



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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St Josemaria and Pope Pius XII

Pilar Urbano

The first words of affection and encouragement Father Escriva heard in Rome in 1946 were from Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, an intelligent, sensitive Italian from Brescia who, since the end of the Second World War, had been involved in the delicate task of renewing the Vatican's diplomatic relations. Years later Montini was to become the head of the Church – Pope Paul VI.

As if he sensed that sooner or later Pope Pius XII and the founder of Opus Dei were going to have a continuous relationship, Monsignor Montini began to smooth the path for their first meeting with a human touch. One day when he was talking with Salvador Canals and two other members of the Work, he asked them for “a photograph of the founder so as to be able to show it to the Pope.” One of them, Julian Urbistondo, quickly put his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out his wallet. After a rapid search he handed Montini a little photograph of the Father, a passport-type photograph with a serrated edge. For a split second he wondered if it was right for this particular photograph to reach the Holy Father's hands, since it was getting a little yellow and had writing on the back. Monsignor Montini could not repress a surprised smile when he read the curious dedication that Father Escriva had written on the back: “Rascal! How are you treating your parents?”

Pope Pius XII had received Alvaro del Portillo twice, and also, separately, the law professors José Orlandis and Salvador Canals; as well as the scientist José Maria Albareda, whose intellectual capacity the Pope found amazing. Not only had Pope Pius XII met several members of the Work, but since 1943 he had prayed for its founder by name and had a copy of *The Way* among his books. It was time to prepare for the first audience of the Pope with Father Escriva, which took place on 16th July 1946.

In a private conversation, Father Escriva explained to the Pope what Opus Dei was and what it was not. After their conversation Pius XII asked the people concerned to resume the juridical studies which finally resulted in a new apostolic

constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, opening the way for Secular Institutes to be established. As a Secular Institute, Opus Dei could have a definite canonical status within the Church. It was not a perfect formula because members of Opus Dei neither practised nor were intended to practise the “state of perfection” which the Secular Institutes take on. Even so, in some way, total self-dedication by lay people who did not change their state in life, job or place in the world, was given a formal blessing, which was something totally new at that stage.

When Pius XII also published the *Decretum Laudis* approving Opus Dei, barely three weeks later, Father Escriva had achieved recognition of the universal call to holiness which the Work promotes for men and women, priests and lay people alike, in one and the same vocation with no grades, no differences, no ranks and no hierarchy.

Father Escriva did not need to take any shortcuts or easy ways out. He prayed and got other people to pray; he studied and got others to study; he worked and got others to work. He knocked at the doors where he needed to be heard. He spent hours and hours in waiting-rooms. He always spoke with the strength and humility of one who was doing all he could to set up something which was not an ambition of his own but rather a task commissioned by God. The certainty that the Work was divine was clearly the key to his conviction. However, as would shortly be seen, the Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* was not the right “clothing” for ordinary people walking through the world *nel bel mezzo della strada*, in the middle of the street. So, at every moment and every opportunity, with Aragonese clarity and tenacity, Father Escriva stated that he was in the dynamics of a waiting period: in a time of “giving way without giving up, intent on recovering any concessions later”.

“Opus Dei,” he would write years later, “has created many canonical and theological problems in the Church and has solved them — I say so with humility, for humility is truth. Once solved, the problems appeared simple; in particular, the fact there is only one class of members, which includes both clergy and laity.”

Pius XII perceived a splendid panorama: the personal holiness and personal apostolate which Opus Dei could spread all over the earth. He also noted Father Escriva’s spiritual stature, and the divine scope of his foundation, to which Pope Pius himself was to give definitive approval on 16th June 1950. A short while later the Pope said to Cardinal Norman Gilroy from Sydney, Australia that he had been profoundly impressed by a recent visit from Father Escriva. “He is a real saint, a man sent by God for our times” (*é un vero santo, un uomo mandato da Dio per i nostri tempi*). There was no inkling then of the bitter hours, the tremendous

suffering which Father Escriva would have to endure under his pontificate, though none of it was the Pope's doing. (...)

His negotiations at the Vatican offices continued unabated. It was a struggle in juridical logic, trying to bring down ancient canonical walls so as to open a way for the Work. It was not easy. The hinges of some doors had the rust of centuries on them. The formulas which had been obtained in 1941 and 1943, and the one now being prepared, which became official in 1947, were the best solutions possible and the most suitable – meaning the least unsuitable. Father Escriva wrote in October 1950: “However, there was no other option; either we accepted everything or we would have to carry on trying to go forward with no path to follow. In reality, we were the needle that pulled the thread through. Experience has confirmed that those institutions which sought approval as Secular Institutes after us, have found themselves at ease and joyfully accept the things which clash with our secularity, because such is their calling. One can see more clearly every day that, leaving the thread in place, the ‘needle’ has to leave the cloth which is now called Secular Institutes.” (...)

Father Escriva returned to Madrid on 31st August 1946. He brought with him two important documents: an Apostolic Brief, *Cum Societatis*, and an Apostolic Letter, *Brevi Sane*, praising the aims of the Work. He also brought a strange, very valuable personal present from the Pope: the complete relics of two young Christian martyrs, St. Mercuriana and St. Sinferus. By this gift, Pius XII showed his understanding of the similarity between the members of Opus Dei and those early Christians, exemplified in the fact that the call to holiness has no age limits, but is begun by the Holy Spirit at baptism; and that, as in every family and in every portion of God's people, in the Work there are men and women: two bodies, separate and distinct, but animated by one and the same soul. (...)

In Rome, work on drawing up the constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* intensified. Many visitors came to the apartment in Città Leonina. They were mostly ecclesiastics who were working in the different dicasteries and Congregations of the Curia. Nevertheless, Father Escriva felt like a wound-up spring. Not a minute was being wasted, but Father Escriva still had a real inner sense of urgency: the Work could not travel at man's speed but had to go “at God's pace.” On 6th December he wrote to the members of the Work in Madrid: “Everything is going very well, but excessively slowly.”

Two days later Pius XII again received him in a private audience. On the 16th of the same month, in another letter to Madrid, Father Escriva pointed out: “Don't you forget it was during the octave of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady

when the Roman ‘solution’ began to take shape.” The founder had discovered that the Holy See was not just willing but anxious to grant the approval of Opus Dei as soon as possible. It was better to make the most of this opportunity, even though it was to be a stop-gap solution. So the negotiations continued. (...)

They soon began to look for a place which would serve as the permanent headquarters of Opus Dei. Monsignors Montini and Tardini suggested to Father Escriva that he should settle near the Holy See, should set up house, “a big house”, they said, in Rome. (...)

The advice given by Monsignors Montini and Tardini was well founded: it would be best to locate near the Holy See for several reasons. The canonical path had to be opened up. Opus Dei needed to be Romanised. This did not mean ‘Vaticanised’, it meant that its genuinely universal heart needed to be centred on Rome. Father Escriva wanted the Pope to feel his love as a good son at first hand, and to be able to count on the Work as an instrument of secular apostolate which “only wishes to serve the Church, not make use of it.”

Extracts from Pilar Urbano, *El Hombre de Villa Tevere*, Barcelona: Plaza y Janes, 1995, chapter 3.