



St. Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer

BORN 1902; DIED 1975
PRIEST AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: JANUARY 9

ST. JOSEMARIA ECRIVÁ DE BALAGUER, named after Jesus' foster-father and mother, exemplified the values of family life and the dignity of human work. He is a saint of self-effacement who was content to allow his life's work, the organization Opus Dei, submerge and overshadow him.

Josemaria, the second of two sons and four daughters of José Escrivá and Dolores Albás, was born in Barbastro, a town in northeastern Spain near the Pyrenees Mountains. His parents were devout and joyous, teaching their children the faith, habits of prayer and frequenting the sacraments, almsgiving, and a sense that work is a way of serving and glorifying God.

Josemaria was a cheerful and outgoing child, but he experienced two kinds of great sorrow in his childhood. His three younger sisters died over a three-year period when he was between the ages of nine and eleven, and when he was thirteen, his father's textile business failed. The family moved west to the city of Logroño so that his father could find employment. His father's reduced income meant that the family's new home was cramped, chillingly cold in win-

ter and extremely hot in summer. Nevertheless, the joy that characterized the family's life was not destroyed by either the great sorrow of the deaths of Josemaria's three sisters or the economic hardships the family experienced.

Josemaria was still in his teens when he first sensed a call to a vocation. He was deeply affected by the footprints he saw in the snow left by

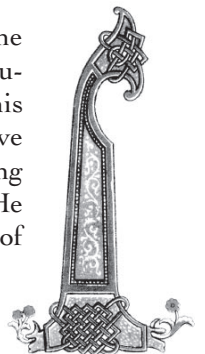
a barefoot Carmelite monk. Not understanding the full meaning of his sense of calling, he began studying for the priesthood so as to be completely available to God's call. He completed his studies in Saragossa, Spain and was ordained at age twenty-three, only a few months following his father's death. He received his first assignment, to a rural parish, and with permission also undertook the study of law, which his father had suggested before his death.

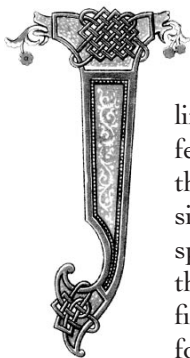
Two years later, he received permission from his bishop to undertake advanced legal study in Madrid. His widowed mother, his older sister, and his young brother, then eight, came with him.

In addition to pursuing a doctorate at the University of Madrid, Josemaria tutored students and taught classes to help support his mother, sister, and brother. However, he gave considerable time to his priestly ministry among the poor, sick, and underprivileged children. He encouraged young men in a variety of walks of



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life — students at the University of Madrid, professional people, and laborers — to join him in these works of charity out of a sense of responsibility for the improvement of society and in a spirit of Christian solidarity. During a retreat the following year, when he was twenty-six, he finally understood God's specific call to him, to found a way to sanctify the daily life and work of ordinary men and women. He called this new organization Opus Dei ("the work of God"), recruiting its first members from among the young men who had joined him in his ministry. Two years later he extended membership in Opus Dei to women. In 1934, the first edition of his most well-known book, which in later editions was entitled *The Way*, was published. It consisted of nearly a thousand concise and practical thoughts intended to be used in meditation to foster spiritual growth. He also wrote several other books and published two collections of his homilies.

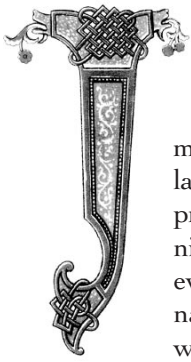
In 1936, the Spanish Civil War, which many historians regard as a "dress rehearsal" for World War II, broke out. Brutal and bloody on both sides, it pitted Catholic and anti-Catholic Spaniards against each other. The Loyalists or Nationalists won the support of factions of the army, business, landowners, the middle class, and the Church, while the Republicans were supported by the socialist government in

