

HISTORY OF THE WORK

1. St Josemaría – God’s instrument for the founding of Opus Dei

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer was born in Barbastro, Spain, on 9 January 1902. His parents, José Escrivá y Corzán and María de los Dolores Albás y Blanc, led an exemplary Christian and family life, which influenced him for as long as he lived. He was the second of their six children. He was still a child when three of his sisters died within a short space of time. He was himself on the brink of death when, at the age of two, he was unexpectedly cured from a serious illness, a favour attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Torreciudad.

In 1914 his family and he had to move to Logroño following the collapse of the family clothing business, which had up to then offered the Escrivás some financial security. This was the beginning of a difficult period for the family, who confronted it together trusting in God. So passed his teenage years.

In the winter of 1917-18, while in the last year of secondary school at the Logroño National High School, he came across some footprints in the snow left by a barefoot Carmelite monk. He saw this as a call to deepen in his own Christian life, the start of what he would later refer to as the phase of his ‘inklings’, hints of God’s Love which pricked his conscience¹. He felt that he was being questioned by God, but he still did not know clearly where this was directing him. He consequently abandoned his plans to study architecture and began ecclesiastical studies as a day student at the Logroño seminary in October 1918. He was 16 years old.

Having finished his first two years at the seminary in 1920, he moved to Saragossa to graduate from what was then the Pontifical University, while he lived as a boarder in the seminary of St. Francis de Paul, also known, for historical reasons, as the seminary of St. Carlos. He showed such piety and maturity there that Cardinal Solevilla decided to confer the tonsure early and to appoint him ‘Inspector’, a post which conferred on him the rank of superior in the seminary. That year, following advice from his father, and with the permission of the seminary’s superiors, he began studying law in the University of Saragossa², and he continued this without interrupting his seminary studies. During his time in the university he carried out an intense apostolate among colleagues and teaching staff alike.

He was ordained to the priesthood on 28 March 1925. Following the death of his father in Logroño some months before, his mother and two sisters moved to Saragossa, and he supported them with his work. After a brief spell as curate in the parish of Perdiguera, a small country town, and a few weeks more at the parish of Fombuena, he carried out his priestly ministry in the church of St Peter Nolasco in Saragossa. In 1927, with the permission of his bishop, he moved to Madrid, to carry out doctoral studies in civil law, and to work on his thesis at the Central University, for only in the capital was it possible to complete a doctorate. During that same year he had finished his law degree.

During his first years as a priest, he worked as a chaplain to the Foundation for the Sick, a charitable institution run by the recently-founded congregation of the Apostolic Ladies of the Sacred Heart. He worked here generously in pastoral service to the poor, children, and the sick. He also established relationships with better off people, whom he encouraged to a fuller spiritual life and greater generosity to others. At the same time he gave classes in canon law and in Roman law in an academy, so as to support his family, whom he had brought with him to Madrid.

¹ ANDRÉS VAZQUEZ DE PRADA. *The Founder of Opus Dei*. Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 2001, Vol. I, p. 67.

² cf. R. HERRANDO PRAT DE LA RIBA, *Los años de seminario de Josemaría Escrivá en Zaragoza (1920-1925)*, Rialp, 2002, p. 212 et seq.

2. *Opus Dei is born in the Church*

On 2 October 1928, while he was doing a retreat in Madrid, St Josemaría, then a young 26 year old priest, ‘saw’ what God was asking of him in the service of the Church, and what he had only up to then ‘guessed at’: the founding of Opus Dei.³

“St Josemaría was chosen by God to announce the universal call to holiness, and to show that everyday life, ordinary activities, are the path to sanctity. One could say he was the ‘saint of the ordinary’. He was convinced that, for someone who lives by his faith, everything offers the chance to find God, everything becomes a prompting to prayer. Daily life, lived in this way, reveals an unsuspected greatness. Holiness really is within everyone’s grasp.”⁴

On 14 February 1930, St Josemaría was supernaturally inspired to understand that women too could form part of Opus Dei. Towards the end of 1931 he left the Foundation of the Sick to begin pastoral ministry at the Foundation of St. Elizabeth, initially as chaplain and later as rector. The Foundation of St Elizabeth was an institution which was started in Madrid by the Spanish monarchy. It comprised a school run by the Sisters of the Assumption and a convent of Augustinian nuns. Priestly care was provided by a rector and two chaplains.⁵

