



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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St Josemaria and Our Lady of Mercy, Barcelona

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St Josemaria Escriva was a devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary his whole life long. Each of her titles found a place in his heart and some took on special resonance at particular eras in his life. One of these was Our Lady of Mercy, patron of Barcelona, Spain.

Throughout his life, St Josemaria was deeply devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. His writings and his inner life are equally marked by this note; so too is Opus Dei, which, under God's providence, he founded on October 2, 1928 as a path to holiness in ordinary life. The founder of Opus Dei tried to bring Mary into everything, and turned to her in his every need. While each of her titles found a place in his heart, some took on special resonance for him. One of these is Our Lady of Mercy (or Our Lady of Ransom), who is venerated as patron of Barcelona, among other places.

Since St Josemaria was born in nearby Barbastro, he may well have heard about Our Lady of Mercy from his childhood. A favourite aunt of his was named Mercedes after her. However, there is no evidence of his having visited the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy in Barcelona as a child or during his student years. His first visit there may have been in 1924, before his ordination to the diaconate, when he made a brief trip to Barcelona by train, arriving at Francia Station.

His next known journey to Barcelona was in very different circumstances, in 1937. In the middle of the Spanish Civil War St Josemaria and some of the first Opus Dei faithful were preparing to cross over the Pyrenees mountain range to gain the other side of the line which then divided Spain, in order to be able to continue the apostolate that God was asking of him. He stayed in Barcelona from October 10 to November 19, and during that time traversed the city from one end to the other on foot, by way of training for the forthcoming trek over the Pyrenees. St Josemaria recommended his companions to pray whenever they passed a church, making acts of atonement and spiritual communions. The basilica of Our

Lady of Mercy may well have been the target of some of these heartfelt petitions, which he himself tried to make very often.

After the end of the Spanish Civil War, Josemaria Escriva returned to Barcelona in the last days of December 1939, with Alvaro del Portillo, who was eventually to succeed him at the head of Opus Dei. The purpose of this journey was to help start up the Opus Dei apostolate in Barcelona. In 1940 he travelled there on three occasions, visiting the basilica of Our Lady of Mercy at least once, on April 2. It is very likely that, according to his custom, he placed his intentions – namely, the Church, the Work and the world – at our Lady's feet there, entrusting to her care what he carried in his heart.

In 1941, when Opus Dei received its first official mark of approval, St Josemaria's immediate reaction was to thank the Blessed Virgin Mary. He sent a telegram to his sons in Barcelona asking them to go to the basilica of Our Lady of Mercy to thank her for her constant motherly concern for the Work. St Josemaria returned to Barcelona, visiting the basilica himself, in 1942 and 1943. For the Work, even though it had the approval of the local Bishops of the dioceses where it was present, these were years of fierce misunderstandings, mainly because of the novelty of its message about the sanctification of ordinary work. God permitted this opposition to be especially strong in Barcelona. To reassure the first Catalan people in Opus Dei, St Josemaria told them he was certain that God our Lord would bless the Work's apostolate in Barcelona with great fruits, through the intercession of Our Lady of Mercy.

On May 16, 1945, after reserving the Blessed Sacrament in one of the first Opus Dei centres in Barcelona, St Josemaria went to pray before the statue of Our Lady of Mercy and then walked to the Monastery of Montserrat, probably in order to visit the Abbot and pray at the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat, patron of Catalonia.

While the apostolate spread, the difficulties and misunderstandings did not lessen but continued ever more violently. Moreover, it was apparent that Opus Dei urgently needed official approval on the part of the Holy See, to enable its apostolate to expand to other countries. For this purpose Don Alvaro del Portillo, who had been ordained to the priesthood two years previously, travelled to Rome on February 25, 1946. Year later, he recalled the first response he met with: "I was told, among many other things, that it was impossible for Opus Dei to be given official approval at that point, because we had been born, as they put it, a century too soon. The difficulties were so great that they seemed insuperable. I decided to write to the Father to tell him that he had to come to Rome in person."

At that time St Josemaria was suffering from very serious diabetes; his doctor told him that if he undertook the journey to Rome he would be putting his life at risk. Nevertheless, he decided to go to Rome by ship, embarking at Barcelona and crossing over to Genoa.

He left Madrid in June, stopping at the shrine of Our Lady of Pilar in Saragossa and at Our Lady of Montserrat. He arrived in Barcelona on June 21, and the men of Opus Dei in the city gathered to meet him at the Opus Dei centre in Muntaner Street. All those present would remember for the rest of their lives how St Josemaria prayed aloud in the oratory there. "Lord, have you allowed me, in all good faith, to deceive so many souls? But everything I've done has been for your glory, knowing that it was your will!" And, making his own St Peter's words, he continued: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have? (Matthew 19:27)" St Josemaria appealed to Our Lady's intercession repeatedly in the course of his prayer, and finally, addressing her under the invocation of Our Lady of Mercy, placed himself and all his intentions under her motherly protection. He recalled later, "I came to Rome with my soul placed in my Mother the Blessed Virgin Mary, and with a burning faith in God our Lord, whom I invoked with the trusting words, 'Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?' What will become of us, O God my Father?"

Once he arrived in Rome after a very rough crossing in the ship *J. J. Sister*, step by step canonical approval of Opus Dei was achieved. The Holy See issued the Apostolic Brief *Cum Societatis* approving of its pastoral work, and the Letter *Brevis Sano* praising its aims, leading up to the *Decretum Laudis*, or "Decree of Praise", granted on February 24, 1947. St Josemaria realized that it had been Our Lady of Mercy who had facilitated this approval, and in memory of his journey he asked for a representation of Our Lady of Mercy to be put up as an altarpiece in the oratory of the Opus Dei centre on Muntaner Street. He also asked for it to be engraved with St Peter's words "Lo, we have left all things..." Later on, he would have a similar representation placed in one of the oratories in Opus Dei's headquarters in Rome.

On October 21, 1946, St Josemaria returned to Barcelona to thank Our Lady of Mercy in person for her loving intercession on Opus Dei's canonical journey. The title of "Our Lady of Mercy" thus came to hold a special place in St Josemaria's memory and heart, together with those of Our Lady of Pilar of Saragossa, the city where he had been ordained to the priesthood, Our Lady of Torreciudad, Sonsoles, Loreto, Guadalupe, and many others.

From that time on he made a habit of visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy, a

habit continued by his successors and many other people in Opus Dei. Like a needy child asking his Mother for help, he returned there at the end of the 1960s at a time when he was visiting many shrines of Our Lady to pray for the situation of the Church. He came back later, like someone in love who never misses a chance to do something extra for his beloved. Almost at the end of his life, on November 28, 1972, he went to one of her shrines to thank her for the mercies he had received through her hands, and especially her help on that first journey to Rome.

On October 7, 1966, at a ceremony to mark his nomination as Adoptive Son of the City of Barcelona, he gave a speech which included the following. “When, after time has gone by, the history of Opus Dei is written – how many things come crowding into my mind! – it will recount events that came to pass in this city of Barcelona, among you all, under the gaze of Our Lady of Mercy.”