



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The Founder of Opus Dei - BOOK SYNOPSIS

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St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, first became aware of a special mission from God while a teenager. It all started when he saw the footprints of a barefoot Carmelite monk on the snow after a snowfall.

“If others can make such sacrifices for God and neighbor, can’t I offer him something?” St. Josemaria was quoted as saying by Bishop Alvaro del Portillo. Fr. Josemaria also said the same thing to different people on separate occasions. All these are recorded by Andres Vázquez de Prada in Volume I of his three-volume biography, *The Founder of Opus Dei*. Two volumes of the English translation are already out. The third and final volume is forthcoming.

Prada writes: “The footprints had been made by Father Jose Miguel. Following that snowy trail, the boy sought out the Carmelite for spiritual direction...

“Looking back, he could see that from the very morning when he saw those footprints in the snow, something had been leading him directly toward Love. Our Lord had been preparing him. He had made a ‘divine restlessness’ spring up in his soul, such that when he came upon those footprints of a Carmelite religious in the snow he recognized in them the footsteps of Christ, and an invitation to follow him.”

Not knowing what precisely God wanted of him, he decided to become a priest as the best way to wait for this inspiration to clarify. His family thought he was going to be an architect or a lawyer. They were not exceedingly well-off so that when his father suffered financial reverses, his decision to become a priest became a sacrifice for his family.

And when his father died even before he was ordained, he was forced to take on part-time work as a teacher to help support his mother, and elder sister and a young brother. Because of financial constraints while he was in school, his family moved from three times, to Logrono, to Saragossa and finally to Madrid.

After being ordained in Saragossa, Fr. Josemaria decided to go to Madrid to finish his civil law studies. And since he could not practice his priesthood in a different diocese, he had to work as a chaplain of a charitable institution to do so. To help support his family, he worked as a private tutor and taught Roman and canon law at the Cicuendez Academy.

The concept of Opus Dei first came to Fr. Josemaria while he was on a retreat during the Feast of the Guardian Angels in October 1928. As Bishop Del Portillo put it in his account, *Immersed in God*, edited by Cesare Cavalleri:

“This is the date of the foundation. A new path is now opened in the Church. People of all social classes are explicitly encouraged and helped to pursue personal sanctity and the realization of the apostolate precisely by fulfilling their ordinary Christian duties – in particular, by sanctifying their own work – in the midst of the world and without changing their state in life.”

From the time he first received intimations of a special mission, young Josemaria kept a journal and took copious notes of his spiritual journey. “Later, he explained the origin and content of those notes,” Vázquez de Prada, his biographer writes, “which later became some of the entries in his journal (*Apuntes íntimos*) that he called ‘Catherines’ (in Spanish *Catalinas*), in honor of Saint Catherine of Siena. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘if I have mentioned somewhere in the Catherines how these notes came about. In case I haven’t, I would like to put on record that I was at most 18, possibly younger, when I felt impelled to just start writing, without rhyme or reason... Now I remember that this is spoken of in the early pages. Enough then...’

“This explanation whets the appetite of curiosity but leaves it unsatisfied since those ‘early pages’ no longer exist. He transcribed them into the first notebook of the *Apuntes*, the one he later burned. In it were recorded many events of a supernatural character. Fearing, with good reason, that they might lead someone reading them to consider him a saint, he decided to destroy them. More than anything else, they revealed the really extraordinary things about his life: his fidelity to his presentiments of love, which proved to be, after 10 long years of self-denying responsiveness to grace, truly heroic...”

“On the morning of Tuesday, Oct. 2, feast of the Guardian Angels, after celebrating Mass, Fr. Josemaria was in his room, reading the notes he had brought with him. Suddenly an extraordinary grace came over him, and he understood that our Lord was responding to those insistent petitions, *Domine, ut*

videam! (Lord, that I may see!) and *Domine, ut sit!* (Lord, that it may be!).

“...Three years later, he described the gist of it like this: ‘I received an illumination about the entire Work, while I was reading those papers. Deeply moved I knelt down – I was alone in my room, at a time between one talk and the next – and gave thanks to our Lord, and I remember with a heart full of emotion the ringing of the bells of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels.’