From those early years before the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) St Josemaría began the task of writing documents about the spirit and the life of Opus Dei. He distinguished between, on the one hand, *Instructions*, whose purpose was to set down, along with in-depth guidelines about the spirit of Opus Dei, experiences and practical details about the apostolates of its faithful and, on the other, *Letters*, which were more discursive.⁶

In 1934 he published *Holy Rosary* and *Spiritual Considerations*; the latter appeared, expanded and revised, in 1939 as *The Way*, his best known work, now spread worldwide. He poured his own spiritual experiences into this book, and this explains why, although written in particular historical circumstances, it continues to be ever modern and of interest to people of the most varied backgrounds.⁷

It was during the 1930’s too that, as a result of the direct apostolate of St Josemaría, people first felt called to Opus Dei, and the first Centre was set up for the apostolic work of Opus Dei. When civil war broke out, preparations were already in train to start apostolates in Valencia and in Paris.

³ On the founding and the name of Opus Dei, CARDINAL RATZINGER wrote on 6 October 2002, the day of St Josemaría’s canonisation, “I have always been struck by the interpretation which Josemaría Escrivá gave to the name Opus Dei – an interpretation which we could call biographical and which allows us to understand the founder in his spiritual dimension. Escrivá knew that he should found something, but he was always aware that it was not his work, that he had not invented anything, that the Lord had simply made use of him. Thus it was not his work, but Opus Dei (Latin for ‘work of God’). He was only an instrument with which God had acted. (...) Josemaría Escrivá did not consider himself ‘founder’ of anything, but only a person who wants to fulfil the will of God, to second his action, the work, precisely, of God. In this sense, the theocentrism of Escrivá, in accordance with the words of Jesus, means this confidence in the fact that God has not retired from the world, and that God is working now and we ought only to put ourselves at his disposal, to be ready, capable of reacting to his calling. This, for me, is a message of greatest importance. It is a message which leads to overcoming what could be considered the great temptation of our times: the pretence, that is, that after the ‘big bang’ God retired from history. God’s action did not ‘stop’ at the moment of the ‘big bang’, but continues throughout time in the world of nature and the world of man.”

⁴ ST JOHN PAUL II, Discourse on 7 October 2002, the day after the canonisation of St. Josemaría, (www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/october/documents).

⁵ ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 2001. Vol. I, ch. VII-VIII.

⁶ See J.L. Illanes, *The Writings and Preaching of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, in *Studia et Documenta*, 3 (2000), p. 203.

⁷ *The Way* was followed by other writings: in 1944 he published a long monograph entitled *La Abadesa de Las Huelgas* (*The Abbess of Las Huelgas*). During the 1960’s and 1970’s he published *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá* (1968) and *Christ is Passing By* (1973). The former is a collection of several interviews given to the international journalists about Opus Dei and its apostolates, as well as about contemporary questions regarding the Church and the world. *Christ is Passing By* contains eighteen homilies spanning the liturgical year. It is a summary of some important elements of Christian life in general and the spirit of Opus Dei in particular. *Friends of God* (1977), *The Way of the Cross* (1981), *Furrow* (1986), and *The Forge* (1987) were published posthumously, translated into many languages, and read by millions all over the world. Critical-historical editions of *The Way* (2004), *Holy Rosary* (2010), *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá* (2012) and *Christ is passing by* (2013) have been published to date.

Spreading to other cities in Spain had to wait until the end of the war. St Josemaría carried out all of this apostolate with the knowledge of the diocesan authorities.

Once the war was over in 1939, the apostolate of Opus Dei began in a stable way in Valencia, and new vocations soon arrived there. The apostolic work of Opus Dei began soon afterwards in Barcelona and in Valladolid (1940), and shortly thereafter in Saragossa, Bilbao, Seville, and Santiago de Compostela. Both the number of faithful and the extent of the apostolic activities grew significantly during the 1940's. The apostolate among women also grew, and resulted with the first women's centre being established in 1942 in Madrid.

