



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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How I came to Opus Dei

Jose Maria Casciaro

José María Casciaro was born in Murcia, Spain, in 1923. He heard about Opus Dei in 1939, when he was 16, from his older brother Pedro, who had been in Opus Dei since 1935. During the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, Pedro encouraged his younger brother to lead an upright Christian life. When, in April 1939, José María finally met Saint Josemaría, he began to face up to his own vocation to Opus Dei. He related all these memories in a book called *It Is Worth While*.

The divine call is hard to analyze. I have the vivid memory that an interior force was impelling me, gently but clearly, to give myself to God in Opus Dei, of which I had now acquired a fairly thorough knowledge both in theory and in practice through Pedro's explanations. The key to it, undoubtedly, was the commitment to seek genuine Christian sanctification through study as responsible work, done in God's presence. The foundation of the whole of the Christian life was the sense of knowing that I was a son of God, with a mission of service towards others; and the whole thing was to be seen in the setting of the ordinary circumstances of Christian existence, which develops in the middle of the world.

Perhaps the keenest question I faced was that of apostolic celibacy, though I did not use such a technical name for it at that time. I had thought about this before, but now the question was close at hand: no longer an ideal on a far horizon, but a reality plainly to be seen. And the facility with which the heart of a sixteen-year-old inclines towards one or two of the most attractive girls he meets is well known. God's grace made me see, quite clearly, that my path was to choose him, in a divine adventure, over and above any created being. I saw it as an adventure, but at the same time I felt a serene certainty, an inner confidence that can only come from God himself, who gives the call. I think I did not find it very difficult to get used to the idea of total self-giving and decide on it freely, without any kind of trauma, though I was very conscious that that decision implied something very serious. And every time I thought over my choice – to say yes to God's call – I felt a little afraid but very happy inside.

Pedro went straight back to Madrid. I stayed at Torrevieja for Christmas, thinking over all the things we had talked about. I meditated on the points of *The Way* in the tranquil holiday atmosphere. I thought I could take the decisive step soon, when I got back to Barcelona. Before I left Torrevieja I made up my mind seriously to lead a Christian life fully consistent with the demands God was making of me, which I could see more and more clearly. Perhaps because of my youthful impatience, I did not reckon with the fact that the people in Opus Dei would make me wait for several months to consider my attitude.

From my point of view, the prospects for my joining the Work looked perfectly straightforward, but I had to wait. I had seen that Pedro was not in any hurry; rather the opposite. For one thing, I was still a few months short of my seventeenth birthday. For another, the people in Opus Dei wanted to be certain of the firmness and constancy of my decision, as with everyone else.. So there was no hurry. The only person in a hurry was myself.

The Father was expected in Barcelona shortly. When he came I would have the chance to speak to the Founder of Opus Dei directly and, if I wanted, explain my dispositions to him with regard to my decision. Meanwhile, I had to keep on waiting.

On 12 May, while I was having lunch at Uncle Diego Ramirez's house, Rafael Termes telephoned to say that the Father was in Barcelona and I could see him. The wave of emotion that swept over me may easily be imagined. I finished my lunch hastily and said good-bye to the family.

Blessed Josemaría received me straight away. As at our first meeting – it was a year since that day in May 1939 – he treated me with great warmth. He asked me some questions to see whether I had thoroughly understood what the calling to the Work means. My answers seemed to satisfy him. Then he asked me, very seriously, “Has your brother Pedro put pressure on you?”

He asked me the same question in different ways twice more. I remember getting quite anxious, because it almost began to seem as if he was not going to take account of my request, which I had held inside myself for nearly five months now. I no longer remember the way I explained myself, but what I said must have made enough sense for Saint Josemaría to be sure that my decision was completely free and well thought over, because he said finally, “Consider yourself in the Work. Go and have a talk with Alvaro now, and he will explain a few things to you.”

My joy, and relief even, can easily be imagined: at last my long-standing desire was fulfilled, my long-cherished dream was a reality. All this was something tremendous for me. Perhaps I do not need to clarify that asking to be admitted to the Work is not the same thing as belonging to Opus Dei juridically. At least a year and a half more go by to become a member, in law. But the Work offers everyone appropriate means for their ascetical and human formation and their training in religious doctrine, just as it does to those who are, legally speaking, members of Opus Dei; and it shows the same care and attention to everyone. Because of this, from the first moment we feel that we are in the Work, with the full trust of children with their own family, living in a spirit of filiation towards the Father and fraternity towards the other faithful of Opus Dei.

Later, when I recalled that meeting with the Founder of the Work, I understood the exquisite care Blessed Josemaría took of people's freedom in giving themselves to God, so that this self-giving was made sincerely and for supernatural reasons alone. When I heard him say, on various occasions, that in Opus Dei we have a narrow door by which to get in and a wide one for leaving, I always remembered that episode on 12 May 1940, which confirmed the profound truth of this statement.

(In 1998, nearly fifty years after joining Opus Dei, Fr. Casciaro summed up his life as follows:)

At various places in the central buildings of the Prelature, we read the inscription *Vale la pena*, "it is worth while", a motto we often heard the Founder of the Work use, which expresses the value of giving ourselves to God, and directs us to eternal blessedness.

Indeed, when one looks back on those first years of God's call, and then takes a look at the years that followed, one feels the truth of these words very deeply. It was worth while following Blessed Josemaría because that meant, and means, going hand-in-hand with him to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is an adventure but also a safe "path" through the earth to heaven. After more than half a century, how joyful and consoling it is, amidst all my personal failings, to have followed the route God showed me in my early youth!

I have been sustained ever more strongly, day after day, by a joyful ambition to contribute with other people to the marvellous adventure of "doing Opus Dei on earth". On looking back, it is indeed clear that it was worth while making that journey. Yes, once and a thousand times, it was worth while, it is worth while.

Extracts from Jose Maria Casciaro, *It Is Worth While*, Scepter, 1999, pages 97-106 and 267-268.