



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## Africa, its people and the message of Josemaria Escrivá

*Lydia Waithera*

The goal which I propose to you – better still the goal that God sets for you - is holiness. This message of saint Josemaria came to Africa almost 50 years ago. The following article highlights the reception of saint Josemaria’s message as something personal, like the voice of a close friend that illuminates the most ordinary things in life. The author, Lydia Waithera, describes Africa as a land where no one is an isolated individual.

For generations in Africa, there has always been a sense of belonging, of forming part of a clan or a family. This reflects the sense of belonging found in God’s family, of this God, Creator and Lord. Saint Josemaria saw God most of all as a Father. This encouraged him to write: “No-one can consider himself as a solitary verse, but rather everyone is part of the same divine poem, which God writes, with the help of our freedom”.

The African people are naturally religious. They seem to have an innate sense of the supernatural. The name of God is very often on their lips. It would be unthinkable for an African to live throughout the day without mentioning or thinking about God. Christianity arrived to East Africa as recently as a 100 years ago and the teachings of saint Josemaria were introduced in 1958. Many of the Africans who came to hear of the message of saint Josemaria were first generation Catholics or Christians.

One such person describes the impact of the message of saint Josemaria: “The missionaries brought us the message of a God who loves us so much that He became man for our sake. They showed us how to build churches and to go and worship God in these sanctuaries. Saint Josemaria showed us how to look for God also in the street, looking for Him in our everyday occupations”. It is a personal and relevant message. A very young person said to me once, referring to “The Way”, the most widely known book written by Josemaria Escriva: “When I

read *The Way* , I ask myself, who wrote this, who is this man? He is writing for me, only for me”.

For many Africans, the idea of finding God in ordinary life means finding Him in the midst of poverty. I think that this idea has deeply impressed those Africans who have become acquainted with saint Josemaria’s message. I know a family that was going through a financial crisis because the father had lost his job and shortly afterwards the mother as well. Also, one of their children was suffering from an illness that required expensive medication. The financial situation was so bad that one-day their electricity supply was cut since they could not pay the bill. That night, while they were having their dinner by candlelight, one of the young children, who knew saint Josemaria said: “Aren’t we Christians? Well, let's carry this cross with happiness and keep on struggling”.

We are a land of diversity. For example, Kenya has 52 different tribes, each with its own language and customs. The geography of the country is likewise varied and these circumstances influence the different tribes to live in different ways. One of the factors that has helped integrate these peoples has been the message of the Gospel. To somebody from this land, the message that *all belong to one race, the race of the children of God* has an enormous impact.

I still remember the experience of a young white South African, who had lived in the era of the *apartheid* in her country. When she came to study at a multi-racial institution in East Africa, she was terrified at the thought of sharing a bedroom with a black person. However, both discovered through their friendship and loyalty that diversity is a gift, and that in front of God everyone is the same, with the same dignity. Saint Josemaria, who encouraged a number of multi-racial schools in Africa, liked to say with these emphatic words: “There is only one race, the race of the children of God”.