

The Richness of Ordinary Life *a homily by St. Josemaria Escriva*

1 I remember, many years ago now, I was going along a road in Castile with some friends, when we noticed something in a field far away which made a deep impression on me at the time and has since often helped me in my prayer. A group of men were hammering some wooden stakes into the ground, which they then used to support netting to form a sheep pen. Then shepherds came along with their sheep and their lambs. They called them by their names and one by one lambs and sheep went into the pen, where they would be all together, safe and sound.

Today, Lord, my thoughts go back specially to those shepherds and their sheepfold, because all of us who are gathered here to converse with you — and many others the world over — we all know that we have been brought into your sheepfold. You yourself have told us so: 'I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.' You know us well. You know that we wish to hear, to listen ever attentively to your gentle whistling as our Good Shepherd, and to heed it, because 'eternal life is knowing you, who are the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.

The image of Christ with his sheep at his right and left means so much to me that I had it depicted in the oratory where I normally celebrate Holy Mass. Elsewhere, as a reminder of God's presence, I have had engraved Jesus' words, *cognosco oves meas et cognoscunt me meae*, to help us consider constantly that he is at our side, reproaching us, instructing us and teaching us as does a shepherd with his flock. The Castilian scene I have recalled is very much to the point.

2 You and I belong to Christ's family, for 'he himself has chosen us before the foundation of the world, to be saints, to be blameless in his sight, for love of him, having predestined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his Will'. We have been chosen gratuitously by Our Lord. His choice of us sets us a clear goal. Our goal is personal sanctity, as St Paul insistently reminds us, *haec est voluntas Dei: sanctificatio vestra*, 'this is the Will of God: your sanctification'. Let us not forget, then, that we are in our Master's sheepfold in order to achieve that goal.

3 Another thing I have never forgotten, though it took place a long time ago, was once when I had gone into the Cathedral in Valencia to pray and I passed by the tomb of the Venerable John Ridaura. I was told that whenever this priest, already very advanced in years, was asked how many years he had lived, he would reply with great conviction, in his Valencian dialect, *Poquets*, 'Very few! Only those I have spent serving God.' For many of you here, the fingers of one hand are still sufficient to count the years since you made up your minds to follow Our Lord closely, to serve him in the midst of the world, in your own environment and through your own profession or occupation. How long is not all that important. What does matter is that we engrave, that we burn upon our souls the conviction that Christ's invitation to sanctity, which he addresses to all men without exception, puts each one of us under an obligation to cultivate our interior life and to struggle daily to practise the Christian virtues; and not just in any way whatsoever, nor in a way which is above average or even excellent. No; we must strive to the point of heroism, in the strictest and most exacting sense of the word.

4 The goal that I am putting before you, or rather that God has marked out for us all, is no illusory or unattainable ideal. I could quote you many specific examples of ordinary men and women, just like you and me, who have met Jesus passing by quasi in occulto, at what appeared to be quite ordinary cross-roads in their lives, and have decided to follow him, lovingly embracing their daily cross. In this age of ours, an age of generalised decay, of compromise and discouragement, and also of licence and anarchy, I think it is more important than ever to hold on to that simple yet profound conviction which I had when I began my priestly work and have held ever since, and which has given me a burning desire to tell all mankind that 'these world crises are crises of saints'.

5 Interior life. We need it, if we are to answer the call that the Master has made to each and every one of us. We have to become saints, as they say in my part of the world, 'down to the last whisker,*' Christians who are truly and genuinely such, the kind that could be canonised. If not, we shall have failed as disciples of the one and only Master. And don't forget that when God marks us out and gives us his grace to strive for sanctity in the everyday world, he also puts us under an obligation to do apostolate. I want you to realise that, even looking at things humanly, concern for souls follows naturally from the fact that God has chosen us. As one of the Fathers of the Church points out, 'When you discover that something has been of benefit to you, you want to tell others about it. In the same way, you should want others to accompany you along the ways of the Lord. If you are going to the forum or the baths and you run into someone with time on his hands, you invite him to go with you. Apply this human behaviour to the spiritual realm and, when you go towards God, do not go alone.'

