



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Expansion

1946.1.3

Between 1946 and 1960 Opus Dei began its apostolate in several new countries, including Portugal, Italy, Great Britain, France, Ireland, the US, Kenya, and Japan.

These were years of physical suffering. The Father's diabetes was the cause of great discomfort. He lived with a constant headache, suffered chronic thirst, and gained too much weight, in addition to the other problems that can arise in connection with this illness. Each day he was injected with a heavy dose of insulin. But his attitude remained one of unflinching cheerfulness. He joked with good humor about the excess sugar in his blood:

"I guess they'll have to call me *Pater dulcissimus* ('Most Sweet Father')."

He seemed to give no importance to the incurable nature of the disease.

On April 27, 1954, Father Álvaro had just given him an injection of insulin and they were seated at a table. All of a sudden, the Father asked him:

"Álvaro, give me absolution."

Father Álvaro, failing to understand him, replied:

"But Father, what are you talking about?"

"Absolution!"

Seeing his confusion, the Father began to prompt him with the sacramental words:

"*Ego te absolvo...*" ("I absolve you...")

He lost consciousness, fell on one side and immediately began to turn different colors: red, purple, clammy yellow...

Father Álvaro gave him absolution and hurriedly called the doctor, but by the time he arrived, the Father was already coming to. It had been an anaphylactic shock. He was left blind for several hours, but afterwards recovered completely. Although some of the consequences of the disease would remain with him in the years to come, he no longer had diabetes. The attending physician was dumbfounded. The sickness had lasted more than ten years.

Villa Tevere, the house in Rome

By this time, the property in Rome, on Bruno Buozzi Avenue, had become a construction site. They had obtained the property as usual with almost no funds, confiding in the providence of God and with the encouragement of various Curia officials. At the beginning they had to live in the small gatehouse at the entrance called the pensionato, whose tenants had moved out. Now the house started taking shape. A house which would never be rich, the founder said, but which would be built to last, precisely out of love for poverty: Villa Tevere.

These years were also the years of the spread of the Work in Europe and the Americas. In 1946, some members of Opus Dei began working in Portugal, Italy, and Great Britain. In 1947, it was France and Ireland's turn. By the end of the decade a start had been made in Mexico and the United States. In 1950, Chile and Argentina; in 1951, Colombia and Venezuela; in 1952, Germany. The expansion would continue at this lively pace. By 1949, a summer course of formation was held for the first members from various countries.

The Work took hardy root in these diverse areas, a sign that it was God's doing. And people began to come to the Work in all of these places, from very different cultural and social backgrounds. The need to furnish them with a more effective formation arose. Thus, in 1948, although still hampered by makeshift living arrangements, Saint Josemaría established the Roman College of the Holy Cross. To it would come members of the Work from all over the world for a special period of formation close to the heart of the Church and the heart of the Work.

On December 12, 1953 he established the Roman College of Holy Mary for the women of Opus Dei. Since that time thousands of men and women have been formed in these centers. Many of the men who studied there have received priestly ordination.

Cooperators of Opus Dei

Another forward-looking innovation of these years was to admit non-Catholics as cooperators. "With respect to religious freedom, from its foundation Opus Dei has never practiced discrimination of any kind. It works and lives with everyone because it sees in each person a soul which must be respected and loved. These are not mere words. Our Work, with the authorization of the Holy See, admitted non-Catholics, whether Christian or not, as Cooperators. "This is why Saint Josemaría could jokingly, but with great respect, say to Pope John XXIII: "I did not learn ecumenism from Your Holiness," because non-Catholics, including

non-Christians, were already cooperators of the Work prior to his pontificate.

To countries in Europe

The founder sent his sons and daughters to various countries with the same faith in Providence with which he had begun every activity — with almost nothing, as Jesus sent out his disciples. But he followed their steps with fatherly care. He undertook long and uncomfortable trips to visit them and to prepare the terrain (with prayer and meetings with Church authorities) before their arrival. Sister Lucia, the visionary of Fatima, had already asked him in 1945 to have the Work start in Portugal as soon as possible. In 1949, Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich received him enthusiastically, asking that Opus Dei start in Germany. The scene was repeated in Zurich, Basel, Bonn, Cologne, Paris, Amsterdam, Louvain, and other cities. He arrived in Vienna when Soviet soldiers were still a common sight in the streets. There in the Austrian capital he began to pray the aspiration *Sancta Maria, Stella Orientis, filios tuos adiuva!* (“Holy Mary, Star of the East, help your children!”), thinking of those countries left under Communist rule after World War II.

He traveled in an antiquated and cramped car on roads still damaged from the recent war, but he lightened the journey for his companions by breaking out into songs and by his cheerful conversation. Often he prayed out loud in the car, commenting on the words of the Lord: “I have chosen you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide.” Visits to shrines of our Lady were a standard feature of the trip.

In the years straddling the decades of the 1950’s and 60’s he went to England to spend some weeks during the summer. He placed particular hope in that nation, due both to its university tradition and to its eminent place in the world. “This England is a great place,” he wrote. “If you help us, we will work with constancy in this crossroads of the world: pray and offer small mortifications cheerfully.”

In August of 1958, he was walking through the city of London, looking at the concentration of powerful institutions built up over centuries. How would it be possible to bring the light of Jesus Christ here? The spirit of the Work? That teeming flow of people of every race and nation, was it really Christian? It seemed as if everything was still left to do, and he felt the weight of all his weakness.

“I can’t do it, Lord, I can’t do it!”

But God made him understand, “You can’t do it, but I can.”

One day in Rome

However numerous, these forays abroad were always brief. He did not want to be too distant from the headquarters of Opus Dei. His days for the most part were spent in prayer, in reviewing apostolic plans, in forming his sons and daughters. His usual schedule did not vary much during all his years in Rome. Orderly by nature as well as by habit, he knew how to multiply his time. He got up early in the morning, made a half hour of mental prayer with a group of his sons, celebrated Mass — the center and root, not only of his day, but of his life as well. During breakfast that was frugal even by continental European standards, he glanced at the newspaper, a time that came to be, paradoxically, one of intense union with God, full of thanksgiving and reparation.

Together with Father Alvaro, the secretary general of Opus Dei, he then set to work on the ordinary affairs involved in governing Opus Dei. News, consultations, apostolic plans poured in from all over the world, and the founder had a stated policy of not being the one to hold things up.

At the end of the morning he often received visitors who sought him out for his prayer, his advice, and his affection. People from all over the world, members of the Work or not, came to see him. And all left comforted. After the main meal at mid-day, simple and frugal, he relaxed by getting together with and talking informally with his closest collaborators or with the students of the Roman College. Then he returned to work, prayer, the recitation of the Rosary, study, and writing.