



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## A Surprising and Unusual Book

*Pedro Rodríguez*

*The Way*, one of the twentieth century's best known spiritual works, had a great impact on me personally and has been part of my life since the day it first came into my hands. Later, I studied it in depth and I have written about its history, spirituality and theology. It is a surprising and unusual book.

The critical edition refers to *The Way* as “the book that was never written.” Let me explain. Escrivá was a priest who preached the Gospel whenever he had the chance. He would prepare short outlines where he jotted down ideas and anecdotes. He always kept a small piece of paper in his cassock pocket so that wherever he was—walking along the street, on a streetcar, etc.— he could note down experiences, ideas, phrases from Scripture or invocations to Jesus that welled up in his heart. His heart was filled with God, who had made him “see” that he was to build up Opus Dei to serve the Church and the world. Expressed on those small scraps of paper was the ideal that filled his soul: a future where, in the midst of all the upright activities of the world, men and women would in each moment seek union with God and fraternity (holiness).

Behind those notes—later transferred to index cards and used for his own prayer—were God and all the people he was dealing with who were constantly in his mind and heart. When Escrivá “sat down to write”, he found the book already contained in those short phrases from his prayer and his life. He had only to arrange the pieces of paper and index cards, the famous “points” of *The Way*. And so the book came to be without being written.

The “book” spent its first years as mimeographed sheets that Escrivá gave to the university students who came to him for spiritual advice. They were a way to prolong his personal conversations with the students about God. Escrivá liked to speak to each soul in a friendly, face-to-face way, but, when time to cover everything was lacking, the mimeographed sheets would continue the conversation: “We don’t have any more time, but read these sheets slowly and we’ll talk about them some other day.” These pages, used for personal meditation,

served to communicate ideas and hold a conversation in God's presence.

The mimeographed sheets first appeared almost 75 years ago, and so the cultural, social and historical setting of *The Way* is quite different from today's. But it is characteristic of all enduring books that they transcend their original setting and appeal to men and women of various cultures. The reader of *The Way* today, just as yesterday, quickly realizes that he has entered into a conversation with someone who is speaking to him forcefully and lovingly. He speaks to the reader directly and compellingly about Jesus Christ, the center of all human history: "Christ has died for you. –You...what must you do for Christ?" (*The Way*, 299). The "atmosphere" of *The Way* is that of Jesus of Nazareth who stands before both Escrivá and the reader.

The book's origin may also have something to do with another surprising "anomaly." I refer to the impact that *The Way* has had on many non-Catholic and even non-Christian readers from quite varied cultural backgrounds. I find this surprising, since *The Way* is not just a "Catholic" book, but, one might say, an "intra-Catholic" one. What I mean is that, both in its origin and its intended audience, everything takes place (one sees this on every page) on the spiritual plane of the Catholic faith: its doctrine, its liturgy, its tradition, its devotional practices. *The Way* in its origin is, as I have already said, a help for the spiritual direction that its author, a Catholic priest, offered to the faithful who approached him to grow in their Christian life. Thus one would think that non-Catholics and especially non-Christians would find it difficult to understand many pages in the book, not only because they come from a different cultural background, but also because they lack knowledge of the Catholic faith and its practice. It would never occur to me, as a theologian or pastor of souls, to give this book to a non-Christian as an "introduction" to Christianity, in order to learn more about the origin, doctrine and structure of the Church. *The Way* was not written for this purpose. Nevertheless, for many people their first contact with Christianity has been a point from *The Way*, and this small but great book has struck an existential chord with them and led them towards the faith. God clearly has his own ways, and each person has their own personal path to the faith.

The paradox of *The Way's* impact on people so distant from the Catholic Church is, perhaps, related to something that runs through every page of the book. Escrivá and his conversational partner, the reader, appear as persons of flesh and blood living in the midst of society, with real sins and virtues, passions and interests, joys and sorrows, successes and failures. It is these human realities, contemplated in Christ, that form the framework of the book and—transcending differences of culture and religion—"hook" the reader who opens up *The Way*.

Many men and women, upon reading it, have received a sudden stream of light that illumined their human condition. Thus they verified, unknowingly, what the Second Vatican Council would say thirty years after those “small sheets of paper” were filled with St. Josemaría’s jottings: “it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22).

*The Way* is certainly an unusual book, one that resists any attempt to read it just for information or as a scholarly work. Perhaps this is because it shares so strongly that very Christian quality of being first and foremost life and witness. In this witness the spirit of Opus Dei is everywhere implicitly present, although not as a systematic presentation. As the author says in his prologue, it is an attempt to “stir your memory so that some thought may arise and strike you: and so your life will improve and you will set out along the way of prayer and of Love.”

**Msgr. Pedro Rodríguez** is the author of the Critical edition of *The Way*, with annotations on scriptural, theological and historical references (*Camino. Edición crítico-histórica*, Rialp, Madrid 2002)