

FOREWORD

In 1950, the Servant of God Josemaría Escrivá had already promised to meet his readers again in a new book—*Furrow*. In the preface to the seventh Spanish edition of *The Way* he wrote, “I hope to let you have it in a few months’ time.”¹ What the founder of Opus Dei wanted then has become a reality now, on the eleventh anniversary of his going to Heaven.

Furrow could really have been brought out many years ago. Monsignor Escrivá was on the point of sending it to the printer on several occasions, but as the old Castilian proverb says: “You can’t ring the bells and walk in the procession at the same time.” He was prevented from making that last revision of the manuscript with leisure by his intense foundational work, his attention to the task of governance at the head of Opus Dei, his wide pastoral work with so many souls, and his many other duties in service of the Church. *Furrow* had been finished, however, for some time, including the titles for the chapters into which it was divided. All that needed doing was to arrange the various entries in numerical order and to make a final stylistic revision.

The Way is a book that has sold more than three million copies and has been translated into more than thirty languages. Like it, *Furrow* is the fruit of Monsignor Escrivá’s interior life and experience with souls. It was written with the intention of encouraging personal prayer and making it easier. Because of its approach and style, then, it cannot be classified as a systematic theological treatise, though its rich and deep spirituality does contain profound theology.

¹ J. Escrivá de Balaguer, *Camino*, 7th ed. (Madrid: Rialp, 1950).

Furrow is directed to the whole Christian person—body and soul, nature and grace—and not only to the mind. That is why its source is not reflection alone, but Christian life itself. It reflects the waves of movement and rest, of spiritual energy and peace, which the action of the Holy Spirit had impressed in the soul of the Servant of God and of those around him. *Spiritus, ubi vult, spirat*, the Spirit breathes where he wills,² and brings with him a depth and harmony of life which cannot be equalled, which cannot—and should not—be confined by the narrow limits of a merely man-made structure.

There lies the reason for the approach of this book. Monsignor Escrivá never wished—in any field, much less in the things of God—to make a suit of clothes first and then fit the child in by force. Out of respect for the freedom of God and the freedom of men, he preferred to be an attentive observer, to be able to recognize the gifts of God, to learn first, and only then to teach. I heard him say so often, when he arrived in a new country, or when he got together with a new group of people, “I have come here to learn”; and learn he did. He learned from God and from souls, and he transformed his capacity to learn into a constant process of teaching for those of us who were around him.

With the considerations he makes in this book, drawn from his wide experience of souls, the founder of Opus Dei displays before us a series of qualities which should shine in the life of all Christians: generosity, daring, sincerity, naturalness, loyalty, friendship, purity, a sense of responsibility . . . Just by reading the table of contents we can discover the full scope of human perfection—“the virtues of man” (Preface)—which Monsignor Escrivá discovers in Jesus Christ, “perfect God and perfect man.”³

² Jn 3:8.

³ The Athanasian Creed.

Jesus is the complete model of the human ideal of a Christian, for “Christ the Redeemer fully reveals man to man himself.”⁴ Let the words of the author of *Furrow* serve as a summary of these virtues as he gives thanks to our Lord for having decided to become “perfect man, with a heart which loved and is most lovable; which loved unto death and suffered; which was filled with joy and sorrow; which delighted in the things of men and showed us the way to Heaven; which subjected itself heroically to duty and acted with mercy; which watched over the poor and the rich and cared for sinners and the just” (813).

What appears in these pages is Christian life itself, in which—at Christ’s pace—the divine and the human are interwoven, not confused, and yet kept in perfect union. “But do not forget that these considerations of mine, though they may seem very human to you, must be priestly as well, since I have written them for you and for myself—and I have put them into practice, too—before God” (Preface). They are the human virtues of a Christian, and precisely for that reason they appear fully developed; they delineate the character of the mature man or woman, who has the maturity that belongs to a child of God, who knows that his Father is close by: “We should make no mistake. God is no shadowy or distant being who created us, then abandoned us; nor is he a master who goes away and does not return. . . . God is here with us, really present, living. He sees and hears us, he guides us, and knows our smallest deeds, our most hidden intentions” (658).

