

FEAST OF ST JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA, FOUNDER OF OPUS DEI

ST MUNGO'S GLASGOW

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

SATURDAY 27TH JUNE 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being asked by Opus Dei to preach at this Mass on the Feast Day of your Founder St Josemaria Escriva.

Obviously the facts of his life are known to you all – as well as many of his teachings. However on this occasion I am sure would not go amiss if I mention some highlights in the life of your saintly founder as well as pick on certain aspects of his teaching.

LIFE OF ST JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA:

Jose Maria was born in Northern Spain on the 9th January 1902. Following on his ordination to the Priesthood in 1925 he carried out intense pastoral work in the poorer outlying districts of the City of Madrid and in hospitals while undertaking further studies in Law. In the relatively short time after his ordination, namely on 2nd October 1928 he founded “Opus Dei” in Madrid – thereby opening a new way of sanctification in the middle of the world through the ordinary work and the fulfilment of family social and personal obligations of those following ‘The Way’.

Following on the religious persecution of the Spanish Civil War he oversaw the expansion of Opus Dei in Spain, then in Rome and then to all of the five Continents directing the organisation from Rome until his death on 26th June 1975.

Now a personal prelature, the Prelate resides in Rome but the Members of Opus Dei live all over the world with the majority being married men or women while the rest of the faithful commit themselves to celibacy for apostolic reasons.

I have singled out four aspects of the message of Opus Dei that I would like to consider with you today.

SIMPLICITY OF THE CALL OF JESUS CHRIST:

One of the most wonderful teachings of the Second Vatican Council is the fact that every baptised person is called to **follow Jesus Christ by living according to the Gospel and making it known to others**. It is the aim of Opus Dei to contribute to that evangelising mission of the Church by promoting among Christians of all social classes a life fully consistent with their faith, in the middle of the ordinary circumstances of their lives and especially thorough the sanctification of their work. A simple call...! I think of my own call and my particular call to be that of a priest. When I was finishing primary school I felt that call, shared something of it with my parents and my priests and went for interview by the Archbishop of Glasgow. I was told to go on to secondary school, not junior seminary – because of a health issue – I have a heart murmur. On leaving secondary school I re-applied this time to the Archbishop of Edinburgh – again I was deferred for the same reason and advised to go to university first. This I did and at the end of university still feeling that call I reapplied – this time being accepted and went to on to ordination to the Priesthood in 1965.

A simple call – and a simple call told to me by a young priest when I was recently in Myanmar. This young priest – Dominic was his Christian name – was driving me to talk to students for the Priesthood at the Senior Seminary. To prepare myself for this experience I asked Dominic about his own vocation. He replied with very great simplicity: “I was from a Buddhist family brought up in a Buddhist village in our country where there were many monks but few Catholic priests. I felt sorry for the Catholics in my township and said that I would be a priest for the Catholics. I was laughed at by my friends who said – you cannot be a priest, you are not even a Catholic! So I learned how to be a Catholic from the Sister who came to our village. When I tried to be a priest my parents did their best to dissuade me because my father was a Government Official and said he would lose his work but I persisted and eventually was ordained a priest, I was sent to Rome for further studies, and now I serve God in the Priesthood as General Secretary of our Bishops Conference of Myanmar”. A simple call – answered in a simple way with the full backing of the good Lord!

THE WAY TO FOLLOW THE CALL:

When one answers a call one must consider **how best to follow that call**. St Josemaria indicated: “**It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind**”. The family, marriage, work – all of our activities – are opportunities for dealing with and imitating Jesus Christ, trying to practice charity, patience, humility, diligence, integrity, cheerfulness and all the other human and Christian virtues.

With SCIAF I had the opportunity of visiting that horrible desolate desert which is Darfur in the Sudan then describes as it still is today as the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster”. In the midst of a 90% Muslim population one day I was approached by members of a small Christian community who asked if I would celebrate Mass with them. I indicated I would only be too happy to – although it was not on my programme. Consequently they came to where I was staying and we celebrated Mass about 6.00 am – a wonderful simple celebration in the midst of a great Muslim population. At the end of the Mass I asked the small group of about 20 people when they last had Mass in their township. They said that a priest had been with them about 3½ or 4 years before – and they did not know when a priest would come again. However on questioning they indicated that when the Muslims gathered for prayer on a Friday they would gather in one another’s homes quite simply to read the Bible, to share their knowledge of the Bible, to bring up their children on their biblical knowledge of Jesus Christ and their knowledge of the Commands of the Church.

