



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Friends for 43 years

Msgr Pedro Altabella

Msgr Pedro Altabella first met St Josemaria in Saragossa, Spain, in the early 1920s. In the following article he recalls some aspects of the enduring friendship between them. “I would like to be able to evoke at least some facet of the rich, priestly character of the founder of Opus Dei,” he once said. “I think the fact of having been in frequent contact with him over the space of 43 years authorizes me to attempt this.”

I met Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer when I first arrived at the Conciliar Seminary in the Plaza de la Seo, in 1925, in Saragossa. Josemaria was living in the San Carlos Seminary, and as Superior of the San Francisco de Paula Seminary, he came to accompany the seminarians when they attended classes at the Conciliar Seminary. We would see him come in, dressed in his cloak – as Superior he didn’t wear the normal students’ stripe – looking very distinguished. I think he had just received Minor Orders at that stage. Later the news went round our Seminary that Josemaria was in Madrid. He completed his Law studies there and worked in the apostolate with university students. I didn’t hear anything more of him then.

In January 1934 I was asked to go to Madrid by Cardinal Angel Herrera. We lived at 15 Villanueva Street. It was there that Fr Josemaria Escrivá first greeted me. Our Director, Fr Emilio Bellon, presented me to him, telling me, “Come here, I want you to meet a fellow-townsmen of your own, a great priest and apostle.” He presented me to Fr Josemaria with some joking words about me, and we gave each other a hug of recognition. That was the beginning of an enduring friendship.

We talked about our ideals for the priesthood and the apostolate. Fr Josemaria invited me to visit him at the DYA Academy, in Ferraz Street. When I did, I was struck by the trusting, cheerful way he treated the young men who went there, and his great affection for them. But what really made a deep, lasting impression on me was the great value Josemaria Escriva set on prayer, something he also managed to pass on to those university students. The chapel was full of young men, absorbed in prayer. In those days that was not at all usual.

The theme of prayer was a basic aspect of Josemaria Escriva's personality. I would say that for him, prayer was his strength, his refuge, his favored occupation, his time for light and love. In prayer he was able to listen to his God and his Lord, and promised – a promise he kept – to follow Him faithfully till death. How often I heard him say that he talked everything over in prayer! I remember how at the key moments of his life that I knew of or that he told me of, whether at brilliant times or in bitter, hard moments, with intrepid faith, great decision, and enormous power of conviction, he used to say: "You'll see how God sorts everything out in the best possible way. Let's pray without slackening."

I believe that the source of the attraction Josemaria exercised over others was prayer. His strength came from God; he poured himself out for others in a very human way that was at the same time divine. He was one of the most human people imaginable; he had a heart that never got tired of loving God and his fellow-men. I would sketch his portrait using words from the Letter to the Hebrews on which he himself often meditated: "Every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God" (Heb 5:1). This would be no mere flattery. Josemaria Escriva was a very human man who was very much a man of God. On the basis of a friendship that lasted for 43 years, I can honestly say that he was an exceptionally gifted human being, but that all his strength was from God. A demand that he made on himself and his children was that of being very human, but rooted in God. There is a lot that could be said on this subject.

I have tried to evoke some rapid memories of my friendship with Josemaria Escriva. I would like to end on two more. The first is that, in the friendship between us, he was always the first to make contact, and was always the more loyal of the two. More than once, perhaps he would have had every reason to drop me, or forget me, but he did just the reverse. I could give a thousand instances of his loyalty. And he was who he was; while I – what can I say?

The second thing is this. He never said a word to suggest, or even hint, that I should join the Work – neither on the basis of being a close friend of his, nor because of being a diocesan priest. And God our Lord well knows that the topic of the holiness of priests was one that we spent many hours discussing. I want to make this point, because some people have included me among the members of Opus Dei. Josemaria Escriva was very understanding. He knew very well that one thing is friendship, and quite another is the call from God to a life specifically dedicated to God within coordinates such as those of the Work. That was one of the many motives for our deep love for each others. I think of his friendship as a gift to me from God. And we each followed the path marked out for us by our Lord.

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