If we do not wish to waste our time in useless activities, or in making excuses about the difficulties in our environment — for there have always been difficulties ever since Christianity began — we must remember that Christ has decreed that success in attracting our fellow men will depend, as a rule, on how much interior life we ourselves have. Christ has stipulated that our apostolic endeavours will only be effective if we are saints; rather (let me put it more correctly) if we strive to be faithful, for while we are on this earth we shall never actually be saints. It may seem hard to believe, but both God and our fellow men require from us an unswerving faithfulness that is true to its name and is consequent down to the last detail, with no half measures or compromises, a faithfulness to the fullness of the Christian vocation which we lovingly accept and caringly practise.

6 Some of you might think I am referring only to a select few. Don't let the promptings of cowardice or easygoing ways deceive you so easily. Feel, instead, God urging each one of you on, to become another Christ, ipse Christus, Christ himself. To put it simply, God is urging us to make our actions consistent with the demands of our faith. For our sanctity, the holiness we should be striving for, is not a second class sanctity. There is no such thing. The main thing we are asked to do, which is so much in keeping with our nature, is to love: 'charity is the bond of perfection'; a charity that is to be practised exactly as Our Lord himself commands: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind,' holding back nothing for ourselves. This is what sanctity is all about.

7 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 correspondence of man. As one of the early Christian writers says, referring to union with God, 'Everything that grows begins small. It is by constant and progressive feeding that it gradually grows big.' So I say to you, if you want to become a thorough-going Christian — and I know you are willing, even though you often find it difficult to conquer yourself or to keep climbing upwards with this poor body of ours — then you will have to be very attentive to the minutest of details, for the holiness that Our Lord demands of you is to be achieved by carrying out with love of God your work and your daily duties, and these will almost always consist of small realities.

8 Thinking of those of you who, despite years of experience, still go about dreaming — with vain and childish dreams, like those of Tartarin of Tarascon — imagining they are hunting lions in the corridors of their homes, where the most they will find are mice, if that; with, I insist, such people in mind, I can only remind you how great a thing it is to be accompanying God through the faithful fulfilment of your ordinary daily duties, coming through struggles which fill Our Lord with joy, & which are known only to him and to each one of us.

Rest assured that you will usually find few opportunities for dazzling deeds, one reason being that they seldom occur. On the other hand, you will not lack opportunities, in the small and ordinary things around you, of showing your love for Christ. As St Jerome writes, 'Even in small things, the same (greatness of) spirit is revealed. We admire the Creator, not only as the framer of heaven and earth, of sun and ocean, of elephants, camels, horses, oxen, leopards, bears and lions, but also as the maker of tiny creatures, ants, gnats, flies, worms and the like, things whose shapes we know better than their names: and in all of them (big or small) we reverence the same skill. So too, the person who is dedicated to Christ is equally earnest in small things as in great.'

9 When we meditate on the words of Our Lord, 'And for them do I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth,' we clearly perceive our one and only end: sanctification, or rather, that we have to become saints in order to sanctify others. Then, like a subtle temptation, the thought may come that there are very few of us who have really taken to heart this divine invitation. Moreover, we see that those of us who have, are instruments of very little worth. It is true; we are few, in comparison with the rest of mankind, and of ourselves we are worth nothing. But our Master's affirmation resounds with full authority: Christians are the light, the salt, the leaven of the world and 'a little leaven leavens the whole batch'. That is precisely why I have always taught that we are interested in each and every person. Out of a hundred souls we are interested in a hundred. We discriminate against no one, for we know for certain that Jesus has redeemed us all, and that he wishes to make use of a few of us, despite our personal nothingness, to make his salvation known to all.

A disciple of Christ will never treat anyone badly. Error he will call error, but the person in error he will correct with kindness. Otherwise he will not be able to help him, to sanctify him. We must learn to live together, to understand one another, to make allowances, to be brotherly and, at all times, in the words of St John of the Cross, 'where there is no love, put love & you will find love'; and we have to do this even in the apparently uninspiring circumstances that arise in our professional work or in our domestic and social life. You & I must therefore seek to make use of even the most trifling opportunities that come our way, to sanctify them, to sanctify ourselves & to sanctify those who share with us the same daily cares, sensing in our lives the sweet & inspiring burden of the work of co-redemption.

