



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The Youthful Spirit of a Saint

Maria Casal

There are many things that could be called characteristic features of a saint, because although the saints canonized by the Church are almost infinitely varied, they all have certain things in common.

The feature I want to look at today is their being young at heart, their youthfulness of spirit, because being young is not just a matter of years. It is a spirit, an attitude towards life and death that radiates freshness and joy. All the saints, even those who lived to be very old indeed, possess that youthful spirit, although it is more apparent in some than others.

The secret of their youthfulness lies in their relationship with God, from which they draw confidence, 'shamelessness', security and optimism, as a result of knowing that they are always in good hands, always protected, always loved and cherished. And in their relationship with God saints discover above all, and help others discover, the fact that God is their Father. Jesus Christ taught us this specifically, and spoke about it on many different occasions, especially in his clear reply to those who asked him to teach them how to pray. "You should pray like this: 'Our Father, who art in heaven...'" (Matt 6:9). Good children, even when they are grown up, always find it easy to have that confident, trusting, open attitude towards their father, because they know that their father loves them and will help them to the limit of his possibilities, however serious their situation may be.

Saint Josemaria's youthful spirit

All his life, Saint Josemaria wanted people to consider him still young, and he used to say that he would be angry if anyone reminded him that he was seventy years of age, because really he was only seven – and he would hold up seven fingers. He loved the prayers which, before the reform of the liturgy, were said at the foot of the altar at the beginning of Mass: "*Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meum*, to the God who gives joy to my youth" (Ps 42[43]:4). From what I have just said it also follows that God very soon made Saint Josemaria discover the wonderful, consoling truth that God is our Father.

All the institutions in the Church feature what is known as “divine filiation”, but the founder of Opus Dei penetrated the truth of it so deeply that our Lord made him see it as the basis of the spirit he passed on.

Saint Josemaria’s youthful spirit was shown, for instance, in the natural way he behaved and treated people. During the twenty-five years when I had the great good fortune of witnessing his life, and often had the opportunity to talk and listen to him, I never found the slightest sign of affectation in his attitude or his words.

He had the simplicity of a small child, a child who does and says whatever seems best to him at a given moment, and lets everyone see him as he is, with nothing twisted, tangled or false about him, because he simply doesn’t worry about what people will think. Saint Josemaria always stressed to us that we should never have any human respects when we were trying to bring people closer to God, or in fulfilling our duties. I remember the day when I arrived in Rome in 1963 to teach in an international center for women in Opus Dei, and the Father received several of us. He spoke to us very seriously about how we would need to study a lot, since up till then our many other jobs had almost prevented us from studying hard. It was a serious moment, but his words were totally devoid of self-importance. On the contrary, his conversation was so full of common sense, interspersed with original and amusing turns of phrase, that I couldn’t help laughing, even though it was not the moment for it.

Children are usually optimistic. They are full of hope, knowing that if anything happens their parents are always there to sort things out. Saint Josemaria practiced that same optimism, though with a supernatural perspective, throughout his life.

Christian optimism is not unconcern or rashness, but comes from having a supernatural outlook – an outlook of faith and hope. Christians know that everything will work out for the best because God is the one who decides on the destiny of each person. “For those who love God, all things work together for the good” (Rom 8:28), Saint Josemaria often used to say, in Saint Paul’s words. He also had the gift of passing on that optimism to other people, especially his children. Since I joined Opus Dei I have been involved in setting up quite a few difficult projects, usually with very little by way of resources, and with no previous experience: a catering school, the School of Nursing at Pamplona, the beginnings of the apostolate of Opus Dei in Switzerland, and others. Knowing that Saint Josemaria was expecting that of me, because God was expecting it of him, was enough to make me certain of the “success” of the enterprise.

Naturally, optimistic people are joyful, just as children are joyful. The founder of Opus Dei was always joyful, able to make people laugh even in the hardest moments. This was such a notable feature of his character that one of the books about him is called *Maestro de buen humor* – “Teacher of cheerfulness”.

Youth is magnanimous, setting itself high goals. Young people desire to do great things, to make their lives into something worthwhile. Saint Josemaria hoped to reach the highest possible goal: holiness. Spanish people of my generation lived through two wars: the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. These profound experiences of suffering and death led us to think deeply about the meaning of life.

In order to do something worthwhile – life is short, I thought – I decided to study medicine, because that was the only thing that occurred to me until I met Opus Dei. Then I discovered that what was really worthwhile was what Josemaria Escriva was teaching: how to live for God, to do everything for God and to bring souls to Him. It was the greatest project I could ever undertake. Something which I think illustrates this is what happened when I was in Pamplona, working at the School of Nursing of what later became the University of Navarre.

The head of nursing and I went to speak to the Dean, Juan Jimenez Vargas, who is now dead, about the possibility of having our own building in the hospital at Navarre. We had been offered a dilapidated building which the architect had said was no use at all, and as we couldn't afford anything else we were rather disheartened. Then Jimenez Vargas, who was a man of few words, took a piece of paper out of his pocket and started smoothing it out with his hand. We asked what it was. Jimenez Vargas had been with Saint Josemaria during the Spanish Civil War and the escape across the Pyrenees, and he had kept this piece of paper on which Saint Josemaria had written a plan of the future University of Navarre, which at that time only existed in his dreams. And saints, like children, are dreamers, even when, like Saint Josemaria, they are great realists as well. Naturally, our discouragement vanished.

Youth seeks an answer to fundamental questions: the meaning of life, and death, and suffering. The various biographies that have been written of Saint Josemaria Escriva show that he too passed through such questioning, even though since he was very small, faced with any kind of suffering, such as the death of three of his sisters and the ruin of his father's business, he had always held firmly to the faith that he received from his parents. In my case, because of deficient religious formation,

I had found no answer to these questions until, through Saint Josemaria's teachings, I was able to understand the value of suffering in all its depth. As a Protestant I knew that the explanation lay in the words "Thy Will be done" from the Our Father, but that was not enough for me. When my fellow medical students introduced me to *The Way*, I discovered that there was much more to suffering: it was atonement for one's own sins and for other people's, and above all, it meant being with our Lord on his Cross, suffering for love. I think that this was one of the most sensational discoveries I ever made.

Youth dreams of love. A great, pure love that never betrays and never ends. Saint Josemaria had found this love in Jesus Christ, and he spent his whole life helping others to do the same, including me. Discovering what Catholics call "vocation", a call from God, was something indescribable, which made me utterly happy and still does.

At the same time, finding that love leads people to make decisions about their lives, to give them a definite direction so that they can discover what life is really about. And that gives a great sense of security to young people. It also leads to commitment, in the knowledge that it is worth giving everything, including one's life, for that love, and even that is too little. Youth is generous, "it gives itself without calculation" (*The Way*, 30). It doesn't haggle over the price. That is how Saint Josemaria behaved throughout his life, and that is why he was always young and why it is worth taking him as one's model.

Maria Casal was born in Guillena, Spain, and has Swiss nationality. She received her secondary education in Seville, Spain, followed by a one-year course in home economics in Switzerland. She took her doctorate in Medicine at the University of Barcelona and was the first Director of the School of Nursing at the University of Navarre. She has lived in Switzerland since 1965, and she gained a professional diploma in 1967. She has taught religious education in Zurich and has worked in the educational field in cultural centres and halls of residence for students.

At the congress "The Grandeur of Ordinary Life" she contributed a paper on her perception of the founder of Opus Dei, with particular emphasis on Saint Josemaria's youthful spirit.