



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Freedom, politics and Opus Dei

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The difficulties that the Work encountered in the sixties did not come just from the opposition of one particular person or group. The founder faced all kinds of resistance, as often happens with any institution of historic significance. Some of these have already been mentioned, in connection with the turbulence that surrounded the Second Vatican Council. Others arose from the political arena. Defamatory campaigns originating in Spain soon spread to other countries.

The founder by now was so used to them that, more than rob him of his peace, they generally just robbed him of time, leaving his cheerfulness intact. Behind the attacks on the Work he could see the hand of God. Thus he wrote to his children:

“Never have we failed to see the involvement of Divine Providence when, periodically, with a frequency that reveals the not very clean hand of certain individuals and their chorus of supporters, these mudslinging spates occur. Blessed be God. When the Nile overflows its banks, it soon returns to its bed – everything returns victoriously to its bed – and the flooded fields are left dry and fertile.”

He had no desire to fight with those who insulted him. His was a battle of love, an effort always to sow peace and joy.

In those inevitable clashes, those campaigns of denigration, there was seldom any lack of strong feelings, partisanship, or bad faith. The founder advised “being understanding when they don’t understand us.” A generous attitude of being quick to forgive mistakes and to take on the sentiments of Christ, in our dealings both with fellow Catholics and with those enemies of the Church who are out to return Christians to the catacombs. The founder wrote: “Let’s not blow things up out of proportion. It’s logical that the enemies of God and of his Church don’t like us. And it’s also logical that, in spite of everything, we love them: ‘*Caritas mea cum omnibus vobis in Christo Iesu!* - My love be with you all in Christ Jesus! (I Cor 16:24)’.”

Both in speech and in writing, the founder never tired of speaking to his children about freedom. One might well see this as being because of the strained situation there now was in Spain, after so many years of authoritarian government. But Monsignor Escrivá's insistence on freedom was not focused on the current scene in this or that country. In 1954 he wrote: "I will never tire of repeating, my children, that one of the most obvious characteristics of the spirit of Opus Dei is its love for freedom and understanding. In the human realm, I want to leave you as legacy a love for freedom and good-naturedness."

He kept the flag of freedom very high. He thanked God with all his heart for "the great adventure of freedom". He taught this freedom to his sons and daughters as soon as they came to the Work. His life was a continual fight for freedom of spirit, since only this personal freedom makes one "capable of meriting or offending, of pardoning or of harboring resentment, of hating or of loving".

Furthermore, so necessary was that "precious gift of freedom" that where there was no freedom, the apostolates of Opus Dei would suffocate. For "freedom and the resultant responsibility are, as it were, the seal of lay activity, in the apostolate as well."

Freedom as "an essential characteristic" of the spirit of Opus Dei was implicit since 1928 in the life and apostolate of its members.

"It is quite common to find, even among apparently responsible and devout Catholics, the error of thinking that they're only obliged to carry out their family and religious duties. They seldom want to hear any mention of civic duties. The problem is not selfishness; it's simply a lack of formation."

But it was not just a matter of duties. The founder also energetically defended the right of Catholics to participate actively in public life. And to those who devoted themselves specifically to political work, whether with a certain party or in government or whatever, he repeatedly emphasized that they were doing this on their own. This principle was already fixed from the very beginning. The founder wrote that in political matters each member of the Work had complete freedom and therefore the sole responsibility for his or her activity. "Never," he declared, "can the directors of the Work impose any political or professional – in a word, temporal – guidelines on their brothers and sisters."

The following words were addressed to those who chose politics as their professional vocation: "Like all the other members of the Work in their temporal occupations, when acting in that field you do so without calling attention to your

being Catholics or members of Opus Dei; without using either the Church or the Work. For you know that you can't mix up either God's Church or the Work in contingent things...

Those of you who find yourselves with a vocation to politics should work without fear and realize that if you didn't do so, you would sin by omission. Work with professional seriousness, paying attention to the technical demands of that work of yours, setting your sights on Christian service to all the people of your country, and fostering harmony among all nations."

The rights to political choice and activity that every citizen should enjoy have not always been respected, and certainly they were not in the Spain of that time. The Franco regime had its origins in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and was mounted on a platform that justified authoritarian personal power. When in 1957 Franco had to restructure the government, he gave representation to the political forces making up the National Movement: the Falangists, the Carlist Traditionalists, the Francoist Christian Democrats, the Dynastic Monarchists, and, the same as in every other cabinet of his, some trustworthy high-level bureaucrats with special expertise. The purpose of the change was to work out and put into effect the social, political, administrative, and economic reforms that Franco thought the country needed. But at the same time, the new cabinet was a reflection of his basic ideas of national, political, and social unity – ideas which impeded political and social pluralism.