“Under the powerful and ineffable light of grace he was shown the Work as a whole; ‘saw’ is the word he always used when relating this event. The supernatural vision absorbed into itself all of the partial inspirations and illuminations of the past, variously recorded in the individual notes he was then reading, and projected them toward the future with a new unity and fullness of meaning.”

Women Too

Two years later, on Feb. 14, 1930, while celebrating Mass, Fr. Josemaria was also given to understand that women were also called to become Opus Dei.

“During the Mass, right after Communion, the whole women’s branch of the Work! I cannot say that I saw it but intellectually, in detail, I grasped what the women’s branch of Opus Dei was to be... I gave thanks, and at the usual time, I went to the confessional of Fr. Sanchez. He listened to me and then said, ‘This is just as much from God as the rest’, Fr. Josemaria wrote in his journal (no. 1871).

Fr. Valentin Sanchez Ruiz, S.J. was the confessor of Fr. Josemaria at that time. Prada says that, “although Fr. Josemaria had earlier poured out his soul to several confessors, he was now without a spiritual director. Thus he did not have ‘anyone to whom I could open my soul and communicate from my heart of hearts that which Jesus had asked of me.’ Hearing (...) that a certain Fr. Sanchez took very good care of his penitents, he went one morning, near the beginning of July 1930, to the residence on De la Flor Street to ask the Jesuit to be his spiritual director.

“Then slowly, I revealed to him my soul and told him all about the Work. Both of us saw in all of it the hand of God. We agreed that I would bring him some sheets of paper – a packet of note-sized sheets, it was – where I had written out the details of the whole endeavor. I brought them to him. Father Sanchez went to Chamartin for a few weeks. When he returned, he told me that the enterprise was from God and that he would have no problem being my confessor. A few years ago, I burned the packet of papers. I regret that,” Fr. Josemaria wrote in his notes in 1948.

Fr. Sanchez had a hand in naming Fr. Josemaria's mission as Opus Dei. "...Getting back to the name of our Work," Fr. Josemaria writes in 1948 in his notes, "one day I went to talk with Fr. Sanchez, in a parlor in the De la Flor Street residence. Talked to him about my personal things (I would only mention the Work insofar as it related to my soul), and my good Fr. Sanchez asked me at the end, 'How is that work of God going?' When I was already back on the street, I began to think, 'Work of God. Opus Dei! Opus, operatio... work of God. This is the name I've been looking for!' And from then on it has always been called Opus Dei."

Prada quotes a note written by Fr. Josemaria on Dec. 9, 1930: "The Work of God. Today I asked myself, why do we call it that? And now I'll answer myself in writing... Fr. Sanchez, in the course of conversation, referring to the unborn family of the Work, called it 'the work of God.'

"Then, and only then, I noticed that in my notes I had called it that. That name – the Work of God – which seemed like an impertinence, something presumptuous, almost an impropriety, was something that our Lord had me write the first time without knowing what I was writing. God put it on the lips of my good Fr. Sanchez so that there could be no doubt that the Lord himself was directing that his work bear that name, the Work of God."

In 1930, a former classmate of Fr. Josemaria joined the Work. Fr. Josemaria laid the groundwork for Opus Dei while working as a chaplain of the Foundation of St. Elizabeth. He led a life of near poverty, having to support his mother, sister and brother, on the income he received as chaplain and as a teacher.

In 1931 a new political regime took over in Spain. The Society of Jesus was suppressed and Fr. Josemaria's spiritual director, Fr. Sanchez, had to go into hiding.

In 1933, Fr. Josemaria started Opus Dei's work with college students, setting up a students' hall of residence. The following year, there was a need to expand the residence and they found a new place but they needed to raise 25,000 pesetas. Prada summarizes the story:

"At once, (Fr. Josemaria) launched a prayer campaign writing to anyone and everyone who might participate. Three of these letters are dated Aug. 5, 1934, and they all sing the same song. To one person he writes, 'Look, one small favor: make a triduum to our Immaculate Mother, asking her, if such is the will of God, to send us the 25,000 pesetas that we need immediately. We are relying on the

principle that “God helps those who help themselves,” but we also need the prayers of everyone else...”

