



Saint Josemaría Escrivá

Founder of Opus Dei

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Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*. Volume I: *The Early Years*, Princeton (N.J.), Scepter Publishers, 2001; Volume II: *God and daring*, New York, 2003; Volume III: *The Divine Ways on Earth*, New York, 2005 .

Andrés Vázquez de Prada's three volume biography of St. Josemaría Escrivá breaks entirely new ground and presents a far more detailed and nuanced portrait of St. Josemaría than any previous work.

Sources

Vázquez de Prada relies heavily on the testimony which was collected as part of St. Josemaría's process of beatification and canonization. The fact that the process began only six years after St. Josemaría's death made it possible to take both the written and oral testimony of numerous people who knew him from the 1930s on, and even of some who knew him earlier. Of particular importance is the testimony of his successor, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, who worked closely with him for more than 35 years, and of Bishop Javier Echevarría, who served as his secretary from 1952 until St. Josemaría's death in 1975. The author also makes use of information collected from hundreds of other men and women, including many written testimonies of people who were not called as official witnesses but who wrote down their recollections of St. Josemaría and sent them to the postulator of his cause.

The author also relies heavily on previously unpublished materials from the

General Archive of the Prelature of Opus Dei. An historian perusing the biography's numerous footnotes cannot help but be impressed by the depth and richness of the sources the archive contains. Vázquez de Prada's careful record in footnote of the sources on which he draws will prove helpful to future historians once the archives are open to consultation. For most readers, however, the many footnotes which merely indicate where in the archives documents can be found add to the bulk of the work without providing any useful information. It would be a shame if the abundance of footnotes which contain little of interest for the non-professional reader were to discourage most readers from looking at the notes. Since some of them contain very useful information.

The founder of Opus Dei had a strong sense of history that led him to save copies of his voluminous correspondence. Vázquez de Prada gives no indication of how many letters have been preserved, but it seems the number is large. Despite the extraordinary difficulty of preserving documents during the three-year Spanish Civil War, there are at least 170 letters from the period before the outbreak of that war on July 17, 1936. In the years after the Civil War, it is not unusual to find 3, 4, and even 5 letters written on a single date. These letters provide information about St. Josemaría's activities, whereabouts and situation on specific dates. Even more importantly they provide glimpses into his attitudes and dispositions and his relations with his correspondents.

After visiting several of his sons in Zaragoza during the Civil War, for instance he wrote them the following: "Who can fathom the human heart? Can you believe that till the very last minute, I kept looking to see if you would come before the train left? Now I feel a little remorseful for not having been more generous with my Lord Jesús, because I told you not to come to say good-bye to me... [and then I kept] longing to see you and talk with you a few minutes and give you all a hug". (Letter to his sons in Zaragoza, Vitoria, September 4, 1938; quoted in II, p. 236).

Even more important than Escrivá's correspondence are the notes he took over many years, which Vázquez de Prada refers to as "personal notes". The earliest surviving note dates from March, 1930. Escrivá began to take notes around 1920, but he later destroyed the notebook which covered the period prior to March, 1930. Many notes, however, allude to and throw light on earlier events.

Escrivá described his notes as "candid notes" and called them "Catalinas" ["Catherines"] out of devotion to St. Catherine of Siena whose outspokenness and love for the Church and the Pope he especially admired (*Personal Notes*, n. 1862, Roma, 14- VI-1948; quoted in I, p. 255). He wrote them, he says, "because I feel urged to preserve not only the inspirations of God—I very firmly believe they are

divine inspirations— but also other things in my life that have served, and could serve, for my spiritual benefit and help my father confessor get to know me better”. (*Personal Notes*, n. 167, February 1931; quoted in I, p. 255).

Throughout his life Escrivá was reticent about speaking of his interior life and the graces he received from God. Even in this notes which were not intended for publication he often silences mystical aspects of his prayer and tries to “make everything as impersonal as possible.” (*Personal Notes*, n. 713, quoted in I, p. 256). Despite these limitations, the *Personal Notes* offer us a window into his soul and give us a vivid sense of the tone and content of his dealings with God and with the Blessed Virgin. In a note taken on December 3, 1931, for instance, we read: “This morning I backtracked and became a little boy, to greet our Lady before her statue on Atocha Street, at the top of the house the Congregation of St. Philip Neri has there. I had forgotten to greet her. What little boy misses a chance to tell his mother he loves her? My Lady, may I never become an ex-child” (*Personal Notes*, n. 446, quoted in I, p. 257).