In the face of such determination to follow the Christian calling, one can only look on in amazement.

KNOWLEDGE OF OUR CALL:

I think it is vitally important to realise that we do have a vocation in life – whatever our particular way of life. **There is that call given by God to us all** – to grow in holiness in our following of Jesus Christ – and we must always try to recognise that call! Something of that call is summed in the call of Jesus to Simon Peter as accounted in today’s Gospel – “Put out in to deep water and pay out your nets for a catch”. ‘Duc in altum’ (**Launch out into the deep**) that is the way in which we live out our call.

Recently I was speaking to the head teachers of our Catholic secondary schools. I questioned them about their ways of living out their vocations beginning by asking: “How authentic are you in terms of being a witness to your faith: how confident are you in your knowledge of the faith; how are you ensuring that your overall school community takes seriously its mission to be at the heart of the Church”. And I went on to ask how the headteachers were helping the young people under their care to develop their understanding of Gospel values and of how to apply them to life.

Perhaps each one of us should examine ourselves on our own particular knowledge of our faith at this present time; our ability to hand on that faith as leaders in our various communities; and especially what way we are sharing in the development of the faith of our young people.

I think back to those words of Pope John Paul II on his visit to Scotland in 1982 when he stated that he was aware of the “new and demanding situations which represent pastoral challenges for the Church today” and he went on to state that in Scotland there “no longer exists the reality of a Christian society, that is a society which despite human weaknesses and failings takes the Gospel as the explicit measures of its life and values. The Pope proclaimed the **necessity of the revitalisation of Christian life – which demands a Holy people. And that is the call which goes out to us today.**

PRAYER AT THE HEART OF OUR VOCATION AS MEMBERS OF OPUS DEI:

The formation given by Opus Dei encourages prayer and sacrifice in order to sustain the effort to sanctify ones ordinary occupations. The imitation of Jesus Christ in his way of life is vitally important. We must remember that as St Paul reminds us in that second reading of today’s Mass “everyone moved by the spirit is the son of God and it is by living as a son or daughter of God that we by our lives of prayer reach out to others.

Only last Sunday Pope Benedict XVI made a pilgrimage to the tomb of Padre Pio now canonised. Speaking of St Pio in his homily the Pope explained how he “prolonged” the work of Christ: Announcing the Gospel, remitting sins and healing the sick in body and spirit”. However he also stressed that the **legacy of St Pio to his spiritual children was sanctity.** His main concern was that people should return to God, that they should experience his mercy and, renewed within, rediscover the beauty and joy of being Christian, of living in communion with Jesus, of belonging to His Church and practicing the Gospel”.

“**In the first place came prayer**” said the Pope. “His days were a living rosary, a continuous meditation, a bond, and a simulation of the Mysteries of Christ, in spiritual union with the Virgin Mary.....from prayer, as from an endless font, arose charity. The love he carried in his heart and transmitted to others was full of tenderness, ever attentive to the real situations in which individuals and families lived”. And the Pope ended with a warning about the risks of activism and secularisation, which are ever present.

CONCLUSION:

We must be ever more aware of the wonder of our own vocation: the simplicity of the call; our determination to follow the call; and our knowledge of our faith – with prayer undermining all that we do.

Perhaps we should keep before us always the words of the late Pope John Paul II when speaking to the lay faithful following on a Synod in Rome on that very subject: **“You have an exalted vocation and there are many and varied forms of mission open to you!”**

Let us take heart from those words. Let us realise the wonder of our own vocation – that call from Almighty God in so many varied ways. Let us always be assured that the most important thing in our lives is not work with prayer following on from our good works – but rather our lives of prayer and our good works flowing from those same lives.

In his short Pontificate Pope John Paul I said some wonderful things – and one phrase which I always remember is his statement: **“Let us advance in order and discipline whilst still enjoying the glorious liberty of the children of God!”**

As we journey on our way through life, as we journey in the footsteps of Jesus Christ – let us always be aware of that call in our exalted vocations to advance in that order and discipline while always being fully aware of that glorious liberty which we have as children of our loving Father in Heaven.