



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The story of *Yes!*

Yes! The Life of St Josemaria was the first book about St Josemaria written and illustrated for children – children up to 80, as the author, Elizabeth Torra, puts it. The book has been translated into different languages, and this has given rise to many stories about how the message of St Josemaria has spread to unexpected corners of the world. But the story of how the book came to be written in the first place is equally interesting.

Some years ago, Elizabeth Torra, Spanish, a teacher and trades unionist, whose father was a Republican and whose family were working-class, came across a column in the newspaper *Mundo Obrero* entitled “Josemaria, a Misunderstood Man”. It was about the publication of *Friends of God*. The journalist declared, “It does not do justice to the humanitarian work carried out by Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer if he is presented as someone who focused solely on the intellectually gifted or the rich, and neglected the poorest and neediest sectors of society.”

This came as a surprise to Elizabeth, as the image she had of Opus Dei was precisely the one the journalist was criticizing. Being a creative, tenacious and determined person, she set herself to find out the truth. She read all Josemaria Escriva’s published works (except *La Abadesa de las Huelgas*, because, she says humorously, she didn’t feel she could take all that about Abbesses). She ended up being convinced of the truth of the article, especially when she learned about St Josemaria’s first years in Madrid, working with slum children, the sick in the General Hospital and the King’s Hospital, and the institute of the Damas Apostolicas. She found the same spirit operating in the subsequent fruits of all his pastoral activity – the social projects that have been started in every country where Opus Dei is present.

The seed of the book

As a teacher, Elizabeth saw the need to put good books into children’s hands, books that would serve as an example to counteract the tide of comics and books that were causing harm. She wanted to “plant flowers among the garbage.”

“St Josemaria’s life,” thought Elizabeth, “is full of spiritual and human values: a

passionate love for Christ and his Mother, and a passionate love for the good of his neighbor. He was joyous, a good friend, quick-tempered – the saints, thank God, have their defects too. It is the life-story of a child, a young man, an adult, every page of which bears the stamp of love and faithfulness to God's Will. Children have a right to know about it.”

She began to read and re-read the published biographies of St Josemaria. But none of them was accessible for children. “The authors know their subject thoroughly, but the language isn't easy for everyone,” she thought. She realized that the sort of biography she was looking for could do a lot of good to simple people, not only children. And she started sketching out a possible text, thinking that the Holy Spirit had suggested the idea to her, but other people would be the ones to write it. The person who was surprised was herself. “The real author of this book is the Holy Spirit, and that's why the book breaks all the molds, because someone who wasn't, and isn't, in Opus Dei wrote the first biography, with pictures, of the founder of Opus Dei for children, intended for children of all ages.”

Accordingly, Elizabeth made a first draft for the book, sketching in possible illustrations. “I really got hooked. I wrote all the texts in the oratory of the center of the Work in Lleida (Spain). In the evenings I drew pictures, sitting on my stool. It was exhausting, but I was very happy. This book was born of sacrifice that turned into happiness.” She had it all thought out. For example, she left some difficult words in the text, knowing that children wouldn't understand them. “I did that on purpose. Like that, children can ask their parents what those words mean, and then their parents will end up reading the book too.”

Later on, she decided to write to Don Alvaro del Portillo, who was then Prelate of Opus Dei, and sent the text of the book to him. This was the beginning of a correspondence about the project that continued for several years. After writing that first letter to Don Alvaro, Elizabeth had a sense of relief: the Holy Spirit had suggested the idea to her and she had passed it on. Don Alvaro, she thought, would take charge of it.

She received a prompt answer. “I sat down, just in case...” she recalls humorously. “The Prelate replied to me as follows: ‘I am praying for your work, and I am sure that our Lord will make use of it to stir up a good number of souls.’ He saw the book as I did, but with more charisma, and looking to the future. He suggested I should get in touch with the central office of Opus Dei in Spain, in Madrid.” Elizabeth went to Madrid and explained the project to several different people, who reacted enthusiastically. “I kept telling them, ‘God has used me to start up this project. Now you can bring it to fruition.’ But one of them said bluntly,

'You're the one who had the idea – we'll cooperate with you in doing it.' What's more, it was Don Alvaro's wish that I finished the work."

She went back to Lleida, where she lived, and reworked and improved the project. Then she sent it to the vice-postulator of the Cause of Beatification of Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer "for him to read and correct it, to make sure it didn't contain any mistakes about Opus Dei's charisma, or the Church." The next two years were filled with hard work, comings and goings, as the whole text was re-written, negotiations were undertaken to find a suitable illustrator (Giorgio Del Lungo) and contact was kept up with the publisher (Rialp), and the Office of Vicepostulation. Elizabeth kept Don Alvaro up to date with progress. Finally, in June 1993, Don Alvaro sent Elizabeth a letter thanking her for the two copies of *Yes!* he had just received.

The letter said, "I think that from Heaven our Founder will be delighted with this book and will reward you with his powerful help. In addition, he will intercede effectively before God our Lord so that the text and drawings in your pages will be a good instrument to stir up the souls of the people who read the book." This has since come true.

Moving people to say "Yes"

Currently there are versions of *Yes!* in Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Italian, English, French, German, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian, Chinese (with editions for Singapore and for Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) and Japanese. Elizabeth knows that Pope John Paul II received the Polish copy she sent him in 2003.

Through the letters people write to the publisher, Elizabeth can see the truth of Don Alvaro's words. "The aim of the biography was obvious: through St Josemaria's 'yes' to God's Will, to help each reader to make their own life into another 'yes' to love, to God and to other people."

In a school in Cordoba, Spain, the 11 and 12-year-olds did a reading comprehension exercise on *Yes!*. They drew all sorts of conclusions from it. "I think it's a book that helps you to understand how to believe in God. And also when you're in a tight spot, you can go to Mass, like they did when they were crossing the Pyrenees." "This book made me think of lots of things. I thought my life was hard, but after seeing Father Josemaria's life I think I'm well lucky." "I've learned about respecting your parents, the importance of using money properly, and above all how much you should love God."

In San Salvador (El Salvador), the book was published in episodes in a Sunday newspaper, with interviews of boys and girls talking about how they prayed to Blessed Josemaria (as he then was) for help with their problems or for their families and friends.

The latest feedback to reach Elizabeth is a letter from a religious sister who lives and works in Africa. She says: “We are reading your book of the life of St Josemaria Escriva. I read it as soon as I arrived in Guinea and I have to say I knew nothing about this saint and I was very much impressed. I think that when he was little, he suffered a lot with the loss of his sisters, and later his father. If he hadn't been a boy of great piety and serenity perhaps he would have reacted badly. You can see how he always seeks God's Will and doesn't want to do his own will. We are reading this book in our Spanish classes at the boarding school. The girls write a summary of what they have read in each session, so that by the end of the course they'll have a little book of their own that will remind them of St Josemaria's life. Sometimes they also read it on their own, because I have it in the library and they have a reading period in the library after supper. They tell me that they really like it.”

The pupils have also sent Elizabeth some letters. They tell her, for example, that some of them have not yet made their First Holy Communion, and they like reading the part about when Josemaria received the Holy Eucharist for the very first time. So that both St Josemaria's “yes!” and Elizabeth's “yes!” are bearing fruit in the lives of children around the world.

Yes! The Life of Josemaria Escriva for Young Readers, Michael Carceles and Elizabeth Torra, Manila: Sinag-Tala 1994 / Princeton New Jersey: Scepter 2002.

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