One of the new government's aims was an integration of the Spanish economy into the framework of the Western world. Consultations with the IMF and the OECD led to a plan for stabilization and to deregulation measures proper to a market economy. That economic operation was piloted by the Minister of the Treasury, Mariano Navarro Rubio, and by the Minister of Commerce, Alberto Ullastres Calvo, and enjoyed the support of most of the economic leaders. The stabilization plan was approved in July 1959. Two years later studies began that led to the plans for development and economic expansion.

The fact that there were in the Spanish government members of Opus Dei (Navarro Rubio and Ullastres) gave rise to gossip of various kinds in the social and political spheres. Some groups in the National Movement disparagingly called them technocrats. With this term they wanted to point out, in a cryptic way, their belonging to Opus Dei Dei, and to discredit them politically.

It must be noted, first of all, that if they were ministers, that was due to the decision of Franco, who had full control of the state; and, of course, to their free acceptance of their appointments. Their belonging to Opus Dei had no bearing on their decision from a political standpoint, although it may well have been reflected

in the professional rigor and moral sensibilities with which they carried out their work. Like their colleagues in the government who were also Catholics, they tried to make their decisions, in matters social as well as political, in accord with their conscience, and were conscious of the fact that their political actions should reflect the faith that they professed.

Upon hearing of the appointment of Alberto Ullastres, a cardinal felt that he should congratulate the founder. But the founder said decisively, "To me it's neither here nor there; I don't care.

Minister or street cleaner, it's all the same to me. The only thing I care about is that he becomes holy through his work."

The success of the stabilization plan laid the groundwork for the development plans. At the same time, throughout 1962, rumors of changes in the government were flying, because of the need to respond to the challenges that were arising in a society growing ever more conscious of its political and social rights. There was something of a crisis in the government. And during this time it came to the attention of the founder that in some sectors, the Work was considered a political group. To dispel this erroneous notion, the office of the General Secretariat of Opus Dei issued, on June 17, 1962, a communiqué stating the following: "The members of Opus Dei are completely free in their political thought and action, the same as all other Catholic citizens. Within the association there is room for, and there in fact are, people of differing and even conflicting political ideas; and Opus Dei has nothing to do with the merits or demerits of the personal conduct of its members. It should, therefore, be clear that Opus Dei is not tied to any political person, regime, or idea."

The founder received many visits, from authorities both civil and ecclesiastical. They all had questions to ask him: "Why doesn't Opus Dei take a definite political stand, so that people will know what they should do?" "Why don't you give your followers some instructions or at least guidelines in this area?" And the founder never tired of giving this answer:

"Members of Opus Dei take part in politics (to the extent each one sees opportune) with complete freedom, and, therefore, with personal responsibility. They each do so according to the dictates of their conscience, as Catholic citizens, without allowing anyone else to be implicated in the decisions that they have legitimately made."

He was pressured by several authorities to order the members of Opus Dei to withdraw from the government. But it was not in his power, he told them, to

diminish or co-opt the freedom of any son or daughter of his. And as for making an authoritative pronouncement on a political regime from a doctrinal standpoint, this was not his job but that of the Holy See or the bishops of the country in question.

To order his sons to resign from that government, or from any that was not denounced by the ecclesiastical authorities, would have meant betraying the spirit of Opus Dei.

During the sixties, when a strong campaign against the Work was being launched in several countries, he said to one of the directors of the Regional Commission of Spain: "My son, I would be rid of a lot of problems if those brothers of yours weren't ministers. But if I were to hint at that, I would not be respecting their freedom and I would be destroying the Work."

Neither his absence from Spain nor the silence of his presence in Rome was enough to quiet certain groups. Their unfair treatment of him and the Work, and even the slanders that some newspapers printed about him, did not upset him; to him they were no big deal. But when the attacks on the Work turned into attacks on the Church, the founder changed his habit of bearing injuries in silence. This happened in the first months of 1964, when a fierce campaign against Opus Dei was launched in the Netherlands. The motive? The fact that Princess Irene, a daughter of the Dutch queen, had converted to Catholicism and an Opus Dei priest had been God's instrument in her conversion.