10 I wish to continue this conversation with Our Lord with an observation I made use of years ago, but which is just as relevant today. I had noted down some remarks of St Teresa of Avila: 'All that passes away and is not pleasing to God, is worth nothing, and less than nothing.' Now do you understand why a soul loses all sense of peace and serenity when it turns away from its goal, and forgets that it was created by God to be a saint? Strive never to lose this supernatural outlook, not even at times of rest or recreation, which are as important in our daily lives as is work itself.

You can climb to the top of your profession, you can gain the highest acclaim as a reward for your freely chosen endeavours in temporal affairs; but if you abandon the supernatural outlook that should inspire all our human activities, you will have gone sadly astray.

11 Allow me a short digression. In fact it is very relevant to what we have been saying. I have never asked anyone who has come to me, about his politics. I am just not interested! My attitude here demonstrates a fundamental fact about Opus Dei, to which by the grace and mercy of God I have dedicated myself completely, in order to serve our holy Church. I am not interested in the subject because, as Christians, you enjoy the fullest freedom, with the consequent personal responsibility, to take part as you see fit in political, social or cultural affairs, with no restrictions other than those set by the Church's Magisterium. The only thing that would worry me, for the good of your souls, would be if you were to overstep these limits, for then you would have created a clear opposition between your actions & the faith you claim to profess, and in that case I would tell you so, clearly. This holy respect for your opinions, so long as they do not lead you away from the law of God, is not understood by those who are unaware of the real meaning of the freedom which Christ won for us on the Cross, *qua libertate Christus nos liberavit*, by the sectarians at either extreme: those who seek to impose their temporal opinions as dogmas; or those who degrade man, by denying the value of the faith and putting it at the mercy of the grossest errors.

12 But to return to our subject. I was saying just now that though you might achieve spectacular success in society, in public affairs, in your own careers, if you neglect your spiritual life and ignore Our Lord you will end up a complete failure. As far as God is concerned — and in the last analysis that is the only thing that matters — victory only comes to those who strive to behave as genuine Christians. There is no middle way. That is why you find so many people who from a human point of view ought to be ever so happy, yet they go about uneasy and embittered. They appear to be overflowing with happiness, but just scratch beneath the surface of their souls and you will discover a bitterness more bitter than gall. This will not happen to us, provided we really try, day in day out, to do God's will, to give him glory, and praise him and spread his kingdom to all mankind.

13 It makes me very sad to see a Catholic — a child of God, called by Baptism to be another Christ — calming his conscience with a purely formal piety, with a religiosity that leads him to pray now and again, and only if he thinks it worthwhile! He goes to Mass on holidays of obligation — though not all of them — while he cares punctiliously for the welfare of his stomach and never misses a meal. He is ready to compromise in matters of faith, to exchange his faith for a platter of lentils, rather than give up his job... And then he impudently or scandalously seeks to climb up in the world on the strength of being a Christian. No! Let us not live on labels. I want you to be genuine, solid Christians; and to become such you will have to be unswerving in your search for suitable spiritual food.

Personal experience shows, and you have often heard me tell you so, to warn you against discouragement, that our interior life consists in beginning again and again each day; and you know in your hearts, as I do in mine, that the struggle is never ending. You will have noticed too, when making your examination of conscience just as I do (excuse these personal references, but even as I am speaking to you I am going over the needs of my own soul with Our Lord) that you often experience little setbacks, which at times perhaps may seem to you enormous, revealing as they do an evident lack of love, of self-surrender to God, of a spirit of sacrifice, of refinement. Well, strengthen your yearning for reparation, with a sincere act of contrition, but please do not lose your peace of mind.

