it is a discourse which clearly makes itself a completed model of pragmatic logos. They are texts which do rather than speak. What do they do? In a simple way they lead the empirical reader to an encounter with God. Rather: through the discourse the author carries out several acts: the first of them is to make the recipient or the reader contemplate. Naturally in this case we come across texts which are of literary beauty. But this is not the principal goal which the author wanted to achieve. There is a deliberate resolve to move the reader and plunge him into contemplation.”⁹

José Miguel Ibáñez-Langlois, having analyzed the rhythm and development in *Holy Rosary*, concludes: “As in every work of art which is well done, the resolution of its problems of expression seem easy. But, in this book, these problems were very difficult: evangelical themes read and re-read a thousand times, which had to be described, glossed and made to participate in by the piety of the readers, all in a very short space. The challenge was resolved in an apparently easy way – borne out by the few hours in which this book was written, at one sitting – resulting in great spontaneity and beauty. Its literary-technical key, which has behind it a living genius of the language is, as I have already suggested, the narrative approach. The essential element in *Holy Rosary* as literature is the ability of the author to instil in the poetic mind a whole new perspective: to introduce it into the heart of salvific events as a marvellous eye-witness, with a first person “narrative approach”, and its corresponding invention of dialectic characters, the I and you, the child narrator and the child reader. It is a perspective which is part and parcel lyrical-narrative and spiritual theology.”¹⁰

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In these pages, the author of *Holy Rosary* teaches one how to pray, closely linking vocal petition to contemplative prayer. Faithful to the teachings in the rich spiritual tradition of the Church, he has said in *The Way*: “*Slowly. –Consider what you are saying, who is saying it and to whom. –For that hurried talk, without time for reflection, is just noise, the clatter of tin cans. And, with Saint Teresa, I will tell you that, however much you work your lips, I do not call it prayer.*”¹¹

This was his advice he gave throughout his life: Do not separate prayers pronounced with the lips (especially those which go to form the Rosary – the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be) from contemplative prayer, done without “the noise of words”, in the intimacy of the heart, speaking one to one with God. In this context, some words of his seem especially significant, when he refers to events of his spiritual life which took place in the 1930's: “*I often had the custom, when I was young, of not using any book when making a meditation. I would recite the words of the Pater Noster, one by one, savouring them. And I would pause lovingly over the consideration that God is Pater, my Father, and that I should see myself as a brother of Jesus Christ and a brother to all men.*”

*I never got over my astonishment, contemplating that I was a son of God! After each reflection I found myself firmer in faith, more secure in hope, more on fire with love. And there was born in my soul the need, since I was a child of God, to be a small child, a needy child. That was the beginning, in my interior life, of my living whenever I could – whenever I can – the life of childhood. I have always recommended this to my sons and daughters, while, of course, respecting their freedom.*¹²

These autobiographical words cast a beam of light on the humus where *Holy Rosary* was born. This brief written work, redacted in the early days of December 1931 as I have recalled earlier, is the fruit of the work of divine grace in the docile soul of the author. In earlier months, and especially since 2 October 1931, the third anniversary of the founding of Opus Dei, St Josemaría advanced resolutely along the way of spiritual childhood. In previous years he had spoken with thousands of boys and girls whom he prepared for Confession and First Holy Communion, as chaplain of the Foundation for the Sick (1927-1931). Our Lord had granted him this gift as a response to his incessant requests for greater intimacy with Him, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and of the Holy Guardian Angels.¹³

⁷ J. García Nieto, “Foreword”, en Miguel A. Garrido (ed.), *The literary work of Josemaría Escrivá*, Pamplona, Eunsa 2002.

⁸ J.M. Ibáñez-Langlois, *Josemaría Escrivá as writer*, Ed. Rialp, Madrid 2002.

⁹ A. Vilarnovo, “*Holy Rosary*: scene and contemplation in the discourse”, in M. A. Garrido (ed.), *The literary work of Josemaría Escrivá*, Pamplona, Eunsa 2002.

¹⁰ J. M. Ibáñez-Langlois, *cit.*, pp. 78-79.

