



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## The work that Escrivá did not want to found. The story of a priest who became a saint

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It was October 6, 2002, and St Peter's Square, which has seen so many crowds, had never seen one quite so vast. I have a privileged memory of it all, at least the visuals, because I was helping Giuseppe De Carli with the television transmission. Our Italian RAI camera was on a sort of raised platform by the colonnade, and from our elevated standpoint we could see how the sea of humanity there was divided into orderly sectors.

The Square held maybe one hundred thousand people, who despite their numbers were capable of maintaining intense silence when the liturgy required it, or when the Pope was speaking. But beyond the rigorous order in the space designed by Bernini, the packed crowd filled the whole of the Via Della Conciliazione, all the way to the River Tiber and even further, so that in order to greet them all, Pope John Paul II in his Popemobile went all the way down to Castel Sant'Angelo.

There must have been half a million people in all. The cameras showed faces wet with tears: some were crying because they had come from so far, maybe spending all their savings on the trip, but the physical limits of the Square prevented them from getting any closer. This was the canonization ceremony of St Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, the "founder" of Opus Dei. There is a reason for the inverted commas: St Josemaría himself insisted on them when, in spite of his desire to remain hidden, people wrote about him. "I'm a founder without foundation," he would say, shaking his head.

This is a decisive but little-known aspect of the self-awareness of one of the Catholic institutions that is most widely loved (as confirmed by that vast crowd in 2002) and, at the same time, most controverted or reviled, sometimes even within the Church herself. All too often, its friends and enemies do not know the whole

truth of the institution they are arguing about. So, exactly five years after the canonization, it is worth recalling that Father Josemaría not only did not want to found anything (least of all Opus Dei), but was virtually forced into it, and set about doing it, as he later confessed, reluctantly.

This is how it was. In the morning of October 2, 1928, the 26-year-old priest from Aragon, Spain, who had come to Madrid to finish his law degree, was alone in his room in a house of St Vincent de Paul, where he was making a spiritual retreat. The young priest's temperament was not mystical but pragmatic; he was an organizer, not a prophet, so much so that he had initially hesitated between entering a seminary and a technical college, between studying theology and architecture. He had, however, a clear sensation that God wanted something very definite of him, and he went ahead to become a priest in order to be more available to whatever it was. He saw his future as that of a reliable administrator, certainly not as a charismatic priest.

His spirituality, which was to remain the same throughout his life, and was to be passed on to his followers, was little inclined to marvels and miracles. He did not look for "signs", but distrusted them, convinced that God speaks through everyday events. And then, as the bells of a nearby church were pealing, something took place, quite unexpectedly and disconcertingly, which was to change Father Josemaría's life, and not only his but that of countless people around the world, and was to end up in the first and so far the only personal prelature of the Catholic Church, with 84,000 followers, including 1,800 priests, in all five continents. In the words of the Postulator of the cause of his canonization, "While he was recollected in his room, God deigned to enlighten him: he saw Opus Dei, just as the Lord wanted it to be, and as it was to be in centuries to come."

Msgr. Escrivá always said emphatically that the institution was not his – it was not born of his analysis, reflection, or desire to respond to spiritual or material needs, as was the case with other religious families. Therefore it was not so much a "foundation" as a "revelation". The name itself, Opus Dei – God's Work – shows that it was all a part of God's plan from the start, and that the priest from Saragossa, who was not just young but poor and alone, was chosen merely as an instrument.

For some time, moreover, he was a somewhat recalcitrant instrument, to the point of trying to get out of this obligation, which he found not merely unattractive but frightening. But, if he ultimately felt he had to take up this cross, at least he saw it as limited. "This Work will be for men only," he wrote to one of the few friends he confided in. And yet on February 14, 1930, while he was celebrating Mass, he

received another bolt from the blue: he again “saw” the thing that he was bound, like it or not, to serve as an obedient instrument, and to his astonishment he realized that it was made up not only of men but also of women.

Today, equal numbers of men and of women belong to the Work. So St Josemaría was the gardener to whom the Owner of the land entrusted a seed so that, by dedicating to it a lifetime of hard work, he could make it grow into a tree whose species and character were preordained from all eternity. And that has important consequences: above all, the conviction that since Opus Dei was not born of a human plan in response to particular circumstances, but of a superhuman plan, it will last throughout the centuries, to the end of time and the Second Coming of Christ. A further consequence is the conviction that its growth process will be slow and gradual, but, like a great tree, continuous and sure. God, who has willed it to exist, is the guarantor of its future. Hence the “calm strength”, unhurried but seemingly implacable, characterizing a Work that took by surprise even St Josemaría, whom, five years ago, the Church included among her saints.

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