



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

## Founder of Opus Dei

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## Maria Pötsch (Austria)

St Josemaria's devotion to the picture of our Lady known as "Maria Pötsch" originated in one of the journeys he made to Vienna, Austria. He first went to Austria in 1949, but he did not get as far as Vienna itself. In the aftermath of the Second World War the country was divided into four zones, occupied by the Allied troops, and to reach Vienna he would have had to go through the Russian zone, for which he was unable to obtain a visa.

In May 1955 St Josemaria again visited Austria. Although the Allied occupation was still in place, the circumstances had changed and this time he was able to go to Vienna. (\*)

At the end of that year, on December 3, 1955, St Josemaria returned to Vienna. Next morning he celebrated Holy Mass in Stephansdom – St Stephen's Cathedral, and there, making his thanksgiving after Mass in front of the picture of Maria Pötsch, he invoked our Lady for the first time with the prayer "*Sancta Maria, Stella Orientis, filios tuos adiuva!* – Holy Mary, Star of the East, help your children!"

Among St Josemaria's many invocations of our Lady, this aspiration held a special place from then on. His notes and letters dating from around that time show that he was using it to entrust the future apostolate in the European countries then under Communist rule, to the Mother of God. For instance, on December 4 itself he wrote to his spiritual children in Spain, "I continue to think that Vienna is a magnificent gateway to the East, and that my children in those countries will give great glory to God our Lord." Five days later, he wrote, "I feel safe in saying that our Lord God is going to give us abundant means (facilities, personnel) to work better each day for him in Eastern Europe, until the gates of Russia open to us – which will happen. (...) Get people to pray this aspiration often: '*Sancta Maria, Stella Orientis, filios tuos adiuva!*'" (Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. III, New York: Scepter, 2005, pp. 234-5)

In 1989 the Berlin Wall, symbol of the division of Germany and the whole of Europe, fell, and the Communist regimes collapsed.

## **History of the picture of Maria Pötsch**

In the final years of the seventeenth century Austrian troops halted the advance of the Turkish Empire and even conquered vast territories. In this period a miraculous event occurred in the small Hungarian town of Pócs (Pötsch in German). On November 4, 1696, a picture of the Virgin Mary and Child in the local church began to shed tears. The weeping lasted for many days and attracted great crowds from all around the area, as well as a good number of officers, including Protestants, from the Austrian imperial troops stationed in the locality. Many witnesses attested to the event under oath. The wooden backing of the painting was even dismantled and subjected to a detailed examination in front of three hundred people, to ensure that there was no question of trickery, as some malicious tongues had alleged. The account of this event includes stories of several conversions.

News of the event reached the imperial court in Vienna. Emperor Leopold I had the picture brought to the court for his veneration, and, on the advice of the palace chaplain, begged forgiveness for his sins of omission. He also bound himself to encourage Confession and Holy Communion among his people, and especially devotion to the miraculous picture: this was to be carried through the city in a procession in which the whole court had to take part, to set a good example to the populace, and it was then to be set up in St Stephen's Cathedral. The Emperor fulfilled all these commitments. Between the time of its arrival in Vienna at the beginning of July, and December 1 when it was finally placed in the Cathedral, the picture was exposed to the veneration of the faithful in different churches and aroused great devotion.

Devotion to our Lady under this avocation grew still more after the battle of Zenta against the Turkish army in September 1697. The Austro-Hungarian troops won a great victory in which many people clearly saw the intervention of the Mother of God. The picture has witnessed many significant events in the history of Austria, and continues to attract thousands of visitors every year.

Devotion to Maria Pötsch remains equally fervent in the town of Pócs, soon renamed Máriapócs, in Hungary, where a copy of the original picture is venerated. This copy also wept in 1715 and 1905. It is currently one of the great centres of pilgrimage in Hungary, and a major shrine for Greek Catholics. The picture is considered as a symbol of unity and ecumenism that attracts Latin and Eastern-rite Catholics, Greek Orthodox and Protestants, from many different countries – Polish, Russian, Ruthenian, Slovak and German pilgrims all come.

## **From the beginnings**

From the beginnings of Opus Dei St Josemaria dreamed of spreading its apostolate throughout the world, including the countries of Eastern Europe. On his return from Austria in 1955 he intensified his prayer for the countries under Communist rule.

St Josemaria had suffered in his own person from the furious religious persecution that was unleashed against the Church in the years of the Spanish Civil War. The same thing happened in the 1950s and afterwards in many deeply Christian countries, producing a large number of martyrs. "He used to speak with admiration and gratitude of the present-day martyrs in the Church. He praised, specifically, Cardinal Stepinac, Cardinal Mindszenty, Cardinal Beran, and many others who had been confessors of the Faith in an atmosphere of persecution. At the same time he never forgot the millions of unknown faithful who, without being in the limelight or receiving the applause of the multitude, lived out their faith at the risk of their lives. And he urged us to pray to persevere on our way, preferring to die rather than renounce the faith." (Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaria*, Madrid: Rialp, 2000, p. 132).

\* Austria was divided into four occupied zones controlled by the United States, France, Britain and the USSR. Vienna, the capital city, was divided up in the same way. On May 15, 1955, the four Allied Powers and Austria signed a state treaty that officially restored the Republic of Austria.