



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Nanny and The Way

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She came from Lastres, a fishing-village in Asturias, Spain. Her name was Azucena Olivar Sanchez, but for us kids she was always Nanny. She'd been our nanny and was an enormous help to our Mom, who had her hands full with nine children, running our house in Madrid, and looking after my Dad's business when he was away in Mexico looking after the companies he had there.

Nanny was an extraordinarily joyful person. My earliest memories of her are of a woman in her 30s, well-built, with very black hair, a pleasant, smiling face, always concerned for the smallest children in the house, and a very witty way of speaking. She knew countless stories, proverbs and fairy-tales, which she passed on to us little by little, and which I consider one of the cores of the tradition in which I grew up.

Years later, when my brother Nacho invited me to come on some outings organized in a Center of the Work, I resisted, because I didn't fancy getting cold and hungry scrambling up the Guadarrama mountain range. The underlying reason was that I was scared someone would start talking to me about a possible [vocation to Opus Dei](#), something I had no intention of discussing. Nanny always took my part, and told my brother to leave me in peace. Nacho yielded before her, since we all respected and loved her to the point of veneration. And I was deeply grateful to her for throwing over me the cloak of her protection.

I soon had a chance to thank her with deeds, because around that time she decided to learn to read, and chose me as her teacher. She had never learned to read or write, and had never needed to. She managed perfectly without it, and I never heard that anyone succeeded in tricking or cheating her. But all of a sudden she decided she just had to be able to read. I really teased her about it, telling her that although she was so clever she would remain in ignorance all her life.

She herself had told me, laughing, that when she was a kid she hardly ever got to go to school, because her family were very poor and she had to work at all sorts

of things to bring in a bit of money. The few times she did go to school, the teacher, who could see how bright she was, would send her on errands, which she enjoyed much more than being shut up in a classroom.

But this time she didn't mention her previous indifference to every kind of book-learning. And the first chance she had, she got out the book she wanted me to use to teach her to read. It was *The Way* by Josemaria Escriva. I wasn't surprised, because Nanny was a naturally devout person, and *The Way* had always been around in our house and some of the family would use it for meditation, although personally I didn't know much about it.

She could remember a bit about the alphabet and syllables. We went rapidly through the basics and started reading at the [first point](#): "Don't let your life be barren..." She had never read anything before. But once we'd worked our way through that first text, she turned to face me and explained to me what it meant. She spoke very naturally about how we have to be useful to others in order to lead a fruitful life, and explained what apostolate was, more clearly than I'd ever heard it before. I was absolutely astounded, but that was just the start. It wasn't long before she could read fairly fluently, and she gave me a running commentary on each of the remaining 998 points of *The Way* without missing a single one.

Nearly every day we would set aside some time for her reading class. But without any apology on her part or surprise on mine, those minutes turned into a lesson on asceticism and mysticism given by Nanny just as though she were a Doctor of the Church. She spoke about the depths of life in God not like someone handing on a lesson they've learned, but the way a person talks about something they know from experience and that comes naturally to them. I occasionally teased her about her wisdom, or argued, jokingly, against something that she said (and that I knew was the simple truth). The fact is that it made a very deep impression on me, as though I was present at something extraordinary, with no human explanation, even though it was all taking place in Nanny's little room in our flat on Castello Street, Madrid. Those masterclasses changed me completely on the inside. Thanks to Nanny, I began to have a real interior life. I began to pray seriously, though I found it hard work. And Jesus became a living person for me, someone I could talk to and listen to throughout my everyday activities.

I no longer refused to go to the Center of the Work my brother went to. And when they talked to me about a vocation, I accepted straight off. I felt certain I had arrived at a harbor that was somehow my final home. Nor was I in any doubt about who would be the first person to hear of my decision. That January 12, Nanny was in the kitchen, because there weren't any more little kids for her to

look after and she'd turned into a terrific cook instead. When I told her my news, instead of being surprised like I'd expected, she smiled and, like the Asturian fisherfolk she came from, said, "You fell like a gannet!"

The gannet is a bird like a seagull, which watches the sea from high up and when it sees a fish, drops straight down to catch it.

And that was the moment when we both put our cards on the table. The reason she wanted to learn to read was that she'd been recommended to do some spiritual reading every day. She had come to know [Opus Dei](#) through my brothers and sisters, and had asked to be admitted to it shortly before I had.

The end of this story is that Nanny died years later, in a very holy way, after continuing to help everyone in our family with her deep spiritual life and keen sense of humor. She brought many people to God, and they were astonished at the depth of Christian wisdom that she possessed – and that she had shown me for the first time when we read *The Way* together.