3. First Apostolic Approvals

On 19 March 1941 Opus Dei was approved as a *Pious Union* by the bishop of Madrid. Bishop Leopoldo Eijo y Garay's intention was to put a stop to a slanderous campaign which had been simmering in religious as well as in political circles, largely as a result of a failure to understand the novelty of Opus Dei's message regarding the universal call to holiness through ordinary work and the other activities of daily life, and apostolate in the middle of the world.

On 14 February 1943 St Josemaría, once again supernaturally inspired, saw a way by which he could have priests to support him who would both arise from the apostolates of the Work and who would fulfil the apostolic tasks which he wanted to give them; thus arose the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. The bishop of Madrid, with the *nihil obstat* of the Holy See, erected it as a Society of Common Life Without Vows in that same year.

It was clear that this canonical solution could not be definitive. This was because, from the very outset, the faithful of Opus Dei had always been and lived as ordinary Christians, just like their fellow citizens. They earned their own living and wore no emblems or badges of any sort. This had always been clear in its official documents. They had always carried out their apostolate in a natural way among relatives and friends, with the initiative and responsibility of one among equals. Opus Dei was an institution requiring a new canonical structure, one which would guarantee a unity of formation, government, and apostolate, through its own pastor.

Meanwhile the apostolates continued to grow. The number of both men and women seeking admission to the Work was increasing. The first priestly ordination of faithful of Opus Dei took place on 25 June 1944. The three priests concerned, Alvaro del Portillo, José María Hernández Garnica, and José Luis Muzquiz, all engineers, were ordained by the bishop of Madrid. The causes of canonisation of each of them has now been opened. Once World War II was over, and with some 20 centres and several hundred faithful in Spain, Opus Dei was now able to spread to new countries; first within Europe: Portugal (1945); Italy and Great Britain (1946); Ireland and France (1947); and then across the Atlantic, to Mexico and the United States (1949); and Chile and Argentina (1950).

The rapid spread of Opus Dei was yet another reason for a change in its juridical status. Although 1943 had been an important step, it became clear that the development of Opus Dei needed a global framework. The long juridical journey of Opus Dei therefore continued, and led St Josemaría to move to Rome in 1946. Following intense months of prayer, sacrifice, and work, Opus Dei was approved as a secular institute by Pope Pius XII in February 1947. On that new basis, which, though an improvement on what existed previously was still inadequate, Opus Dei continued to grow.

4. Development and Expansion

Opus Dei continued to spread throughout the world, and its members, inspired by St Josemaría and helped by many other people, established major initiatives in education and community development: universities, hospitals, agricultural colleges, schools, and training centres in the most varied countries and social circumstances. The approval granted in 1950 created the entity of *Cooperators of Opus Dei*: people who, though not members of Opus Dei, cooperate with their prayer, their alms, and sometimes with their work, in its apostolates, and share in its spiritual goods. Non-Catholics, and even non-Christians, could be admitted as Cooperators.

Apostolic growth and expansion was based, first of all, on supernatural means. In addition, St

Josemaría directed the formation of its members. In 1948 and 1953 he created two international centres of formation in Rome for men and women respectively: the Roman College of the Holy Cross, and the Roman College of Holy Mary.

The framework of a secular institute did not suit the foundational charism of the Work, even though it had made international expansion possible, as it allowed for trans-diocesan government. In particular, apostolates had begun in 1951 in Colombia and Venezuela, in 1952 in Germany, in 1953 in Guatemala and Peru, in 1954 in Ecuador, in 1956 in Uruguay and Switzerland, in 1957 in Brazil, Austria, and Canada, in 1958 in Japan, Kenya, and El Salvador, in 1959 in Costa Rica, in 1960 in Holland, in 1962 in Paraguay, in 1963 in Australia, in 1964 in the Philippines, in 1965 in Belgium and Nigeria, and in 1969 in Puerto Rico.

The history of Opus Dei during the last five years of its founder's life was marked by the consolidation and development of its apostolates in all five continents, by the continued quest for its definitive canonical status, by the challenges faced by the Church after the Second Vatican Council, and by the catechesis carried out by St Josemaría in Europe and South America in 1972 and 1975. On 26 June 1975 the founder of the Work died suddenly in Rome. Opus Dei numbered 60,000 faithful.