The members of Opus Dei pooled their savings to be able to put up that new center but before work could be done on the premises they had rented, they found themselves 15,000 pesetas short.

“Once again,” Prada writes, “Fr. Josemaria had to write letters asking for help. All those dated Sept. 6, carry basically the same message. ‘We are so worried,’ he writes to Fr. Eliodoro Gil, a good friend of his. ‘We have rented a new property at 50 Ferraz Street. We have wonderful projects in mind that are perfectly viable and could become realities right away, except that when we put our money together, we found ourselves 15,000 pesetas short, and we don’t know where we’re going to get that money. Please earnestly keep this intention in your Masses and in your private prayers.’”

They did raise the money. The year before, Fr. Josemaria’s mother’s uncle who was also a priest, died and left them some property. Fr. Josemaria decided to discuss his financial problems with his family and tell them about the Work. His report to Opus Dei members in Madrid:

“...I spoke with my mother and sister and brother in broad outlines, about the Work. How persistently I had called on our friends in heaven to help me at the vital moment! Jesus made sure it went over very well. I’ll tell you word for word how they responded: My mother: ‘That’s fine, son. But don’t beat yourself or put on a long face.’ My sister: ‘I figured it was something like that, and even said so to Mama.’ And the little one: ‘If you have sons, then they better treat me with lots of respect, those boys of yours, because I’m their uncle!’ Without a moment’s hesitation, all three saw it as the most natural thing in the world that their money should be used for the Work...

“We are going to discuss this devil’s filth called money. My mother thinks she might be able to come up with 35,000 or 40,000 pesetas...”

It actually came to 45,000 pesetas.

In 1936, Fr. Josemaria opened another center in Valencia. Then the Spanish Civil War broke out.

Vol. 2 – “God and Daring”

Fr. Josemaria Escriva was just starting his apostolate with university students

when the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936. He received his first vision of Opus Dei on Oct. 2, 1928. Since then he was working to make that vision a reality at a time when he was virtually living on the edge of poverty.

To be able to work as a priest in Madrid, he accepted the job of being the chaplain of the Foundation for the Sick and then later of the Foundation of St. Elizabeth. At that time he asked the sick people under his care to pray for his intentions which were to help him make his vision of Opus Dei a reality.

At the start of 1931, he established a hall of residence for university students. As Bishop Alvaro del Portillo put it, it was “a formational activity for university students, aimed at leading them to a solid spiritual life and apostolic witness in their professions. It is the first seed of an apostolate. Before the end of the year, he established the DYA Academy, the first established apostolic activity of Opus Dei.”

“Our first corporate work,” Fr. Josemaria writes in his journal, “was the academy that we called DYA – *Derecho y Arquitectura* (Law and Architecture) – because classes were given in these two subjects. But for us the initials stood for *Dios y Audacia* (God and Daring).” The DYA was then incorporated with the student residence and was transferred to a bigger site on Ferraz Street purchased in 1935.

All these were destroyed at the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Fr. Josemaria used funds derived from the sale of family property for these projects. The value of the Ferraz St. residence may be gathered from the claim filed against the Spanish government. Since Opus Dei was not yet a registered organization, the Ferraz St. residence was registered under the Civil Society for the Encouragement of Advanced Studies. The organizers were among the first members of Opus Dei. Since the president of the society, Isidoro Zorzano, was an Argentine citizen, he submitted claims for damages to the amount of 1,078,900 pesetas through the Argentine embassy. The DYA was taken over by the rebel militia.

The archives of the Work say: “Among the listings in the claim were the following: Academy (furniture, labs, etc), 154,820 pesetas; Residence (furniture, clothes, equipment, etc.) 240,000; Building (16 Ferraz Street) repair work, 110,000.