power, trade unions, workers, and peasants as well as homegrown socialists, Communists, and anarchists. In the ideological crucible of 1930s Europe, the fear of disorder and revolution, heightened by constant agitation by leftists and legitimized by autocratic governmental policies and poverty, made the Spanish Civil War unusually ideological. Both sides tarnished themselves by accepting aid from the most dangerous European powers, the Nationalists from the rising fascist powers of Germany and Italy and the Republicans from the Communist Soviet Union and other international Communist organizations. Because the Republicans were ferociously anticlerical, bishops, priests, and members of religious orders were hounded, persecuted, and murdered. The best records show the murder of twelve bishops, over sixty-four hundred priests (both diocesan and religious-order priests), and nearly four hundred nuns. For a while, Josemaria continued to care for souls in Madrid, frequently changing where he stayed to avoid capture. Eighteen months after the beginning of the war, he was forced to flee, on foot, across the Pyrenees with a small group of his followers. From there he went to the principality of Andorra and eventually found refuge in the city of Burgos, in northern Spain, an area controlled by the Nationalists.



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Following the end of the war in 1939, Josemaria returned to Madrid and completed his law degree. In 1941, the Bishop of Madrid approved Opus Dei as a “pious union.” The organization was built around a spirit of family, and even as it grew to many thousands in Spain (the nation remained neutral in World War II and was thus less affected than the rest of Europe), each member felt a true sense of intimacy with its founder. During these years, Josemaria also gave numerous retreats to priests, members of religious orders, and lay people. In 1943, he founded the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which opened the possibility of ordination for some members of Opus Dei. By this means, the apostolic work of the organization is carried out by a completely integrated association of ordained and lay members. The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross also made its members available to assist in the formation of priests and seminarians in various dioceses of Spain.

Although the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and the indirect effects of World War II confined Opus Dei to Spain for most of the first twenty years of its existence, Josemaria envisioned a universal mission. In 1946 he moved to Rome, where he lived for the remainder of his life. He obtained a doctorate in theology, worked with two congregations (departments) in the Vatican, and received numerous honorary positions. Everything needed to allow Opus Dei to admit members in any country was approved in 1950. This included approving its emphasis on personal holiness specifically in, rather than in spite of, one’s daily life; on service to the Church at all levels; on living in the world and as part of the world; on a love for personal freedom and personal responsibility in the context of a pluralism consistent with the moral, political, and social teachings of the Church.

Although having its beginnings in young, unmarried Catholics, Opus Dei in 1948 began to allow married people to become full members and, in 1950, the Pope permitted the organization to recruit “cooperators” — individuals who help the organization — who were not Catholics and, at times, not even Christians. Its growth in-

cluded the opening of a variety of formal organizations, including agricultural universities, professional schools, elementary and high schools, and health-care facilities that served everyone but were plainly Catholic in character. The distinctive teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on the universal call to holiness and the role of the laity in carrying out the mission of the Church perfectly meshed with Opus Dei’s understanding of its role and mission.

Josemaria spent much of his time in fostering the growth of Opus Dei. This included frequent travel throughout Europe and overseas to Mexico and Latin America. By the time of his death, he had seen Opus Dei spread to every continent, having centers in thirty nations. In 1982, Opus Dei became the first institution in the history of the Church to become a “personal prelature,” that is, it has jurisdiction not over territory, as does a diocese, but over the individuals who are its members. This type of organization, envisioned by the Fathers of Vatican II, does not remove the members of Opus Dei from the authority of the dioceses in which they live and work, but only extends to the specific commitments the members make with respect to their apostolic work, their spiritual formation, and the ways they advance in holiness through charity, prayer, and ascetical practices.

One of the most striking aspects of Opus Dei, which has over eighty-five thousand members, is its emphasis on sanctification of the ordinary layman and laywoman through work. Josemaria understood that the opening chapters of the Scriptures present work as holy, not as part of the punishment of original sin, for Adam had been given by God the task to cultivate the Garden of Eden. Our Savior himself, a humble carpenter, had sanctified work as he sanctified every other aspect of human existence but sin. Josemaria also understood that, as a consequence of original sin, pain and suffering were part of the way work must be carried out, and that this pain and suffering can, unified with Jesus’ suffering on the cross, help transform human work into prayer, using work performed with the greatest possible perfection as the principal means of sanctification.

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