In addition to materials found in Opus Dei’s archives, the author also uses documents from a number of other sources including parochial archives (Appendix 7, Vol. I, pp. 467-468), diocesan archives (Appendix 10a, Vol. I, pp. 473-475), university records (Vol. I, p. 188, n. 4), and official Spanish government archives (Vol. I, p. 408, n. 99). The documents used from sources other than Opus Dei’s archives fill in small details or corroborate minor points, for example, the records of the grades Escrivá received in school (Appendix 8, Vol. I, pp. 469-470), but Vázquez de Prada’s account rests squarely on the sources found in Opus Dei’s archives.

Contrasting Facets of a Rich Personality

It is impossible to summarize or even catalogue in a review the contents of this sprawling three volume biography. One of the strongest impressions left with the reader is the rich diversity of Escrivá’s personality and experience. He combined in apparently effortless harmony traits, attitudes, and activities which we would not normally expect to find combined in a single person’s life. He was, for instance, a mystic and a builder, a lawyer given to fine legal distinctions and a poet, an executive who built a large international institution, and a father passionately interested in the details of the lives of each of his sons and daughters.

Despite Escrivá’s reluctance even in his *Personal Notes* to talk about extraordinary mystical phenomenon, the material Vázquez de Prada presents leaves no doubt that he was a mystic. Perhaps the best known of his mystical

experiences occurred on October 16, 1931 when, in his own words: “I felt the action of the Lord. He was making spring forth in my heart and on my lips, with the force of something imperatively necessary, this tender invocation: *Abba! Pater!* I was out on the street, in a streetcar. [...] Probably I made that prayer out loud. And I walked the streets of Madrid for maybe an hour, maybe two, I can’t say; time passed, without my being aware of it. They must have thought I was crazy. I was contemplating, with lights that were not mine, that amazing truth. It was like a lighted coal burning in my soul, never to be extinguished” (*Personal Notes*, n. 60. Vol I, p. 295).

That experience was far from being an isolated one. Only a few weeks earlier, describing a locution received while celebrating Mass, he referred to hearing “a voice, perfectly clear as *always*” (Vol. I, p. 287, emphasis added) and he commented, “*Ordinarily*, before the supernatural, I feel afraid. Later comes the ‘Do not be afraid. It is I’” (Vol. I, p. 288, emphasis added). These divine favors continued until the end of St. Josemaría’s life. On August 6, 1970, for instance, he heard from Our Lord a phrase from the book of the prophet Isaiah, “clama ne cesses” [“cry out without ceasing”] (Is. 58, 1) encouraging him to continue praying insistently for the Church and for Opus Dei (III, p. 426). One year later, on August 23, 1971, while he was reading the newspaper, Our Lord encouraged him to pray to the Blessed Virgin with a phrase modeled on Hebrews 4,16: “Adeamus cum fiducia ad thronum gloriae ut misericordiam consequamur” [“Let us go with confidence to the throne of glory that we may obtain mercy”]. The text of the Epistle to the Hebrews is identical except that it refers to the throne of grace rather than of glory. St. Josemaría understood Our Lord to be referring to His Mother as the throne of glory (III, p. 426).

But this mystic was also a builder. Vázquez de Prada narrates in detail the construction of Villa Tevere, Opus Dei’s headquarters in Rome, especially the challenge of finding the necessary money (Vol. III, pp. 73-87, and 152-159, *passim*). Faced with what appeared to be insuperable difficulties, Escrivá refused to delay the project, cut it back to more modest proportions, or build something provisional in the hope of being able to do something better at a later date. He wrote in 1952, when the project was just getting fully underway: “We are financially drained—and must finish these buildings” (Vol. III, p. 153). In fact, construction went on for another eight years. During all that time, Escrivá remained deeply involved in the architectural planning as well as encouraging his sons and daughters all around the world to seek the money necessary to complete this ambitious project.