“As can be seen, there was no claim for the building itself, but only for the repair work... The agreed-upon price for 16 Ferraz St. was 400,000 pesetas, to be paid over 14 years at 43,032 pesetas a year... This annual amount was to be paid ‘in

four equal instalments, every three months, with the first payment due on Sept. 30.' When the deed was drawn up, on June 17, 1936, the Society handed over 6,000 pesetas as part of the first quarter payment.”

During the battle of Madrid, the building itself was heavily damaged by artillery fire. So Opus Dei had to start from scratch.

A fierce anti-clerical persecution followed the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and in just a few months a dozen bishops and more than 6,000 priests and members of religious institutions were killed.

Undercover

Fr. Josemaria had to go into hiding and for more than a year had to transfer from one place to another until he found a more permanent place of refuge. The first was in an asylum for the insane and later in the Honduran consulate. The Honduran consul appointed him “Supply Officer”. This allowed him to move about in the city and perform his priestly duties under cover.

“Certain that the Work had to go forward even in those very difficult times,” Andrés Vázquez de Prada writes in the second volume of *The Founder of Opus Dei*, “the founder had begun to think about crossing over the Nationalist zone to rejoin the members of the Work there and carry on his apostolic efforts unhindered. Not wanting to impose his will, he consulted his sons, and they insisted that he should do it. The decision, obviously, was his, but only after a lot of prayer and vacillation was he able to make it. Bishop Alvaro del Portillo explains:

“The idea of leaving a number of his sons and daughters behind in the Red zone, in a dangerous situation, hurt him. Plus, his mother and brother and sister would also be staying in Madrid. The founder of Opus Dei was in doubt for quite some time. Sometimes he saw clearly that he should escape; other times, it looked to him that his duty was to stay and, if necessary, face martyrdom. Finally, after a lot of prayer he made the decision to escape.”

The idea was to cross the border to France using the route of and guided by smugglers, and then re-enter Spain through the “Nationalist” zone. They had to raise the smugglers’ fee of 2,000 pesetas per person in addition to other expenses.

Here’s what was on record in the Opus Dei archives:

“On the eve of their departure for Barcelona, Manolo Sainz de los Terreros was given 3,000 pesetas by neighbors of his on Sagasta St., the Corchado family. This

was a considerable sum roughly equivalent to the annual wage of an unskilled laborer...

“It would take a long time to detail all the efforts made to get the needed money. In broad outline, both Jose Maria Albareda and Tomas Alvira, who were employed by the state, contributed the savings from their salaries, and the rest – Juan Jimenez Vargas, Manuel Sainz de los Terreros, Pedro Casciaro, Francisco Botella, and Miguel Fisac – got help from their families and friends, in Madrid, Valencia, and Daimiel. There was also the remainder of the funds earmarked before the war for the new residence at 16 Ferraz St., and there were donations from other friends and acquaintances. Even so, there did not end up being enough to pay the guides in full; they received after the war what was owed them...”

Fr. Josemaria left Madrid on Oct. 8, and after a stop at Valencia, arrived in Barcelona on Oct. 10. They promptly started negotiations for guides who would take them across the border into Andorra and France. They were supposed to make contact on Wednesday, Oct. 16, with a man named Vilaro but he did not show up. They had to wait longer for the next attempt.

On Oct. 24, the newspapers announced the ambush of a group trying to cross the border. “*La Vanguardia*, Barcelona’s principal newspaper, gave the story this headline: ‘NINE FUGITIVES CAPTURED. ONE KILLED, THREE OTHERS WOUNDED.’ It is very probable that this expedition was the one organized by Vilaro, the man who had not shown up for his meeting...” Was it providence that they missed this meeting?

The smugglers had to lie low, and it was not until Nov. 19, 1937 that a new expedition was organized. Fr. Josemaria and his group arrived in Andorra on Dec. 2 and entered Spain again over the “Nationalist” border on Dec.11.

The leaders of the group settled in Burgos, where Fr. Josemaria started making contacts with the members of Opus Dei who were fighting with the Nationalists. He spent more than a year preparing for his return to Madrid. He was with the vanguard of the Nationalist army that entered the capital on March 28, 1939.