14 Way back, in the early forties, I used to go quite often to Valencia. I had no human means at the time and, with those who were gathered around this penniless priest, as you are now, I would pray wherever we could, some afternoons on a deserted beach. Just like the first friends of the Master, remember? St Luke writes how, when St Paul and he were leaving Tyre on their way to Jerusalem, 'they all of them, with their wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city; and there on the beach we knelt down and prayed'.

Well, late one afternoon, during one of those marvellous Valencian sunsets, we saw a boat approaching the shore. Some men jumped out, swarthy looking and strong as granite, dripping wet, stripped to the waist, so weather-burned that they might have been made of bronze. They began to haul in the net that trailed behind the boat. It was laden with fishes, all shining like silver. Their feet sank into the sand as they pulled away with amazing strength. Then all of a sudden a little boy appeared, all sunburnt too. He came up to the rope, seized it with his tiny hands and began to tug away with evident clumsiness. The tough, unsophisticated fishermen must have felt their hearts soften, for they allowed the child to join in, without chasing him away, even though he was more of a hindrance than a help.

I thought of you and of myself. Of you, whom I did not know as yet, and of myself; of our daily tugging away at the rope, and of many things. If we come before God Our Lord like that child, convinced of our weakness yet ever prepared to second his plans, we shall more easily reach our goal. We shall haul the net onto the shore, bursting with an abundant catch, for the power of God reaches where our strength cannot.

15 You well know the obligations of your Christian way of life; they will lead you safely and surely to sanctity. You have also been forewarned about the difficulties, or practically all of them, because you can already get a rough idea of them at the beginning of the road. Now I wish to emphasise that you must let yourselves be helped and guided by a spiritual director, to whom you can confide all your holy ambitions and the daily problems affecting your interior life, the failures you may suffer and the victories.

Always be very sincere in spiritual direction. Don't make allowances for yourselves without checking beforehand; open up your souls completely, without fear or shame. Otherwise this smooth and straight road will become tortuous, and what at first was trivial will end up strangling you like a noose. 'Do not imagine that those who are lost fall victims of a sudden failure. No, each went astray at the outset or neglected his soul for a long spell, so that the firmness of his virtues was gradually undermined while his vices grew little by little, and so he came to a wretched downfall... A house does not fall down suddenly by some unforeseen accident. There was either something wrong with its very foundations, or the neglect of those dwelling in it was so prolonged that what at first were tiny defects ended up corroding the firmness of the structure, and so when storms came or torrential rains fell the house tumbled inevitably and in so doing brought to light the years of neglect.'

Do you remember the story of the gypsy who went to confession? It is only a story, a joke, because we never talk about confession and, besides, I have a very high opinion of gypsies. Poor fellow! He was very sorry for what he had done. 'Father,' he said, 'I have stolen a halter.' 'Nothing much to worry about there, is there?' 'And with it there was a mule... and then, another halter... and, another mule.' And so on, up to twenty. My children, it is the same with us. Once we give in and steal the halter, the rest follows, a whole string of evil inclinations, bringing wretchedness, degradation and shame. Something similar can happen in our dealings with others: at first there is a small, cutting remark, and in the end people can end up cold shouldering each other, and living in an atmosphere of icy indifference.

16 'Catch the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil our vineyards, our vineyards in bloom.' Be faithful, very faithful, in all the little things. If we try to live thus, we shall also learn to run trustingly into the arms of Mary, as children of hers. Did I not remind you, at the beginning, that we are all really very young, only as old as the years we have lived since we decided to come very close to God? That being so, it is understandable that our wretchedness and littleness should find strength in the greatness and holy purity of the Mother of God, who is also our Mother.

There is another story, a true one, which I can tell you since it took place many, many years ago; and because the expression used is so startling that it will help you reflect. I was giving a retreat at the time, to priests from several dioceses. I invited them, in a friendly way because I wanted to help, to come and have a talk and unburden their consciences, because we priests too need brotherly help and advice. I began to speak to one of them. He was somewhat rough in manner, but a worthy and honest man. I tried to draw him out a bit, gently but firmly, so as to heal any wound there might be inside his heart. All at once he interrupted me, more or less with these words: 'I'm very envious of my donkey. It's been working in seven parishes and you can't say a thing against it. If only the same could be said of me!'