The paint was barely dry on the last walls of Villa Tevere when St. Josemaría

turned his attention to another mammoth construction project, the Shrine of Our Lady of Torreciudad, located not far from his birthplace in Barbastro. Since at least the 1950s, he had harbored the desire of promoting shrines of Our Lady (including one dedicated to Our Lady of Fair Love somewhere in the United States, which has yet to be begun). The first fruits of that desire was to be the Shrine at Torreciudad. Escrivá's personal involvement would be much less direct and intense in the construction of Torreciudad than it had been in Villa Tevere, but once again he was the driving force behind the project, and played an active role in critical aspects of its design (Vol. III, pp. 476-480).

In 1967, when he was already 65 years old, Escrivá began yet another large scale construction project, a permanent home for the Roman College of the Holy Cross, Opus Dei's international center of formation for men, which until then had been housed in part of Villa Tevere. The fact that the plans were being drawn in Rome and that the construction site was less than a half hour away from Villa Tevere where he lived and worked made it possible for him to follow the project closely and to take an active role in its planning and construction. In fact, he inspected it three times in the month before his death (Vol. III, pp. 480-484).

Escrivá's legal mind—he held a doctorate in law from the University of Madrid—is evident in his lifelong struggle to find an adequate place for Opus Dei in the Church's legislation. As a lawyer, he was painfully aware of the importance of legal classifications and alive to the nuances of legal technique.

In 1941, for instance, the Bishop of Madrid was anxious to put his official stamp of approval on Opus Dei, in part as a way of calming the storm of criticism to which it was being subjected in certain ecclesiastical circles. The problem was that none of the categories of canon law adequately reflected the nature of Opus Dei. The least objectionable category was that of pious union, but Opus Dei was very different from what the drafters of the Code of Canon Law had in mind when they established the category and from all of the groups that had been approved as pious unions, groups like the Holy Name Society or the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It was, however, the best fit that could be found at the moment, and the need for some official approval was urgent, so Escrivá agreed that Opus Dei should be approved as pious union.

To signal, however, the provisional nature of this classification and to avoid possible future difficulties in moving into some yet-to-be-created category which would adequately reflect the reality of Opus Dei, Escrivá asked the Bishop to limit himself to granting approval without taking the more formal step of establishing Opus Dei as a pious union. This was a difference which would have escaped most

people, but which the lawyer in Escrivá appreciated (Vol. II, p. 339, n. 51).

This lawyer was also a gifted writer, with the sensibility of poet. With the exception of a some poems written in his youth, he wrote neither poetry nor fiction. His literary gifts are evident, however, in his homilies and other spiritual writings. Recalling an occasion when he and a few early members of Opus Dei were meditating on the beach near Valencia, for instance, he wrote: “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” (*Friends of God*, n. 14).

Vázquez de Prada dedicates only a short section of his biography explicitly to Escrivá's role as organizer and chief executive of an international organization. By the time of Escrivá's death in 1975 that organization had over 65,000 members and numerous corporate activities ranging from universities to farm schools and medical dispensaries, spread out throughout Europe, North and South America, Australia, and a growing number of countries in Africa and Asia (Vol. III, pp. 197ss). An attentive reading, especially of volume III leaves the reader impressed with the organizational and executive skills that contributed to the rapid growth of Opus Dei and its ability to spread its message in vastly different environments all around the world.

We would like to know more about Escrivá's style of government and especially to learn how he approached and solved specific problems that must have arisen especially in Opus Dei's early days in different countries. But despite Vázquez de Prada's lack of focus on such questions, the story he tells leaves us with the impression of an extraordinarily competent executive with broad vision and high goals.

Concern for the expansion of Opus Dei and the problems that growth brought with it did not distract Escrivá, however, from a warm personal interest in his individual sons and daughters and their personal concerns. Writing to the members of the governing body of Opus Dei in Spain, he urged them not to limit themselves to consulting him about questions that needed to be resolved but to keep him informed about daily events: “When I write you, I realize that ever since we started doing the work of government in this methodical way (which is easier and more reliable), quite a few years ago now, our letters haven’t had the same flavor as in the early days.