Mgr. Alvaro del Portillo, who had been his closest confidante ever since the 1930's, was elected his successor. During his period in charge of Opus Dei, the Work attained its definitive juridical status, foreseen by its founder, that of a personal prelature of universal scope. That is to say, it was a portion of the people of God ruled by a prelate as its own pastor, and with its own priests.⁸ In January 1991, the Holy Father ordained the prelate of Opus Dei, Alvaro del Portillo, as bishop. Under his leadership Opus Dei began working in 21 new countries: Bolivia (1978); Zaire, Ivory Coast, and Honduras (1980); Hong Kong (1981); Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago (1982); Sweden (1984); Taiwan (1985); Finland (1987); Cameroon and the Dominican Republic (1988); Macao, New Zealand, and Poland (1989); Nicaragua, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (1992); India and Israel (1993); and Lithuania (1994).

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo died on 23 March 1994, and was succeeded in turn as the head of the prelature by Mgr. Javier Echevarría, who had also worked closely with St Josemaría for more than two decades. He was ordained bishop in January 1995. Since then the apostolate of Opus Dei has begun in Estonia, Slovakia, Lebanon and Uganda (1996); Kazakhstan (1997); South Africa (1998); Slovenia and Croatia (2003); Latvia (2004); Russia (2007); and Romania, Indonesia, and South Korea (2009).

The founder of Opus Dei was beatified by St John Paul II on 17 May 1992, and canonised in St Peter's Square in the presence of 500,000 people from all five continents, by the same pope in October 2002.

5. *Canonical Status of Opus Dei*

Ever since the beginning of the 1960's, the founder of the Work had proposed the idea of revising the juridical structure of Opus Dei to the Holy See. Opus Dei had by then spread throughout the five continents, and the doctrine of the universal call to holiness and the mission of the laity in the Church, which St Josemaría had been spreading since the 1930's, were echoed and proclaimed by Vatican II. Documents approved in the Council itself allowed for an opening towards its appropriate canonical status.

The charism of Opus Dei actually came to find its proper juridical framework in the structure of 'personal prelatures'.⁹ On 19 March 1983 the apostolic constitution *Ut Sit* was published. In it Pope St John Paul II, as and from 28 November 1983, erected Opus Dei as the first personal prelature of universal scope and with its own statutes.

The prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, or simply 'Opus Dei', is therefore, an institution belonging to the hierarchical structure of the Church; that is to say, it is one way in which the Catholic

⁸ cf. A. DE FUENMAYOR, V. GÓMEZ IGLESIAS, J.L. ILLANES. *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*. Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 1994.

⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* ch. 5.

Church organises itself, with a structure which, though not that of a diocese, is similar to one. Its mission is to spread the universal call to holiness, and to promote, among Catholics of all walks of life, holiness through ordinary work and the circumstances of daily life. By means of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association of priests which is inseparably linked to the prelature, it helps diocesan priests in their response to the call to holiness in their priestly ministry.

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Bibliography

Among the various biographies of St Josemaría, the three-volume work by ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA is the most noteworthy: *The Founder of Opus Dei*. Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 2001.

Other biographies of note:

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PETER BERGLAR, *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder, Josemaría Escrivá*. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1994.

ANA SASTRE GALLEGO, *Tiempo de Caminar: Semblanza de Monseñor Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid, 1989.

On the history of Opus Dei, see also:

AMADEO DE FUENMAYOR, VALENTÍN GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS y JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei: History and Defense of a Charism*, Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 1994;

JOHN F. COVERDALE, *Uncommon Faith: The Early Years of Opus Dei (1928-1943)*, Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 2002; and

FEDERICO M. REQUENA y JAVIER SESÉ, *Fuentes para la historia del Opus Dei*, Ariel. Barcelona. 2002.

The St Josemaría Historical Institute was established in 2001 to publish his complete works and to foster the study of the man and his teachings. The first issue of its journal, *Studia et Documenta – Journal of the St Josemaría Historical Institute*, appeared in January 2007. Its bibliographical section is a good way to become familiar with St Josemaría and Opus Dei.