While in Burgos, Fr. Josemaria wrote in his journal, “Before the taking of Madrid, I saw details of what we were going to encounter there. It was like a dream, but a waking one. Thus I knew I was going to give retreats to priests, as in fact has happened.”

He went through a similar experience while giving a retreat in August 1940 to priests in Leon. Again, he was “enlightened about Opus Dei’s next efforts.” This required him to cut down on giving retreats and he wrote Bishop Eijo y Garay of Madrid saying: “I need to give up all work unrelated to Opus Dei. For this I will ask the help of my father, the bishop of Madrid. He can shield me with this authority, refusing to let me give retreats, etc...”

Heretic

While he was working on the expansion of Opus Dei to other places, he met with another problem. He was accused of being a heretic and of trying to supplant the religious orders. The problem was complicated at that time because Opus Dei was still looking for a “place” in the Church. Today it is recognized as a Personal Prelature of the Church by a decree of Pope John Paul II.

Until it was defined as a Personal Prelature, the situation of Opus Dei was vague and this was one of the reasons why some have accused it of being a secret and mysterious organization.

“The political circumstances in Spain between 1931 and 1939, together with the newness of the Work at that time, dictated a low profile for the apostolic activities of its members. To avoid causing a commotion or incurring a persecution, the founder took care – and his spiritual director supported him in this – to act ‘with holy discretion’.”

The late Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who took over as Prelate of Opus Dei on the death of Fr. Josemaria, says in *Immersed in God*, his account of the founder’s life and character, that the “enmity” between Opus Dei and the Jesuits was started by one Jesuit. Bishop del Portillo said, “We should be careful not to generalize. The campaign of denigration was indeed started by a Jesuit who at that time had great influence, both inside and outside the order. However, years later, he abandoned the religious state and ended up apostasizing altogether. Our Father, right from the start, tried to help him understand the nature of our Work; he pardoned him with all his heart, and afterwards, when this man left the Church, went on trying to help him, with the aid of some members of the Work. When speaking about this persecution that followed, our Father made use of the expression of St. Teresa, ‘the opposition of the good,’ and he applied to the persecutors the Gospel phrase *putantes obsequium se praestare Deo* (‘thinking they were doing a service to God’), (John 16:2).”

A few months after the end of the Spanish Civil War, Fr. Josemaria went to visit his confessor, Fr. Sanchez, to give him copies of the documents he had submitted

for getting the Work approved. He spoke about the negative reports concerning Opus Dei and he was surprised by the reply of Fr. Sanchez: "There are those who doubt that you are in good graces with the bishops."

Prada continues: "They went on to talk about the discretion with which members of Opus Dei had been carrying on their apostolate since 1931, when the Work was still in its infancy and the Church was being violently persecuted. A similar prudence also was observed with regard to the spiritual direction of new members. By a free personal decision, they confided fully only in those who had a full knowledge of the Work and its spirit, and who were therefore in a position to give them sound advice. Fr. Sanchez knew perfectly well that this was the only sensible thing to do in such circumstances. In fact, it was what he himself had always recommended. Thus one can well imagine Fr. Josemaria's surprise at hearing him now say, without batting an eyelid, that whatever had to do with a vocation to the Work should be discussed unreservedly with any confessor. How could it happen that the Jesuit was now taking this position, when for years he had been recommending that members of the Work receive spiritual direction only from priests who knew and loved it? As a director of souls, the founder immediately saw the grave consequences of such a change. He wondered at the fact that his confessor had 'in a few hours changed an opinion he had held for years.'"

Two weeks later, Fr. Josemaria saw Fr. Sanchez again and told him because of the radical change in his attitude toward the Work, he could not in good conscience continue seeing him for spiritual direction.

Prada again: "Father Sanchez, obviously somewhat upset, replied brusquely that the Holy See would never approve the Work, and cited a canon in support of his view...

