

Carmen Escrivá de Balaguer

In memory of Carmen Escrivá de Balaguer, elder sister of St Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, for the fiftieth anniversary of her death. Carmen Escrivá – affectionately known to people in Opus Dei as “Aunt Carmen” – was part of the early history of Opus Dei, to which she dedicated her whole life, with generous availability, joy and self-sacrifice.



Carmen was born in Barbastro, in the province of Huesca, Spain, on July 16, 1899. Her father, José Escrivá, was the manager of a business dealing in fabrics and chocolate. Her mother's name was Dolores, née Albas. Carmen was a happy, sociable, generous child with a strong character. She felt especially close to her brother Josemaría who was two and a half years younger than her. After him came three more girls, Chon, Dolores and Rosario. However, the tranquil happiness of the Escrivá household was soon stricken with suffering. Between 1910 and 1913 Carmen's three younger sisters died, and almost at the same time their father's business went bankrupt. He decided to move to nearby Logroño in search of a new job. Carmen left Barbastro at the age of sixteen, never to return.



In Logroño, José Escrivá got a job in a company called “La gran ciudad de Londres”. Carmen went to high school and helped her mother at home. Josemaría talked of studying architecture. However, God had other plans. In the winter of 1917 Josemaría decided to become a priest; and on February 28, 1919, their little brother Santiago was born. Life in Logroño was not easy, and Carmen saw her parents endure their scarcity of means with elegance, joy and self-dominion. They continued to be schooled by suffering: on November 27, 1924, José Escrivá died suddenly. The family moved first to Saragossa, where Josemaría was ordained to the priesthood in 1925, and then to Madrid. From then on, the lives of his mother, sister and brother were especially linked to Fr. Josemaría's.



In Madrid, on October 2, 1928, Fr. Josemaría saw that God was asking him to begin Opus Dei: to open up a path to holiness in the middle of the world to people from every background, through ordinary work and the duties of everyday life, done with perfection for the love of God. Immediately he began to tell the people who came to him, about the spirit that God had entrusted him with. Opus Dei grew quietly, on the firm foundation of its founder's prayer, sacrifice and hard work. Dolores and Carmen Escrivá opened their home to it in the most natural way, and went out of their way to support the apostolate that Fr Josemaría was doing among students and workers. These were years of considerable poverty for them, and it grew worse with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Dolores and Carmen Escrivá remained in Madrid for the whole of the war.



Dolores Escrivá died unexpectedly on April 22, 1941. Carmen felt her loss very deeply, but this new sorrow did not diminish her energy. She was a second mother to her younger brother Santiago, and at the same time took over responsibility for the domestic work in the first centres of Opus Dei, first in Madrid and then in other cities. Years later, in 1952, St Josemaría invited her to move to Rome. She set up house with Santiago and continued helping to spread the family atmosphere that characterizes Opus Dei with her hard work and affection. In 1957 she fell seriously ill, and she died on June 20 that year, surrounded by the love and affection of the faithful of Opus Dei, and of her brother Josemaría, who helped her to prepare to meet God.