17 Examine your conscience sincerely: perhaps neither you nor I deserve the praise that country priest had for his donkey. We have worked so hard, held responsible positions, you have won success in men's eyes in such and such a job... But, in God's presence, is there nothing you regret? Have you truly tried to serve God and your fellow men? Or have you pursued your own selfish plans, your personal glory, your own ambitions, seeking a purely earthly success that will dwindle pitifully into nothingness?

If I am speaking to you somewhat bluntly, it is because I myself want once again to make a very sincere act of contrition, and I would like each one of you to do the same. As we call to mind our infidelities, and so many mistakes, weaknesses, so much cowardice each one of us has his own experience — let us repeat to Our Lord, from the bottom of our hearts, Peter's cry of contrition, Domine, tu omnia nosti, tu scis quia amo te! 'Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you, despite my wretchedness!' And I would even add, 'You know that I love you, precisely because of my wretchedness, for it leads me to rely on you who are my strength: quia tu es, Deus, fortitudo mea.' And at that point let us start again.

18 Interior life. Sanctity in our ordinary tasks, sanctity in the little things we do, sanctity in our professional work, in our daily cares...; sanctity, so that we may sanctify others. A friend of mine was dreaming once. (He is someone I've never really managed to get to know!) He was flying very high, but he was not inside the plane, in the cabin. He was outside, on the wings. Poor soul, how he suffered! What anguish! It was as if Our Lord was showing him that just such insecurity and danger faces apostolic souls who would fly up to the heights of God, but have no interior life, or else neglect it. They are full of anxiety and doubt, and in constant danger of coming to grief.

I really do believe that a serious danger of losing the way threatens those who launch out into action — activism! — while neglecting prayer, self denial and those means without which it is impossible to achieve a solid piety: receiving the Sacraments frequently, meditation, examination of conscience, spiritual reading and constant recourse to Our Lady and the Guardian Angels... Besides, all these means contribute in a way that nothing else can, to making the Christian's daily life a joyful one, for, from their hidden riches, flow out the sweetness and joy of God, like honey from the comb.

19 In our inner life, in our external behaviour, in our dealings with others, in our work, each of us must try to maintain a constant presence of God, conversing with him, carrying on a dialogue in a way that does not show outwardly. Or, rather, which as a rule does not express itself in audible words, but which certainly should show itself in the determination and loving care we put into carrying out all our duties, both great and small. Without such perseverance, our behaviour would hardly be consistent with our status as children of God, for we would have wasted the resources which Our Lord in his goodness has placed within our reach, in order that we may come to 'perfect manhood, unto the measure of the fullness of Christ'.

During the civil war in Spain I travelled a lot to offer priestly care to many young men at the front. In a trench one day near Teruel, I heard a conversation which I have never forgotten. A young soldier was saying of one of the others, apparently a somewhat indecisive and weak-willed person, that he wasn't all of a piece! I should be very sad if it could seriously be said of any of us that we are inconsistent: people who claim to be striving to be genuine Christians, saints, yet despise the means of becoming such, because when they carry out their duties they fail to show God the constant affection and love that he deserves from his children. If our behaviour could be so described, then neither you nor I would be Christians who are all of a piece.

20 Let us try to foster deep down in our hearts a burning desire, an intense eagerness to achieve sanctity, even though we see ourselves full of failings. Do not be afraid: the more one advances in the interior life, the more clearly one sees one's own faults. Grace works in us like a magnifying glass, and even the tiniest speck of dust or an almost invisible grain of sand can appear immensely large, for the soul acquires a divine sensitivity, and even the slightest shadow irritates one's conscience, which finds delight only in the limpid clarity of God. Speak now from the bottom of your heart: 'Lord, I really do want to be a saint. I really do want to be a worthy disciple of yours and to follow you unconditionally.' And now you should make a resolution to renew each day the great ideals which inspire you at this moment.

