



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The First Pilgrimage: "What beautiful eyes: they are suns!"

John Coverdale

I remember how in 1935 I went to visit a shrine in Spain, the shrine of Our Lady of Sonsoles. It wasn't a pilgrimage in the normal sense: nothing noisy or elaborate, just three of us. I respect and love public demonstrations of devotion, but I must admit I prefer to offer Mary the same affection, the same enthusiasm, in private visits or with very few people – a more intimate sort of thing. During that visit to Sonsoles I was told the origin of the name of the shrine. The statue had been hidden during the wars between Christians and Moslems in Spain, and after a number of years it was found by shepherds. According to the story, when they saw it they exclaimed: "What beautiful eyes: they are suns!" [Spanish: son soles] *Christ is Passing By*, 139.

In 1935, devotion to the Blessed Virgin played a large part in the original plan of life that Escrivá outlined for the members of Opus Dei. It included daily recitation of the rosary and of the Angelus, as well as other practices of Marian devotion. Escrivá felt the need, however, for some concrete way of living devotion to Mary during May, the month the Church has traditionally dedicated to her. The solution he found grew out of an incident in the life of Opus Dei.

Fernandez Vallespín mentioned to Escrivá that during the summer of 1933 an attack of rheumatism had threatened to prevent him from finishing a project that was a prerequisite for registering for the last year of architecture. Not completing the project on time would have meant losing the entire 1933-1934 school year. He had prayed to our Lady and had promised her that if he was able to complete the project successfully, he would make a pilgrimage to the small shrine of Sonsoles, located a few hours from Madrid on the outskirts of the city of Avila. He had successfully completed the project before joining Opus Dei, but had not yet fulfilled his promise. Escrivá offered to make a pilgrimage with him, not as part of a large group, but only the two of them and Barredo.

On May 2, 1935 they took the train from Madrid to Avila and then walked the two

and a half miles to the shrine, reciting five mysteries of the rosary on the way. The shrine was visible in the distance, on the top of a small hill. At one point, however, they briefly lost sight of it. Escrivá found in this incident a parable of the spiritual life. “When we lose God’s light, the ability to see things from a supernatural perspective, we have to recall that we once had it. We should continue moving forward, without growing fainthearted, although we are going uphill in the dark.”

At the shrine, they prayed another five mysteries of the rosary; and on the way back to the train station, they prayed the remaining five. The road took them through fields of ripe winter wheat.

Escrivá plucked a few shafts of the wheat as he “remembered a part of the Gospel where Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Do you not say, there are yet four months and then comes the harvest? Well, I say to you: lift up your eyes and behold that the fields are already white for the harvest’ (Jn 4:35). And I realized again that our Lord wanted to put the same yearning into our hearts as he had in his own.”

Reflecting on the experience of this visit to Sonsoles, Escrivá decided that a quiet pilgrimage of this sort, in the company of one or two friends, would be a good way for members of Opus Dei to honor the Blessed Virgin in the month of May and to help their friends to be more devoted to her.

John Coverdale, *Uncommon Faith*, Scepter, 2002, pp. 177-178.