"...Fr. Sanchez returned the papers the founder had given him. But all the way home, a question kept running through Fr. Josemaria's mind: Why did this man, who had so often assured him of Opus Dei's divine origin, now doubt it? When he got back to Jenner St., the first thing he did was to look up the canon cited by Fr. Sanchez. Much to his relief, he found that it had no bearing on the approval. Then he opened the envelope that had in it the returned papers, and with them he found a sheet with five or six names: a list of students who had frequented the Jenner St. residence for the purpose of secretly informing [the priest who was hostile to the Work] of what went on there. Had Fr. Sanchez left that sheet there by accident? Or had he 'accidentally on purpose,' out of friendship, provided him with this information?"

Fr. Sanchez and Fr. Josemaria did not see each other again until Nov. 22, 1948. By then the Holy See had granted the *Decretum Laudis* (the first formal approval) for Opus Dei and pontifical approval of its statutes. The founder traveled to Spain and visited all of the superiors of the Society of Jesus, except for the one in Seville, who refused to receive him. In Madrid, with the permission of the provincial, he went to see Fr. Sanchez, who received him with great joy. They spoke of old times, and, inevitably, they did touch on that sore spot. Fr. Josemaria tells us:

“He was very happy to hear what I told him about the expansion of the Work. I tried to draw him out a bit, saying to him, ‘I really suffered, Father. At the sight of that relentless attack made on me by such good people, I even thought at one moment, Could I be mistaken, and it’s not from God, and I’m leading souls astray?’

“And he immediately protested with great earnestness: ‘No, no. It’s from God. It’s all from God.’”

As the Work expanded, the need for more priests became acute. So far, it was only Fr. Josemaria taking care of the spiritual needs of the members of the Work.

In 1941, Fr. Josemaria invited three members of the Work to become priests. They were Alvaro del Portillo, who was to succeed him as Prelate; Jose Maria Hernandez Garnica and Jose Luis Muzquiz. He arranged for them to receive classes from private teachers under a director of studies. The director was Fr. Jose Maria Bueno Monreal, professor of canon law and moral theology in the Madrid seminary. Fr. Josemaria chose their teachers with the approval of the bishop.

In 1942, Fr. Bueno said the students were ready to take their examination for the two-year philosophy curriculum. The bishop named a panel for the purpose, and all three passed with the highest possible grades.

“Those first three candidates received their pastoral preparation for Holy Orders and their formation in priestly virtues directly from Fr. Josemaria, while their academic studies took place not in a seminary but at the Center of Ecclesiastical Studies of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross which was formally up in December 1943.”

Prada writes:

“...Our Lord had put it in (Fr. Josemaria’s) mind to create a society of priests, of

which the laymen preparing for ordination would become a part. In this way, without ceasing to belong to Opus Dei, they would be incardinated in it ‘*ad titulum Societatis.*’ Together with this solution there ‘came’ (this is the term he used) the symbol of the cross within the globe, a cross whose arms reached all the way across the globe, symbolizing the plan of redemption and also the common priesthood of all the faithful of Opus Dei, from whose ranks the priests would come.”

Today the full name of the Work is “The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei”, or Opus Dei for short. The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross was canonically established by Bishop Eijo y Garay of Madrid. Subsequently, it was also approved by the Holy See.

The first priests of Opus Dei were ordained by Bishop Eijo y Garay on June 25, 1944.

Fr. Josemaria writes: “I won’t try to hide from you the fact that this first ordination of brothers of yours has caused me at the same time much joy and much sadness. I love the lay character of our Work so much that I felt real pain at seeing them become clerics. And yet the need for priests was so clear that it had to be pleasing to our Lord God that those sons of mine were ordained...”

“Now that priests have been ordained in our Work, I want all my children, priests and laypersons, to keep something firmly fixed in your minds and in your hearts – something that can never be regarded as merely external, but that is, on the contrary, the very hinge and foundation of our divine vocation.

“Always and in everything, each of us, whether priest or layperson, must have a truly priestly soul and a fully lay mentality.”

Ten years after the Spanish Civil War virtually wiped out Opus Dei, it was ready to expand outside Spain.

“By now members of the Work... had gone to various countries in Europe and the Americas to pursue their professions. It was time, the founder concluded, to take the expansion to the international level.”