So, since the spiritual and material problems come in ‘administrative prose’, please always include some little story whenever you write me, so I can savor the grace—the poetry—of your apostolic endeavors. It’s a good thing that when you see me, you tell me so many wonderful things. God bless you” (Quoted in III, p. 328).

For many years he made a practice of sending birthday greetings to the members of Opus Dei who turned forty, not limiting himself to a card or a standard formula but writing something different to each one: “A thousand congratulations on your fortieth spring—now starts your youth” (Quoted in III, p. 329). “Forty years, no matter how you look at it, is not a lot—two times twenty” (Quoted in III, p. 330). “A thousand greetings, for your birthday, and because I know that you, like all of us, will be forever young—ad Deum, qui laetificat iuventutem! [“God gives joy to my youth”. At the time priests said these words everyday at the beginning of Mass] “I didn’t forget today to pray specially for you, because you are now a ‘mature gentleman’— forty years old” (Quoted in III, p. 330).

When he heard that one of his sons or daughters found themselves in some special situation, he not only prayed for them but also took the time to write them. In 1964, for instance, he wrote to a priest in Spain who was overwhelmed with work: “When you find the excessive workload a bit overwhelming, remember that work—excessive work—is an incurable illness for those of us who are God’s children in Opus Dei. And smile, and pass on that good spirit to others”. (Letter to Jesús Urteaga Loidi. Quoted in III, p. 327, n. 26).

Anyone of these various facets of St. Josemaría’s personality would be interesting, but the truly fascinating aspect of Vázquez de Prada’s portrait is how these, and many other seemingly contrasting characteristics, come together to form one harmonious personality.

Further Work

One might wonder what remains to be done after this monumental biography. The answer is much. It is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that a biography which was completed while Escrivá's cause of canonization was still pending should focus primarily on illustrating his sanctity and should go to great lengths to insure that readers never draw any negative conclusions about him. Now, however, that Escrivá has been canonized, it is time for less hagiographic studies that concentrate less on demonstrating Escrivá's sanctity and develop more other aspects of his life.

Much remains to be done to place Escrivá in historical context, both as regards factors that influenced him and his influence on the life of the Church. It would be interesting to explore, for instance, how Escrivá's solutions to the various problems he faced in developing Opus Dei reflect and how they transcend the culture of the society in which he was raised and the education he received in the seminary and in law school. Much also remains to be studied about how the spirit which Escrivá transmitted to Opus Dei relates to the theological discussions of the first half of the twentieth century and about the influence that the spirit and practice of Opus Dei had on the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the laity.

Vázquez de Prada's focus is strictly biographical. Escrivá's person is, however, as the title *The Founder of Opus Dei* indicates, inextricably linked to Opus Dei. We find in Vazquéz de Prada an outline of Opus Dei's growth and development after the end of World War II. It would be interesting, however, to learn more about that growth and concretely about Escrivá's role, which shifted from direct personal involvement to inspiring and directing activities carried out by others, often in religious, social, and cultural environments of which he had little or no personal experience.

With the passage of time future studies will need to examine in greater depth and detail the subjects which Vázquez de Prada considered too delicate to explore fully. His account of the campaigns of criticism against Opus Dei and its founder in the 1940s, for example, is much fuller than that given by any previous author (Vol. III, pp. 334-360), but at many points the reader has the sensation that only part of the story is being told, perhaps to avoid criticizing people who are still alive or who died only recently. This sensation is even stronger when we come to his account of hostility toward Escrivá and Opus Dei in certain ecclesiastical circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Speaking about this hostility to Opus Dei, Vazquéz de Prada, for example, raises the tantalizing issue of "how this net of suspicions and misunderstandings was being woven" but then gives no further information (Vol.

III, p. 443, n. 99).

None of these suggestions for further research should be read to take anything away from Vázquez de Prada's monumental accomplishment. Those who follow after will long be indebted to his research and to the colossal effort involved in turning a vast mass of information into a coherent narrative.