Thus, Monsignor Escrivá presents the virtues in the light of man’s divine destiny. The chapter “Beyond Death” gives the reader this perspective; it frees him from an exclusively human way of thinking and anchors him to another—an eternal

⁴ John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (March 4, 1979), no. 10.

way (see 879). The Christian human virtues are thereby placed far above the merely natural virtues: they are “the virtues of the children of God.” Awareness of his divine filiation must permeate the whole life of a Christian, who finds in God the strength and the motive for striving to be better, even humanly better: “Once you were pessimistic, hesitant and apathetic. Now you are completely transformed: you feel courageous, optimistic and self-confident, because you have made up your mind, at last, to rely on God alone” (426).

Another example of how Christian human virtues have divine roots is found in suffering. Confronted by the sorrows of this world, Christian fortitude cannot be confused with a stoic acceptance of adversity, for—with one’s sights on Christ’s Cross—it becomes the source of supernatural life, because “the great Christian revolution has been to convert pain into fruitful suffering and to turn a bad thing into something good” (887). Monsignor Escrivá knows how to discover God’s action in suffering, both in this life—“Allow yourself to be cut, gratefully, because God has taken you in his hands as if you were a diamond” (235)—and after death: “Purgatory shows God’s great mercy and washes away the defects of those who wish to become one with him” (889).

The human virtues never appear as if they were an addition to a Christian existence. Together with the supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they form the framework of the daily life of the children of God. Grace penetrates nature to its roots, to heal it and divinize it. If, as a result of original sin, human nature cannot reach its fullness without grace, it is no less true that grace should not be thought of as juxtaposed to nature, acting on its margin. On the contrary, grace makes nature achieve its greatest perfection so that it can then be made divine. Monsignor Escrivá cannot conceive how one could live in a divine manner without being very human, for this is the first victory of

grace. That is why he gives such importance to the human virtues. For if they were absent they would lead to the failure of Christian life itself: "There are many Christians who follow Christ and are astonished by his divinity, but forget him as man. And they fail in the practice of supernatural virtues despite all the external paraphernalia of piety because they do nothing to acquire human virtues" (652). This deep human sense of the Christian life was always present in the preaching and writings of the founder of Opus Dei. He did not like disembodied "spiritualities," for he would say that the Lord has made us human beings, not angels, and we should behave as human beings.

Monsignor Escrivá's teaching brings together the human and the divine aspects of Christian perfection. That must be so when the Catholic doctrine on the Incarnate Word is known in depth and when it is loved, and lived, passionately. The practical and vital consequences of that joyful reality are clearly drawn in *Furrow*. The author has sketched in outline the life and work of a Christian in the midst of the world, fully committed to the noble aspirations that move other men, and at the same time totally directed toward God. The resulting portrait is most attractive. A Christian has "a calm and balanced character" (417), and that is why he knows how to play the notes "used in ordinary life, the ones people normally hear" (440). He is endowed with "inflexible will, deep faith, and an ardent piety" (417), and he places at the service of others the qualities he possesses (see 422). His universal mentality shows the following characteristics: "A breadth of vision and a deepening insight into the things that remain alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy; a proper and healthy desire, which should never be frivolous, to present anew the standard teachings of traditional thought in philosophy and the interpretation of history; a careful awareness of trends in science and contemporary thought; and a positive

and open attitude toward the current changes in society and in ways of living" (428).

In clear contrast with this portrait, Monsignor Escrivá also sketches the characteristic features of the frivolous man, lacking in true virtues, who is like a reed moved by the wind⁵ of his own fancies or comfort. His typical excuse is: "I don't want to commit myself to anything" (539); and his existence takes place in the most desolate emptiness. Such frivolity, from a Christian point of view, can be given other names too: "calculation, tepidity, easy-goingness, lack of idealism and mediocrity" (541).

The prescription of a remedy follows the diagnosis of the illness. "Nothing perfects our personality so much as correspondence with grace" (443). He then proposes a very sound and practical piece of advice: "Try to imitate the Virgin Mary, and you will be a complete man or woman" (443). Next to Jesus, a Christian always discovers his Mother, Holy Mary, and always goes to her for all his needs: to imitate her, to get to know her, to avail himself of her powerful intercession. It is most significant that all the chapters of *Furrow* should end with some thought related to the Blessed Virgin. Every Christian effort to grow in virtue leads to identification with Jesus Christ, and there is no surer or more direct way for this than devotion to our Lady. It is as if I can still hear the voice of the Servant of God, on one of the first occasions I met him, joyfully explaining to me that "one always goes and returns to Jesus through Mary."

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⁵ See Mt 11:7.