



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Working summers

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Whenever Cardinal Pizzardo met Monsignor Escriva, regardless of who was looking, he would take Escriva's head between his hands and give him a big loud kiss on the nape of the neck, exclaiming, "Thank you for teaching me how to relax.!" And if he saw that people were surprised he would go on, "I used to be one of those people who think that in this life, when you're not working you're wasting time. But he gave me a new, wonderful idea: resting does not mean doing nothing, it's not laziness or idleness, but changing one's occupation, turning to a different, useful, relaxing activity for a while."*

Cardinal Pizzardo was an influential man in the Vatican, being Secretary of the Holy Office and Prefect of the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities. He knew very well what it was to work hard, but he had needed to learn about the sort of active, enriching relaxation which is not a waste of time at all.

For many years Monsignor Escriva too would answer those who insisted that he ought to stop his frenetic activity, "I'll rest when they say 'May he rest in peace'." As time passed, however, he realised that he was wrong, and explained, "You cannot keep your head and your body under constant stress; if you do, you'll collapse." However, he did not manage to find an opportunity to go away and rest until 1958.

"This man has an absolute atom bomb in his mind."

From 1958 onwards Monsignor Escriva began to leave Rome to spend the summer in Great Britain, Ireland, France or Spain, staying in rented or loaned houses. In 1958, 1959 and 1960 he spent some weeks of July and August in Woodlands, a rented house at the end of Courtenay Avenue, towards the north of Hampstead Heath in London. During all those summers he combined rest and study, as well as giving the people of Opus Dei and their apostolates an impetus not only in Great Britain and Ireland but also in continental Europe: he traveled by road to different cities in France, Spain and Germany in 1960, and in 1962 he went to Austria, Switzerland and France.

In the summer of 1963 he spent some time in a house called Reparacea in Navarre in northern Spain, between San Sebastian and Pamplona, and in 1964 he went to Elorrio, a town near Bilbao. He asked Don Alvaro and Father Javier Echevarria, who always went with him, to suggest plans and programmes for work on other matters than their usual ones during the holiday period. When he left Rome he deliberately disconnected himself from his regular work, and delegated as much of the task of governing the Work to others as he could. But his mind, a powerful dynamo of ideas, could not slow down.

Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychiatrist, was a disciple of Freud, Jewish like him, who, in time, went on to show up the myths around his former teacher. He once said, after visiting Monsignor Escriva one day in Villa Tevere, "This man has an absolute atom bomb in his mind." During those summers, as well as reading, studying and writing, Monsignor Escriva produced thousands of ideas, daring initiatives, imaginative solutions and unimaginable discoveries, which he himself noted down or asked someone else to, so as to get them going on his return to Rome, at the start of the next academic year.

"Father, that's cheating!"

Maybe the most noticeable thing about Monsignor Escriva's holidays was their lack of baggage: he traveled light. He never "holidayed in style", and his holidays featured neither a beach and hammock nor a spa and sunbed. He traveled in a beige Fiat 1100, which contained very few pieces of luggage and no fishing tackle, tennis racquets or golf clubs; not so much as a bicycle for a pleasant spin in the sunshine. Monsignor Escriva had never had time to learn any sport other than walking.

From 1965 onwards Monsignor Escriva began to spend August outside Rome, but still in Italy. He took up another cheap sport which did not need a special court or green: *le bocce*, an Italian game of bowls which required more skill than strength and involved bending, rolling the bowls and straightening up again. As the game was played on bare earth in the open country, it raised great clouds of dust, so Monsignor Escriva always changed all his clothes to play, taking off his cassock and wearing an old shirt, old trousers and black tennis shoes.

He was not particularly good at *bocce*, but it was a game for four people, two a side, which gave it the excitement of competition. Monsignor Escriva usually played with the architect, Javier Cotelo, who was in the Work and normally drove Monsignor Escriva's car, against Don Alvaro and Father Javier Echevarria, who always won. It was highly amusing to see how Monsignor Escriva did his best to handicap the natural winners. Sometimes, when it was their turn to bowl, he

nudged them a little so as to put them off balance.

“That’s not fair, Father! That’s cheating!” one of them would protest.

“But, Alvaro, that’s part of the game!” retorted Monsignor Escriva. “Don’t you pride yourself on how well you can do it? Well, you have to have some handicap!”

One day the two pairs had been playing a long time. There was only one ball left: Monsignor Escriva’s. With a bit of luck he could reach maximum score, if he managed to place the ball beside the “premium” ball. He threw. To everyone’s surprise, especially his own, the ball landed right beside the premium ball. With a guilty expression he declared there and then, “I’ll never do that again – that was worse than my usual cheating. Shall I tell you what I did?”

The other three looked enquiringly at him.

