



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [For young people](#) - [The Life](#)

The Life

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Barbastro is a city in the province of Huesca in Spain. Josemaria Escriva was born there at 10 o'clock at night on January 9, 1902 in a house on the corner of the main street and the market-place. Four days later, little Josemaria was baptized in Barbastro Cathedral.

Josemaria was a happy, naughty and funny child, but when he was just two he developed a very high fever. The doctor tried many different kinds of treatment, but in the end said to Josemaria's parents: "He won't survive the night."

The next morning the doctor came back. "What time did the baby die?" he asked.

Don José Escriva, Josemaria's father, answered: "Not only has he not died, he's completely well!"

Don José and his wife Doña Dolores had promised God that if their baby got better they would go and pray to Our Lady of Torreciudad, at a shrine high up in the mountains near Barbastro. After Josemaria recovered they travelled there to thank our Lady. Torreciudad could only be reached by narrow paths beside steep, dangerous cliffs, but they kept their promise. Don José went on foot, while Doña Dolores rode a horse, holding the baby in her arms.

Josemaria had a sister called Carmen, who was two years older than him. Their mother Doña Dolores was a housewife, and Don José worked in a shop which sold cloth and chocolate.

Before Josemaria made his First Holy Communion, his mother took him to make his first Confession to a priest. A Piarist brother prepared him to receive Jesus for the first time in Holy Communion, and taught him a prayer which he remembered all his life. The prayer was: "I wish, Lord, to receive you with the purity, humility and devotion with which your most holy Mother received you, with the spirit and

fervour of the saints.” The day of his First Communion was a very happy day for Josemaria.

Josemaria had three little sisters: Chon, born in 1905; Lolita, born in 1907; and Rosario, born in 1909. Tragically, Rosario died when she was only nine months old. Then Lolita died, and soon afterwards Chon also died. Josemaria was 11 years old by this time, and he was so upset that he said to his mother: “Next year it’s my turn.”

His mother answered: “My darling son, our Lady kept you on this earth for something important, because you were already more dead than alive.” She reminded him that our Lady had saved his life when he was only two. “Don’t worry,” she said again. “I offered you to our Lady, and she’ll look after you!”

Soon after that, his father’s business failed, and the family moved to the town of Logroño, where Don José got a job working in a shop.

One winter’s morning, when Josemaria was fifteen, he went out early. The streets were covered in newly-fallen snow, and he saw the prints of bare feet. They were the footprints of a friar, who was walking bare-footed in the snow to offer a sacrifice to our Lord and to imitate Jesus, who carried a Cross for us. Josemaria was struck by this, and thought: “If other people make so many sacrifices for love of God, aren’t I capable of offering Him anything?”

From then on he began going to Mass every day, and going to Confession regularly. He felt that God was asking him for something, but he didn’t yet know what it was. And so he decided to be a priest, so that he could be freer to serve God and other people. He told his father, “I want to be a priest.”

Tears rolled down Don José’s cheeks. He had thought that Josemaria was going to be an architect or a lawyer. It was the only time Josemaria ever saw him cry. They were partly tears of joy, because Don José was a good Christian, but also partly sorrow, because a priest has to live a life of great sacrifice.

To prepare for the priesthood, Josemaria spent two years studying in the seminary at Logroño, and then went on to study in Saragossa. Shortly afterwards his father died in Logroño. Heartbroken, Josemaria went to the funeral, shared in his family’s grief, and promised to look after them.

Josemaria was ordained a priest in the Church of St Charles, Saragossa, on

March 28, 1925. He said his first Mass in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Pillar, offering it for the repose of his father's soul.

A little while later he moved to Madrid, and spent a lot of time looking after sick people and teaching catechism to children in the poorest parts of the city.

At the beginning of October 1928, Father Josemaria decided to spend a few days alone with God, with nothing to distract him. To do this he went to the house of the Vincentians, a group of religious brothers who lived in the centre of Madrid near the Basilica of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. There Father Josemaria prayed and asked God to help him to be a good priest and fulfil His will.

Then, on October 2, 1928, while he was alone, reading notes he had written while praying in the past few years, God let him see Opus Dei. In other words, God asked him to found Opus Dei to remind all Christians that we have to be saints, no matter what job we do. It isn't only priests who have to get to Heaven, but also doctors, footballers, teachers, housewives, students, farmers, fashion designers, astronauts, and everyone else too. Many people have forgotten that God is waiting for them in Heaven and on earth. "Opus Dei" is Latin for "the work of God".

Father Josemaria started to pray even harder, and offered up many sacrifices. He also started to look for other people who could understand him and receive a vocation from God to Opus Dei – ordinary people who could help him to pass on God's message to many others.

One of the first people to follow Father Josemaria was called Isidoro Zorzano. They had first met at school in Logroño. Now Isidoro was an engineer, and Josemaria was a priest. They hadn't seen each other for a long time, but Isidoro came to find Father Josemaria because he thought that God was asking him to do something, and that his old friend might be able to tell him what he should do. They met by chance in the street, and after a long talk, Isidoro joined the Work, as Opus Dei is often called.

Father Josemaria also asked the sick people he visited to offer prayers and sacrifices. One of them was a lady called Maria Ignacia Garcia Escobar. She was suffering from tuberculosis and was very sick indeed, in the King's Hospital in Madrid. Tuberculosis is an illness that causes a lot of pain, but Maria Ignacia never complained. She also asked to join Opus Dei, and lived out her last days in a very holy way, until her death.