



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## “I don't want to go to Purgatory!”

*Pilar Urbano*

In her book *El Hombre de Villa Tevere*, Pilar Urbano tells of the visit St Josemaria made to Sofia Varvaro, a young Italian who died after enduring a very serious sickness.

In May 1972 Mercedes Morado told Monsignor Escriva that Sofia Varvaro, a young Italian of the Work, had been diagnosed as having cancer, and the doctors thought she had only a few months to live. Monsignor Escriva said he wanted to go and see her immediately.

Sofia was living in Villino Prati, in the house where his sister, Carmen Escrivá had lived; in fact, she was in the same room as Carmen had been when she died. Monsignor Escriva recalled in a flash the death and burial of his sister, and how her body had been brought from Villino Prati, the little apartment at 276 Via degli Scipioni, to Villa Tevere.

“You know, I said I never wanted to go back to that house again, and I've never been back since then. It holds so many memories! But a daughter is more than a sister. I can't let Sofia leave us without going to see her and saying some words of consolation.”

A few days later Monsignor Escriva went to Villino Prati with Father Javier Echevarria. Teresa Acerbis and Itziar Zumalde were waiting for them in the hall. He started talking to Sofia before he had even entered her room. “Sofia, figlia mia! My daughter!”

When he got to the room he gave her a holy picture of the Blessed Trinity, on the back of which he had written a short prayer in big, bold letters.

“Shall I read you what it says?” he asked her. “Would you like to say it with me? ‘My Lord and my God, into your hands I abandon everything, past, present and future: big and little, great and small, temporal and eternal.’”

Then he encouraged her to be cheerful, to be as simple as a child and let herself be cared for, to take painkillers when she needed them, and to pray for her own cure.

He explained, "It would be too easy to go to Paradise. There's still a lot of work to be done here! Although for us, the most important work is doing God's will in everything."

"Father," she confided, "when they first told me what I had, my reaction was fear. But not fear of suffering or death – fear because I'm a very ordinary person, worth very little, and I don't want to go to [Purgatory!](#)\*"

"How about that! She doesn't want to go to Purgatory! You shan't go, my daughter. Don't be afraid, because our Lord is with you. Besides, that's what everybody in Opus Dei is – ordinary! Our Lord has chosen us and he loves us precisely because we're ordinary people. And you have to pray to get better because, just as you are, we need you! You have to help us a lot. Now I feel stronger because I'm relying on you. You can rely on me, and don't be afraid! But if our Lord wants you up there, you'll have to help us even more from [Heaven](#)\*\*."

After this visit Monsignor Escriva followed the progress of Sofia's disease closely. He stressed to the people who were looking after her that they should do all they possibly could for her, with loving care; that they should be "more than a mother or a sister" to her. He told them not to leave her alone, and to help her to say the prayers and fulfil the other norms of piety that everyone in Opus Dei does every day; and to give her the necessary pain-killers, "so this daughter of mine does not suffer unnecessarily."

He went to visit her again at a private hospital in Rome, when she had got considerably worse. Before going into her room he said to Teresa and Itziar, "She mustn't realise how we are suffering for her. How long will the doctor let us stay so as not to tire her? ... Well, when the time is up, if I forget, tell me: I'll only stay as long as the doctor allows."

He went into the room with Father Javier Echevarria, and sat beside the bedhead. He spoke softly and encouragingly to Sofia about spiritual matters. At a given moment, because he knew the value of suffering, he asked her to offer up her pain and physical difficulties "for the Church, for priests and for the Pope."

"Sofia," he asked her, "will you join me in the intentions of my Mass?"

"But, Father, I'm here in bed. I can't go to Mass any more."

"My daughter, now you are a constant Mass! And tomorrow, when I say Mass, I will place you on the paten."

Shortly after this, Sofia said she was getting tired, and Monsignor Escriva made the sign of the cross on her forehead and said good-bye.

On 24 December while chatting with a group of Italian women of the Work, he asked, “How is Sofia doing? Every day when I get to the offertory of the Mass, I place all my sons and daughters who are ill or troubled on the paten.”

Sofia was dying. Gently, but with fortitude, her carers had been helping her to strengthen her faith, love and hope of Heaven. Towards the end they were praying the litany after the Rosary, and at the invocation “Gate of Heaven,” *Ianua coeli*, Sofia smiled and put in, “That’s my one.” She died on 26 December.

The next day Monsignor Escriva went to Villa delle Rose in Castelgandolfo, because that was what had been planned. As soon as he entered the sitting-room, which was decorated with fans, he said, “As you know, my daughters, there’s been a lot of coming and going recently. Your sisters are starting the Work in Nigeria, a few days ago I blessed another who should arrive in Australia today, and yesterday... this other daughter of mine left us to go to Heaven.”

*El Hombre de Villa Tevere*, Pilar Urbano, Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1995, Chapter 12.

\* “All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1030-1.

\*\* “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness. This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor 2:9).” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1024 and 1027.