



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The Founding of Opus Dei

John F. Coverdale

John F. Coverdale, in his book *Uncommon Faith*, tells how Opus Dei was founded.

Tuesday, October 2, 1928, feast of the Guardian Angels, was the second day of a week-long retreat for diocesan priests being given in the house of the Vincentians in the outskirts of Madrid. The six priests attending the retreat had celebrated Mass, breakfasted, prayed part of the Breviary together, and read some passages from the New Testament. At 10:00 a.m., the twenty-six-year-old Fr. Escrivá went to his room.

Alone there, he immersed himself in reviewing notes he had brought to the retreat. These notes recorded a series of graces and inspirations God had conferred on him in answer to ten years of intense prayer, during which he had repeatedly made his own the response of the blind beggar who, when Christ asked what he wanted, responded: “Lord, that I may see.” He knew that God wanted something specific from him, but the insights he had were so fragmentary and incomplete that he could not make out what it was. Later in his life, he would often describe the graces he had received before October 2, 1928, as only “inklings” of what God wanted of him.

As the sound of the bells of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels drifted through the window, pealing to celebrate the feast of the Guardian Angels, the missing elements were added, and the picture suddenly came into focus. Escrivá saw that God wanted there to be a portion of his Church made up of people who would dedicate themselves to incorporating into their own lives and to spreading their friends, neighbors, and colleagues the joyous message that God calls everyone to sanctity, regardless of age, social condition, profession, or marital status.

A private note taken by Escrivá in 1930 records, in almost telegraphic fashion, a series of ideas that may summarize the content of his October 2 vision: “Plain Catholics. The mass of dough being leavened and rising. Our thing is what is

ordinary, with naturalness. The means: professional work. Everyone a saint!" A French author, François Gondrand, has given us a poetic version of the same ideas:

Thousands – millions – of souls, covering the whole face of the earth, raise their prayers to God. Generation upon generation of Christians, submerged in all the world's activities, offer God their work and the thousand-and-one concerns of their daily lives, Hour after hour of hard, conscientious work: an offering that rises up like precious incense from the four corners of the globe... A multitude of people, rich and poor, young and old, from every country and of every race... Millions and millions of souls spread out in time and space, covering the whole surface of the earth with their invisible influx... Thousands – millions – of souls, like an unending peal of bells echoing toward heaven, the chimes mingling as they echo up and up.

We don't know whether Escrivá's vision was more like his terse 1930 note or like Gondrand's lyrical rendition or quite different from either of them. When Escrivá spoke or wrote in later years about the events of October 2, 1928, the references were invariably brief and sketchy. They often came down to the laconic statement: "I saw Opus Dei."

In his earliest surviving written account of the foundational event, dated October 2, 1931, Escrivá says, "I received the illumination about the entire Work." It involved a "clear general idea" of his mission, but did not include all the details. "God our Lord," Escrivá once commented, "treated me like a child. He didn't show me all the weight at once but led me forward bit by bit. You don't give a small child four things to do at the same time. You give him one, and then another, and when he has finished that, another. Have you seen a little boy playing with his father? The child has some colored blocks of different shapes and sizes. And his father tells him, 'Put this one here, and that one there, and the red one over there.' And at the end, a castle!"

***Uncommon Faith: the early years of Opus Dei (1928-1943)*, John F. Coverdale, Princeton N.J.: Scepter, 2002, pp. 13-15.**