



Saint Josemaría Escrivá

Founder of Opus Dei

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First ordination of faithful of Opus Dei to the priesthood

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The first three priests ordained from among the faithful of Opus Dei, on June 25, 1944 by the Bishop of Madrid were Father Alvaro del Portillo, Father Jose Maria Hernandez Garnica, and Father Jose Luis Muzquiz. All three of them were qualified civil or mining engineers.

The first whom St Josemaría invited to become a priest was [Alvaro del Portillo](#). St Josemaría began by stressing to him that he was absolutely free to decide, and stirring up desires of service in his soul. “If this is all right with you,” he said, **“if you want it and have nothing against it, if you with complete freedom say yes to this, I will have you ordained a priest. I call you to the priesthood not because you are better, but in order to serve the others.”**

“[Jose Maria Hernandez Garnica](#), nicknamed Chiqui, had joined Opus Dei in July 1935.

[Jose Luis Muzquiz](#) had joined in 1940, though he first met the founder in 1935, while finishing his civil engineering studies. He had then taken part in circles (small group classes of formation) held at the Ferraz Street residence. When the Spanish Civil War began he was on a study trip through Europe. In 1939 he continued to receive spiritual direction from St Josemaría. And finally, he tells us, on a day of recollection, right after hearing a meditation given by Father Josemaría, “without his having expressly invited me, I told him that I wanted to join the Work. And he simply said to me, ‘May God bless you, it is something of the Holy Spirit.’ This happened on January 21, 1940.”

Since 1928 St Josemaría had been the only priest in Opus Dei. He wrote in 1944: **“In the early years, I accepted the help of a few priests who wanted to bind themselves to Opus Dei in some way. But God soon made it quite clear to me that, although they were good people (some of them outstandingly good), they were not the ones called to carry out that mission. And so, in an**

early document, I indicated that for the time being – I would later let them know till when – they should limit themselves to administering the sacraments and to strictly ecclesiastical functions.”

At the end of 1930, at a time when only two or three laymen and Father Norberto, assistant chaplain of the Foundation for the Sick, were with him, Father Josemaría had written: **“The priest members have to come from among the lay members.”**

He also wrote: **“Without priests, the apostolic efforts initiated by the lay members of Opus Dei would remain uncompleted, since they would necessarily have to stop when they came up against what I often call the ‘sacramental wall’ – the administration of sacraments, which is reserved to priests.”**

Having some priests in Opus Dei was essential for its internal structure and its development. Summing up some of the causes and reasons why Opus Dei needed priests, St Josemaría wrote, **“Priests are also necessary for the spiritual care of the members of the Work: to administer the sacraments, to assist the lay directors in directing souls, to impart deep theological instruction to the other members of Opus Dei, and – a basic point in the very constitution of the Work – to perform certain tasks of its government.”**

From the uncertainty of his first efforts to his tangible, confident hope in the first three of his sons who were training for the priesthood, ten years had gone by, measured by his prayer and mortification. Four more years would pass before they were ordained in 1944. **“For many years I prayed, trustingly, eagerly, for your brothers who were going to be ordained and for those who would follow after them,”** he wrote in 1956. **“I prayed so much that I can truly say that *all the priests of Opus Dei are children of my prayer.*”**

Yet he often insisted that priesthood did not “crown” a vocation to the Work. On the contrary, by reason of their full availability for apostolic tasks and their formation, all numeraries of the men’s branch can be said to have the necessary conditions for the priesthood and to be ready for priestly ordination if our Lord asks this of them and the Prelate of Opus Dei invites them to serve the Church and the Work in this way.

The founder’s resolutions from November 1941 include: **“Pray, suffer and work untiringly until the priests Jesus wants in the Work are a reality. Speak about this point with our Bishop of Madrid, my father.”**

Training the future priests

When he spoke with the Bishop it was about the future priests' ecclesiastical studies. Usually these studies were done at a formal center of instruction, such as a diocesan seminary or a pontifical university. But given these students' circumstances, their age and professional backgrounds, it was agreed that they would receive their classes from private professors at the Diego de Leon center of Opus Dei. The director of studies was Father Jose Maria Bueno Monreal, since 1927 professor of canon law and moral theology in the Madrid seminary.

In the spring of 1942 the director reported that the students were "very well prepared to pass their exams."

St Josemaria wrote in 1956, **"When I began preparing the first priests in the Work, I went overboard – if one might say so – with their philosophical and theological formation. I did so for many reasons. The second reason, to please God; the third, because many people were looking to me with affection, and I could not let them down; the fourth, because there were people who didn't like us and were looking for an opportunity to attack us; and then, because I have always urged my sons to get the best possible professional formation. And the first reason (since I could die at any moment): because I will have to render an account to God for what I have done, and I ardently desire to save my soul."**

Two notes he saved are relevant here: **"Priestly formation: Opus Dei certainly has to provide this!"** and **"The priesthood is received when one is ordained, but priestly formation..."** He also wrote: **"Formation is a lifelong task. Because life is progress, and anyone who stops is soon left behind, and will end up stuck in a ditch."**

The three candidates received their pastoral training for Holy Orders directly from St Josemaria, who took great care over forming them in all the priestly virtues. As mentioned above, they did their theological studies not in the seminary but in the Diego de Leon center of Opus Dei, which was formally established as the Center for Ecclesiastical Studies of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross in December 1943.

See further: *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, volume II *God and Daring*, Andrés Vázquez de Prada, Scepter, 2003, pp. 294,

420-426.