Monsignor Escriva lowered his voice, as if he was ashamed of what he was going to say. “Before throwing the ball, I prayed earnestly to my guardian angel for a good strike. But now I realise it’s wrong to involve my angel in a game that has not the slightest importance.”

1965: Castelletto del Trebbio.

In 1965 a friend of Don Alvaro’s called Signor Scaretti gave them the use of a house on a farming estate in Castelletto del Trebbio, about twenty kilometres from Florence, on condition they left before mid-August when he himself was planning to go there with his family.

The house was old, dilapidated and far from comfortable. There was no telephone or television. It was reached by a rough, unpaved track up a steep hill, and was surrounded on all sides by fields full of crops. Like most of Tuscany, the area had a continental climate, very cold in winter and very hot in summer. Monsignor Escriva, Don Alvaro, Father Javier and Javier Cotelo spent several weeks of July and August there.

A stranger in another person’s home

Here in Castelletto del Trebbio, as in any other house where he spent his holidays, Monsignor Escriva was conscious that he was using a building, furniture and fittings that were not his own, and he took great care to avoid any damage. If they decided to move any of the furniture to facilitate their work or study, he would ask Javier Cotelo to “make a drawing of the room as we find it, so as to be able to put everything back in the same places when we leave.” He also saw to it that the furniture did not mark the walls, and replaced the light-bulbs when necessary even though it meant having to go down to the village for a new one.

He did not mind feeling like a stranger who was staying in another person's home. On the contrary, it helped him to live in true detachment and poverty, and he took care of other people's things as if they were his own. One summer in London he had found a column of ants marching in perfect formation from the garden into the sitting room and out over the balcony on the other side. He called Dora and Rosalia and asked them for the vacuum cleaner. Then, with the help of Father Javier Echevarria, he proceeded to exterminate the "troops". Years later, during a summer in Premeno in the north of Italy, he helped in a similar operation, this time armed with a big stick while Father Javier Echevarria and Javier Cotelo burnt the ant hill by first pouring petrol on it. There is no man, no matter how wise or famous or holy, who does not enjoy playing at war with the very useful excuse of exterminating pests.

For those weeks Monsignor Escriva organised a timetable, with time to pray, work and play sports, as well as going out for walks and excursions. He was working on the revision of a text called "*The St Gabriel Instruction*" which he had written about the Supernumeraries in Opus Dei and the apostolate with married people.

Monsignor Escriva had begun writing this text in May 1935 and finished it in September 1950. There were no photocopiers then, only a poor-quality cyclostyle, which was a sort of stencilling-machine that used spirit to produce copies; the printing press in Villa Tevere did not yet exist. So they had made type-written copies to distribute in the countries where the Work was being established. Some of the copy-typists had made accidental errors of syntax and punctuation, and had even missed out some words. The same thing had happened with the other "Instructions" (the *St Raphael Instruction* about the apostolate with young people, and the *St Michael Instruction* concerning the Numeraries and Associates of Opus Dei, who stay celibate). Monsignor Escriva had had the whole set recalled, to prepare just one printed text which would be printed by the press in Villa Tevere. The time had now come to prepare this edition.

Before them they had evidence of how the meaning of a sentence can be changed by a wrongly placed full stop or comma, or the omission an adverb, and this was especially important in the case of "foundational" texts whose character needed to be kept intact. Monsignor Escriva spoke with Don Alvaro and Father Javier Echevarria about the need to "be self-critical, and do our work really well because we cannot offer up shoddy work to our Lord." He insisted a lot during those days on "the asceticism of little things."

He also studied the documents of the Second Vatican Council and prayed about the big themes still to be debated: that of priests, and that of consecrated

religious. He was grateful for the document *Lumen Gentium*, some of whose points echoed the spirit of Opus Dei, which thus became part of the solemnly declared and recommended teaching of the Church. Monsignor Escriva spent a lot of time in the little oratory which they had set up there in Castelletto del Trebbio, thanking God for the Church's stamp of approval on what had been judged critically, misunderstood or rejected for so long.

As there was no television set in the house and the daily paper arrived late in the day, every day on returning from their walk Monsignor Escriva asked Don Alvaro's permission to turn on the radio so that they could listen to the one o'clock news. He wanted to keep up with world affairs. He nearly always made some comment of a supernatural kind, and encouraged whoever was with him to pray for such and such a country or situation or person.

* This chapter could only have been written with the help of someone who had lived closely with Monsignor Escriva. The author is grateful to Monsignor Javier Echevarria for his accounts, both written and taped, and also for generously taking the time to recall events and put them into writing in reply to demanding questions from the author. Thanks to his help, it has been possible to reconstruct nine stretches of time, unpublished until now, in the life of Monsignor Escriva: the nine summers from 1965 to 1973.

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