



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The First Years of Opus Dei

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Father Josemaria already had many young friends, and he asked them to come with him on his visits to the sick people in hospitals. One of them was called Luis Gordon, and he also joined Opus Dei. Once, when Father Josemaria was talking to a tuberculosis patient, he said: "Luis, please could you empty this bedpan?"

Luis saw that the bedpan was filthy, and made a face, but he took it without a word and went off. Father Josemaria saw him happily giving it a thorough clean, and saying to Jesus, "Jesus, keep me smiling!"

Father Josemaria was very happy, because Luis was doing something for others even though he found it so difficult.

During those first years in Madrid, Josemaria used to work in a church called St Elizabeth's Foundation, where some religious sisters gave catechism classes and looked after lots of poor people.

Every day Father Josemaria sat in the confessional to hear the Confessions of people who wanted to tell God they were sorry for their sins. When he was sitting there, early in the morning, he used to hear a clanking noise in the church, but he couldn't see what it was from where he was sitting. One day when he heard the same clanking noise again he went out quickly, and saw a milkman coming into the church with his metal cans.

"What are you doing?" Father Josemaria asked him.

"Well, Father, I come in here every morning, open the door, and greet our Lord. I tell him: 'Jesus, here's John the milkman'."

Father Josemaria was impressed by the way the milkman talked to God, and he spent the rest of the day saying to Jesus, in his heart, "Lord, here's this wretched priest who hasn't learnt to love you as much as John the milkman."

As soon as he could, Father Josemaria set up an apartment for university students to live in. This meant that he could talk to them about God and help them to be better Christians. One of the first people in Opus Dei, whose name was Ricardo, lived in this apartment. At the start, as well as studying hard and getting good marks, they all had to look after the housework. They made the beds, swept the floors, did the washing up and laid the table. They tried to do it all very well so that they could offer it to our Lord.

Some months after starting this, Father Josemaria had to leave Madrid, because the Spanish Civil War had broken out and his life was in danger. When the fighting was over he went back to Madrid and found that the building where their apartment was had been bombed, and lay in ruins. He had to start all over again.

Father Josemaria and the first people who helped him to spread Opus Dei worked hard during the week at their jobs as architects, engineers and similar things, and on Saturdays they used to take a train to other towns to meet more people and explain to them that they could become saints by doing their work very well and offering it to God, and by treating their family and friends well.

The Bishop of Madrid, Bishop Leopoldo, decided to give Opus Dei an official approval, so that everyone would know that this institution was very much loved by the Church. Twenty years later, all the Bishops in the world gathered in Rome with the Pope. They wanted to remind all Christians that we are all called to be saints. Father Josemaria was delighted, because this was what he had been preaching about for years and years.

Father Josemaria soon realized that some of the men in Opus Dei would need to be ordained priests to serve the Church and provide spiritual help to the people in the Work and their friends. One of these new priests, called Don Alvaro, worked closely with Father Josemaria for many years, and when Father Josemaria died and went to Heaven a long time later, Don Alvaro became the new head of Opus Dei.

As God wanted Opus Dei to spread throughout the world, Father Josemaria moved to Rome, where the Pope lived, in 1946. He took a boat there from Barcelona, and while they were at sea such a fierce storm broke out that the boat very nearly sank.

When he reached Rome he went to stay in an apartment with some people of Opus Dei who were already living there. From their balcony they could see the

windows of the Pope's own rooms in the Vatican, and Father Josemaria spent the whole of his first night in Rome praying for the Pope, because he was very moved at being so close to him. The Pope represents Jesus on earth, and that is why Father Josemaria loved him so much.

Soon students from around the world began to arrive in Rome, to live near Father Josemaria, the founder of Opus Dei, and learn from him. They bought a bigger house and had to do a lot of alterations in it, so they were always very short of money, but they didn't stop being happy, and nor did they complain. One hot summer's day, while they were all chatting together after lunch, Father Josemaria asked, "How much money is there in the cash-box?"

"Just a few coins," was the answer.

"Well, go down and buy some ice-creams, and I'm sure we'll get by," said Father Josemaria. Everyone started laughing with pleasure, because they had so little money that they almost never got the chance to have an ice-cream.

Little by little many of his dreams came true, and there began to be people of Opus Dei in every continent in the world. To help people and be able to talk to them about Jesus, they set up training-schools for farm workers, universities, schools, hospitals, and many other projects.

But above all, there were more and more people who were learning from Saint Josemaria to do their work very well so as to be able to offer it to God. After all, none of us likes to give something ugly and badly made as a present. Lots of people joined Opus Dei, mostly married people, and for them, their marriage is their path to Heaven.

So June 26, 1975 arrived. Father Josemaria went into his office at mid-day and had a heart attack. He died soon afterwards. When he collapsed, he fell just next to a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whom he had always looked at very lovingly as the Mother of God and our Mother too.

From then on many people began to pray to God through Father Josemaria's intercession, because they were sure that he was already in Heaven, and they asked him for all sorts of favours, big ones and little ones. On October 6, 2002, he was canonized by the Pope in Rome. Hundreds of thousands of people were there for the ceremony, and lots more followed it on television or the radio, to hear Pope John Paul II proclaiming that Josemaria Escriva was a saint. So he showed us that it's not too difficult to get to Heaven!