



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

## Founder of Opus Dei

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## Death of Don José Escrivá, November 27, 1924

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On November 27, 1924, Josemaría received a telegram from his mother asking him to come to Logroño because his father had come down with a serious illness. He took the train that very afternoon. At Logroño station he was met by Manuel Cenicerós, a godson of Señor Garrigosa's who worked as a clerk at "The Great City of London". It was Manuel who had sent the telegram, at the request of Doña Dolores.

From its tone and the urgency with which it was given him by the president of the seminary, Bishop Miguel de los Santos Díaz Gomara, Josemaría knew before he left Saragossa that his father had died. As soon as he entered the house he saw the body, already piously enshrouded by his mother and sister, laid out on a crimson bedspread on the living-room floor. The son wept freely, and then prayed with great Christian serenity.

They told him what had happened. Early in the morning, just after breakfast, Don José Escrivá had played for a short time with little Santiago. Then he had knelt in front of a statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, to whom he was very devoted and whose confraternity had brought it to the Escrivá's home, this being their week to have it. He then said good-bye and turned to leave, but before reaching the door he was stricken. Crying out in pain, he grabbed hold of the door jamb, and then collapsed. Carmen and Doña Dolores rushed to his side. They got him into bed and, realizing the seriousness of his condition, immediately called the doctor and the parish priest. But there was nothing the doctor could do. Two hours later, having received the last sacraments but not having regained consciousness, Don José died.

At nine that morning when "The Great City of London" opened for business, the other employees were surprised that Don José was not there. It was most unusual for this meticulously punctual man to be late. On a hunch, the owner sent Manuel to the Escrivá home on Sagasta Street to find out what had happened. Don José

died soon after Manuel got there.

A heartbroken Josemaría comforted his family. Little Santiago, who was then about six, would never forget the expression his brother had on his face when, facing the body, he promised to take over his father's responsibilities for them. "He said in front of my mother, my sister, and me – these are the words I remember – that he would never abandon us and would take care of us."

He immediately took charge of the preparations for the funeral and burial, making the arrangements for the coffin, the grave, the services, and the incidental expenses. But the family did not have sufficient savings. In this painful predicament, Josemaría had to request assistance from Father Daniel Alfaro, a military chaplain who was an acquaintance of the family. This priest would forever be remembered for his charitable loan. The money was soon paid back, but Josemaría never ceased to remember him with gratitude in his Masses. For several years he did this in the Memento of the Living, and later in the Memento of the Dead.

A wake was held throughout the night. Friends from Logroño and Don José's coworkers were there. But the relatives did not come.

The burial took place the following day. Before closing the coffin, Josemaría removed the cross that lay in his father's hands: a poor, worn cross which had also lain in the hands of his grandmother Constanca.

The funeral party crossed a bridge en route to the cemetery. Josemaría walked in front, apart from the rest, as the only relative of the deceased who was present. His mother and sister had remained at home, since it was not customary then for the women of the family to attend the burial. At the grave site the traditional prayer for the dead was recited, and then Father Daniel Alfaro, at Josemaría's request, said some additional prayers.

The coffin was lowered into the grave, and the son threw on it the first handful of earth. The grave digger handed him the key with which he had locked the coffin. Crossing the bridge over the Ebro on the way back to Logroño with the funeral party, the son reflected on his loss. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the coffin key. Resolutely, as though ridding himself of a symbolic attachment that could distract him from his vocation, he threw the key in the river. "Why," he thought to himself, "should I want to keep this key, when it could be for me an undue attachment?"

Days of mourning and of family privacy followed. During this time, on the first of December, a city census reached their neighborhood. Perhaps no documentation could be more simply eloquent of the change in the Escrivá home than the signature given on the census form for “head of the family”: “Dolores Albás, Widow of Escrivá.”

Although officially it was the widow who was head of the family, it was the elder son who took charge of everything. He decided that within a few weeks, as soon as he could manage to rent an apartment in Saragossa, they would go live with him. Overnight, there had fallen on the shoulders of the young seminarian the heavy responsibility of financially supporting his family. His hopes in that little brother of his – that other son whom he had asked our Lord to send to take his place since he was becoming a priest – had collapsed. Now he had to be more of a father to Santiago than an older brother.

He took a long, hard look at his situation. He was now a subdeacon. As such, he was bound by certain commitments he had made to the Church, including that of remaining dedicated to the service of God in celibacy. True, he could apply for a dispensation, and in view of his new obligations, who would be surprised if he did? Nevertheless, despite the recent misfortune, he felt interiorly strengthened, as if all the more confirmed in his vocation. His unlimited trust in Divine Providence led him to see the issue as entirely resolved. Whereas if he father’s death had occurred before he took the subdiaconate, might there not have been some doubt about whether he should continue to seek the priesthood?

Now, in compensation for this new family misfortune, he was able to see more clearly the meaning of his life and the hand of God accompanying him through all his sufferings. On the path of suffering his life was being stripped of human encumbrances, material resources, and whatever might have represented support in the future. He thought of the three little sisters who had died in Barbastro, the collapse of his father’s business, the financial constraints, and the family left in his care. All this became part of the history of his soul. Our Lord was forging it by means of these family woes.

Don José died worn out by work and worries. But from him his son had learned something he would never forget: “I saw him suffer with cheerfulness, without showing the suffering. And I saw a courage that was a school for me, because later I would so often feel as if the sky was falling on me, or as if I was being squeezed between two sheets of iron. With those lessons and the grace of the Lord, perhaps I did lose my peace occasionally, but not very often... My father died exhausted, but still with a smile on his lips and a special congeniality.”

With deep gratitude Josemaría recognized the roles played by his parents in God's plans for him, and how exemplary their virtues were. The memory of Don José, patient and serene in the face of adversity, forgetful of himself in service of his neighbor, grew in a holy way in his son's mind to involve something more than filial affection. "Logroño! What dear memories," he wrote in a letter dated May 9, 1938. "In that cemetery lie my father's mortal remains, which for me – for many reasons – are relics. I hope to recover them some day."

**Extract from *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá, Volume I: The Early Years*, Andrés Vázquez de Prada, Princeton, N.J.: Scepter Publishers, pp.134-138.**