Oh, Jesus, if only we who are united in your Love were truly persevering! If only we could translate into deeds the yearnings you yourself awaken in our souls! Ask yourselves often, 'What am I here on earth for?' It will help you in your efforts to finish all your daily tasks perfectly and lovingly, taking care of the little details. Let us turn to the example of the saints. They were people like us, of flesh and bone, with failings and weaknesses, who managed to conquer and master themselves for love of God. Let us consider their lives and, like bees who distil precious nectar from each flower, we shall learn from their struggles. You and I shall also learn to discover so many virtues in the people about us, who teach us by their hard work, their self-denial, their joy, and we shall not dwell too much on their defects; only when it is absolutely necessary, in order to help them with fraternal correction.

21 Like Our Lord, I too am fond of talking about fishing boats and nets, so that we may all draw clear and decisive resolutions from the Gospel scenes. St Luke tells us of some fishermen washing and mending their nets by the shores of Lake Genesareth. Jesus comes up to the boats tied up alongside and goes into one of them, which is Simon's. How naturally the Master comes aboard our own boat! 'Just to complicate our lives,' you hear some people complain. You and I know better, we know that Our Lord has crossed our paths to complicate our existence with gentleness and love.

When he has finished preaching from Peter's boat, he says to the fishermen, *duc in altum et laxate retia vestra in capturam!*, 'launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch!' Trusting in Christ's word they obey, and haul in a wonderful catch. Then turning to Peter who, like James and John, cannot hide his astonishment, the Lord explains, 'Fear not; henceforth you shall be fishers of men. And having brought their boats to land, leaving all things, they followed him.'

Your boat — your talents, your hopes, your achievements — is worth nothing whatsoever, unless you leave it in Christ's hands, allowing him the freedom to come aboard. Make sure you don't turn it into an idol. In your boat by yourself, if you try to do without the Master, you are — supernaturally speaking — making straight for shipwreck. Only if you allow, and seek, his presence and captaincy, will you be safe from the storms and setbacks of life. Place everything in God's hands. Let your thoughts, the brave adventures you have imagined, your lofty human ambitions, your noble loves, pass through the heart of Christ. Otherwise, sooner or later, they will all sink to the bottom together with your selfishness.

22 If you agree to let God take command of your boat, if you let him be the master, how safe you will be!... even when he seems to have gone away, to have fallen asleep, to be unconcerned; even though a storm is rising and it's pitch dark all around you. St Mark tells us how once the apostles were in just such circumstances and Jesus 'when the night had reached its fourth quarter, seeing them hard put to it with rowing (for the wind was against them), came to them walking on the sea... Take courage, he said, it is myself; do not be afraid. So he came to them on board the boat, and thereupon the wind dropped.'

My children, so many things happen to us here on earth!... I could tell you so many tales of sorrow, of suffering, of ill treatment, of martyrdom — and I mean it literally — of the heroism of many souls. In our mind's eye we sometimes get the impression that Jesus is asleep, that he does not hear us. But St Luke describes how the Lord looks after his own. 'When they (the disciples), were sailing, he slept. And there came down a storm of wind upon the lake and they began to ship water perilously. They came and awakened him saying, Master, we perish! But Jesus arising, rebuked the wind and the rage of the water. And it ceased and there was a calm. And he said to them, Where is your faith?'

If we give ourselves to him, he will give himself to us. We must trust the Master completely, place ourselves unreservedly in his hands; show him by our actions that the boat is his; that we want him to do as he pleases with all we possess.

Let me finish with these resolutions, asking Our Lady to intercede for us: let us live by faith; let us persevere with hope; let us remain very close to Jesus; let us really, really, really love him; let us live out and enjoy our adventure of Love, for we are in love, in love with God; let us allow Christ to come aboard our poor boat, and take possession of our souls as Lord and Master; let us show him sincerely that we are going to try to live in his presence always, day and night, for he has called us to the faith: *ecce ego quia vocasti me!* We are coming into his fold, drawn there by his call, his gentle whistle as our Good Shepherd, certain that only in its shelter will we find true happiness both here and in eternity.