



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [Saint Josemaria](#) - [Biography](#) - [Helping Priests](#)

## Helping Priests

1939.1.1

**“I began to give many, many retreats — they used to last seven days at that time — in a number of Spanish dioceses. I was very young and it embarrassed me.**

I always began by going to our Lord and saying to him: ‘You’ll have to see what you are going to say to your priests, because I ...’ I felt so awkward! And afterwards if they didn’t come to chat, I called them one by one, because they weren’t used to talking to the preacher.”

At the beginning of the 1940’s many bishops asked Father Josemaría to preach to their clergy. After the devastation of the civil war it was necessary to nourish the spiritual life of priests, and the laity as well. Father Josemaría’s reputation was growing, not only as an excellent preacher, but also as a holy priest. Some years the number of priests making these retreats exceeded one thousand.

His preaching was his personal prayer made out loud. To his listeners he conveyed his love for our Lord, his own interior life. His theme was always Jesus and the good news of the Gospel, reflecting on Christ’s life in vivid terms. Whatever his immediate topic, whether sin or grace or eternal life, his destination was always personal union with Jesus who lives and who loves us.

### **St Josemaria’s mother dies**

His love for the priesthood and for priests was transparent. In 1941, he had to leave town for one of these retreats in Lérida. Although his mother was ill, he decided to go anyway because the doctor did not think it was serious.

“Could you offer your sufferings for the work I’m going to do?” he asked her.

As he left the room he heard her murmur:

“This son of mine...”

Arriving at the seminary of Lérida, he had knelt before the tabernacle, saying:

“Lord, look after my mother, for I am taking care of your priests.”

Two days later, the thought of his mother still very much in his heart, he proceeded to preach on the role of the priest's mother. It occurred to him to tell his listeners that her role was so important that she should not die till the day after the death of her son the priest.

After the meditation he remained recollected in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Then the apostolic administrator of the diocese, who was making the retreat, came up to him looking stricken and said in a low voice:

“Álvaro del Portillo would like you to phone him in Madrid.”

His mother, Dolores, had died.

Years later, Saint Josemaría affirmed, “I have always thought that our Lord wanted that sacrifice from me, as an external proof of my love for diocesan priests, and that my mother especially continues to intercede for that work.”

That work, like all his activity, was carried out in close union with the bishops. The prelates held him in high regard and blessed the apostolate he was doing with students and other persons in every walk of life.

The bishop of Madrid, the Most Reverend Leopoldo Eijo y Garay, grasped the nature and mission of Opus Dei, and with paternal and seemingly limitless affection he felt honored to facilitate its development in any way possible. His relationship with Father Josemaría was one of firm mutual trust.

### **Misunderstandings, falsehoods and calumny**

However, the Work in general and the founder in particular ran up against the misunderstandings of certain clerics. It didn't take long for a full-blown campaign of rumors and even calumnies to start. Father Josemaría suffered and forgave.

The good bishop, seriously concerned, wished to grant diocesan approval to Opus Dei in March, 1941, hoping to put an end to the malicious gossip. “One night when I was in bed and beginning to fall asleep (when I slept, I slept very soundly; I never lost sleep over the slanders, persecutions and falsehoods of those times) the telephone rang. I answered and heard ‘Josemaría...’ It was Don Leopoldo, then bishop of Madrid. There was a special warmth in his voice... ‘What is it?’ I asked. And he said to me, ‘*Ecce Satanas expetivit vos ut cribaret sicut triticum*’ (‘Behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat’). Then he added: ‘I pray so much for you all...*Et tu... confirma filios tuos!*’ (‘You, confirm your sons’). And he hung up.”

Father Josemaría did everything he could to avoid harboring resentment and to forgive. One night in 1942, exasperated with a heavy load of work and wagging gossiping tongues, he knelt before the tabernacle and declared:  
“Lord, if you don’t need my good name, what should I want it for?”

## **The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross**

The faithful of the Work multiplied to the point that providing priestly ministry to all of them became a concern. Father Josemaría knew that the priests should come from among the laity of Opus Dei. But as much as the founder racked his brain for a solution, he could not find a path that solved the canonical problem of the title of ordination of the future priests.

As always, it was God who furnished the solution. On the morning of February 14, 1943, while he celebrated Mass in a center of Opus Dei, our Lord let him see the solution clearly and precisely. After the Mass he sketched out the seal of the Work (the cross in the world) and began to speak of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

Already three of the first members of Opus Dei, all engineers, had been preparing for priestly ordination. On June 25, 1944, they received Holy Orders at the hands of the bishop of Madrid. Father Josemaría did not want to be present at what could appear to be a success or a triumph. He stayed at home, praying. As he put it in writing some years later: “My role is to hide and disappear, so that only Jesus shines forth.”

However, his concern for the diocesan clergy, so obvious in those years in which he spent so much time in their pastoral care, never dissipated. Couldn’t they too be part of Opus Dei? The eventual inclusion of diocesan priests would have to overcome hurdles posed by canon law that seemed difficult to solve. So strong was his yearning to provide adequate spiritual assistance to diocesan clergy that in 1950 he planned to launch a foundation separate from the Work for this purpose. It would turn out not to be necessary. Our Lord inspired him once more: diocesan priests could be incorporated into the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, while remaining entirely subject to the bishop of the diocese in which they were incardinated.