The Father, to calm down the fears of his children in the Netherlands, wrote to them reminding them of the strategy that had worked so well for him throughout his life: "When the Lord allows these groups of fanatics to "give vent" to so many slanders, it's a sign that you and I need to keep quiet, pray, work, smile – and wait. Don't give those idiocies any importance; truly love all those souls. *Caritas mea cum omnibus vobis in Christo Iesu!* - My love be with you all in Christ Jesus! (I Cor 16:24)."

We can get some idea of the severity of that campaign from a letter the founder sent on March 27, 1964, to Bishop Jan Van Dodewaard of Haarlem, as an Easter greeting: "There are still coming to me, from that beloved nation, publications loading on us insults, false interpretations, and slanders that are so wild that, despite being almost an aged priest, I never could have imagined them, not even remotely. But don't worry, Your Excellency, because this only makes me love the Netherlands and all the Dutch people even more."

In his customary program for dealing with opposition (“Keep silent, pray, work, and smile”) the recommendation of silence was changed to that of proclaiming the truth, taking up the defense of God’s honor, and that of the Church and of the Roman Pontiff. And he immediately put this into practice.

This change of behavior derived from his firm resolution not to tolerate defamations of God and his servants. As for insults directed at him personally, these he was ready to continue bearing as before.

“You should be on the alert,” he warned his children, “ – *vigilate et orate!* (Watch and pray!) – always serene, with the joy, the peace, and the courage of one who is acting uprightly. *We cannot keep silent*, because this Mother of ours is and always will be under age, although the years go by; and she needs her sons and daughters to defend her *veritatem facientes in caritate* (doing the truth in charity). I have written to the Holy Father three times already, and a fourth time today, because it is necessary to get rid of this mud. I want you to know that the Pope has a lot of affection for us, and shows it.”

A week later he said again: “Now you need to keep in mind the Gospel counsel, *vigilate et orate!* We can no longer put up with calumny, or venomous insinuation. And of every hundred cases, all hundred of them have their origin in that beloved Spain of mine. Enough is enough!”

He had resolved not to keep quiet about things that were injurious to the Church or the Work. Sometimes he had to pick up his pen, because splatterings from certain press campaigns in France and Spain had reached Rome – smears impugning the spiritual nature of Opus Dei and its universal scope. He would explain to the Pope what the facts really were, the falseness of the accusations, and their origins.

Naturally, these unpleasant events, while not taking away his inner peace, did affect him somewhat. He wrote in a letter at the time: “It hurt me to read that obscene, sarcastic thing that was sent anonymously from Spain. It is inevitable that the devil isn’t happy; when things are going well for the sheep, they aren’t going well for the wolves. I burned that scrap of paper. Stay calm, because your work and that of your brothers and sisters – Opus Dei – is reaching heaven as a pleasing fragrance.”

Well, what could he do to counteract those slanders? One tactic he thought of was to get interviews with correspondents from several nations and publications. The first of these on May 16, 1966, was with a correspondent of *Le Figaro*. His

procedure was simple: tell the truth clearly, tirelessly reiterating that in Opus Dei everyone works with complete personal freedom, differences of activity or opinion not being a problem for the Work, since “the diversity which exists and will always exist among the members of Opus Dei is a sign of good spirit, of an honest life, of respect for the legitimate opinion of each individual.” The interviews were later published in book form under the title *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer* (Dublin: Scepter, 1968).

The founder truly was a “romantic”, who fought for freedom without getting involved in politics. And one big reason is that while politics is the art of governing, and affords many possibilities and very varied inspiration, it must not be forgotten that it is also a gateway to power. For Monsignor Escrivá, respect for human freedom was the best guarantee of the internal unity of the Work, whereas ambition for power would lead directly to its disintegration. Such is the human condition: there is a perennial temptation to impose one’s own will on one’s fellow citizens. Apart from the supernatural ones, these considerations were the founder’s basis for affirming that “an Opus Dei involved in politics is an imaginary figure that has never existed, does not exist, and never could exist. Were that impossible situation to occur, the Work would immediately be dissolved.”

Extracts from *The Founder of Opus Dei, vol. III: The Divine Ways on Earth*, by Andres Vazquez de Prada (New York: Scepter, 2005), showing Saint Josemaría’s attitude to politics and his reactions to slander and misinformation about Opus Dei (pp. 360-382).