¹¹ St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 85.

¹² St Josemaría Escrivá, *Letter 8 December 1949*, 41.

¹³ This spiritual journey is referred to in summary fashion in Vázquez de Prada, I.

In his *Intimate Notes* dated 1 December 1931, while doing a novena in honour of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he noted the following petition, which seems like a cry emanating from the depths of his soul: “*Immaculate Mother, Holy Mary: You will give me something, my Lady, in this novena honouring your unspotted conception. Now, I don’t ask for anything – since I am not required to – but I want to set before you my desire to reach perfect spiritual childhood.*”¹⁴

It was the advice he always gave to people who came within the ambit of his priestly work, without obliging anyone to follow the “way of childhood” – he was a great lover of freedom, in the spiritual life too! – which was spreading thanks to the writings of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, especially with the canonization of this Carmelite in 1925.

The considerations of *Holy Rosary* indicate what a simple soul (the “soul of a child”) can achieve in its dealings with God and with the Mother of God. St Josemaría had experienced it himself, and the Introduction which he wrote for this book, clearly demonstrates it. There he reveals his “secret”, which is not directed to people of facile devotion and sentimentality, but to normal men and women, who from time to time raise their hearts to God calling on him with the Psalmist to make known his paths to them, so that they more easily reach Him. Here is what he says in confidence:

“*My friend, if you want to be great, become little.*

To be little it is necessary to believe as children believe, to love as children love, to give yourself up as children give themselves up... to pray as children pray.

And you have to do all this if you are to achieve what I am going to reveal to you in these lines:

The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary.

–Do you want to love our Lady? –Well, then, get to know her. How? –By praying her Rosary well.”¹⁵

These lines reflect St Josemaría’s intense priestly experience from his work with little girls and boys in Madrid’s suburbs. This was really the “school” where he learned the rudiments of the life of spiritual childhood, which he would later develop thanks to supernatural graces and his generous response to the divine gifts, through the intercession of Our Lady.

In some editions of this work – specifically those of 1952 and 1971 – the author added brief introductory notes, stressing the advice he had given in the 1930’s and underlining at the same time the spiritual freedom of all to travel the path of spiritual childhood. On 9 January 1973, on the occasion of his birthday, he added one more note: “To say the Holy Rosary, considering the mysteries, repeating the Our Father and Hail Mary, with the praises to the Blessed Trinity and the constant invocation of the Mother of God, is a continuous act of faith, hope and love, of adoration and reparation.”¹⁶

For many souls those were painful years, for they found themselves as if lost in the fog of unsure doctrine and a morality which little by little lost the fundamentals of the Law of God. In these circumstances, the recitation and contemplation of the Rosary was for St Josemaría – as he had written in 1931 – the spiritual weapon on which he sought support to win the battles of the spirit, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. And with his incessant preaching, he recommended it insistently to hundreds of thousands of people whom he addressed in Europe and South America, during the final years of his life.

One of the literary critics previously referred to, says the following towards the end of a Prologue of a book on the literary work of St Josemaría:

“I thank Monsignor Escrivá because he has written in the way he has written: to this Monsignor Escrivá whom I saw once – at the time I did not know it was he – in Santa Engracia Street [in Madrid] where I lived and he frequented in the year in which he founded the Work, the same year in which I came to Madrid to finish secondary school. Thank you, Monsignor Escrivá.”¹⁷

I associate myself, with all my heart, to this gratitude, directing it in the final instance to God for having granted this good and faithful son, St Josemaría, so many human and supernatural gifts, which he always and only used in the service of souls.

+ Javier Echevarría
Prelate of Opus Dei.
Rome, 7 October 2009, Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary

¹⁴ St Josemaría Escrivá, *Intimate Notes*: (1 December 1931), 437.

¹⁵ St Josemaría Escrivá, *Holy Rosary, To the Reader*

¹⁶ St Josemaría Escrivá, *Holy Rosary, To the Reader*, 9 January 1973.

¹⁷ J. García Nieto, *cit.*, p. 44.