

ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER Y ALBÁS (Saint Josemaría)

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ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER Y ALBÁS (Saint Josemaría), priest, founder of Opus Dei (born Barbastro 9 Jan. 1902 and died Rome 26 June 1975).

The figure of Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer can be sketched out in four basic strokes : saint, priest, founder and spiritual master. He was born in Barbastro (Huesca). His parents, José Escrivá y Corzán and María de los Dolores Albás y Blanc provided him with a solid example of Christian family life. His education began as an infant at the Daughters of Charity school ; then he went through primary school before starting his baccalaureate studies at the Piarist school in Barbastro.

Between 1910 and 1913 his three little sisters died of various diseases. In 1914, the textile business that up to then had provided the family with a comfortable lifestyle went bankrupt. They had to move to La Rioja province, where his father found work in the capital, Logroño. The period of his adolescence was a difficult time for the family. During the winter of 1917-1918, when he was studying the final year of his baccalaureate at the National Institute of Logroño, he came across the footprints of a disclaled Carmelite in the snow. He took this as a call to go more deeply into his Christian life. Feeling a calling from God, but without any clear idea in which direction it was telling him to go, he decided to become a priest, believing that in this way he would be more available to fulfil the divine will. He therefore gave up his plans to study architecture and in October 1918 began ecclesiastical studies as a day pupil at the Conciliar Seminar of Logroño. He was seventeen years old.

In 1920, after two years at the Seminar, he went to Zaragoza to continue his studies at what was then the Pontifical University, while he was a boarding pupil at the Seminar of Saint Francis of Paula. During that year, following advice from his father and with the authorisation of the directors of the Seminar, he began to study for a Law Degree at the University of Zaragoza. Teachers and fellow students remember him as a priest of great humanity and apostolic zeal.

He was ordained as a priest on 28 Mar. 1925. His father had died a few months earlier in Logroño and he had brought his mother and two siblings to Zaragoza, where he supported them with his work. After a brief experience as temporary administrator in the parish of Perdiguera, he undertook his priestly ministry in the Church of Saint Peter Nolasco in Zaragoza. In 1927, with the permission of his bishop, he moved to Madrid to begin his doctoral thesis in Law at the Central University. That same year he had obtained his Law Degree in Zaragoza.

He spent his first years in the Spanish capital as chaplain to the Foundation for the Sick, a charitable institution run by the recently-founded Congregation of the Apostolic Ladies of the Sacred Heart. During that period, he devoted himself actively to the priestly care of the poor, the sick and children. He also had dealings with people from the well-off classes, who he encouraged in their spiritual life and in their generosity towards others. At the same time, he taught classes in canon law and Roman law at an academy to maintain his family, who had also moved to Madrid.

On 2 Oct. 1928, while he was making a spiritual retreat in the Central House of the Vicentians in García de Paredes Street, in the words he used for the rest of his life, he "saw" what had until then just been "a premonition" : his mission would be to spread and put into practice the call to holiness for all the baptised through their worldly work and daily duties. This path that opened within the Church soon received the name of Opus Dei. On 14 Feb. 1930, while celebrating the Eucharist, he also understood that women had to form part of Opus Dei.

A few months after the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic, he left his position as chaplain of the Foundation for the Sick to become chaplain of the Augustinian Recollects of Santa Isabel. In this new pastoral situation he was able to devote more time to Opus Dei. He maintained close links with the vicar general of the diocese, Francisco Moran, whom he kept informed of all his activities. The early 1930s was a period of important interior mystical experiences and intensive sacerdotal work among the sick of Madrid's hospitals, all in a growing anti-clerical atmosphere. In 1933 he started the DYA Academy, where lessons on Law and Architecture were given. This was the first Opus Dei centre for students and professionals. The following year, during which he was

appointed Rector of the Santa Isabel Foundation, the academy moved to Ferraz Street and also functioned as a residence.

In 1934, he published *Holy Rosary and Spiritual Considerations*. In 1939 and much expanded, the latter became *The Way*, his best-known and most widely read work.

He finished writing *The Way* in Burgos, where he spent the final months of the Spanish Civil War. From the time the civil conflict broke out in July 1936 to the end of 1937, he had taken refuge in Madrid, where religious persecution was intense. He stayed in various refuges until he was able to reach the other part of Spain via the Pyrenean frontier.

He continued to promote Opus Dei from Burgos, establishing contact with the first members and other young people who he guided spiritually and who were spread across the two areas into which Spain had become divided. At the request of various prelates, he also preached at spiritual retreats for hundreds of priests, seminarists and monks, a task he continued to undertake during the first years of the post-war period. A good number of Spanish bishops, beginning with the bishop of Madrid, Leopoldo Eijo y Garay, as well as other important ecclesiastical figures, professed great esteem and appreciation for him as a man of God.

During his time in Burgos he also devoted his intellectual efforts to the preparation of a new doctoral thesis in Law, as he had lost the material he had previously written at the beginning of the Civil War. This new research focused on the study of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Abbess of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, a monastery near Burgos. The thesis would be defended in Madrid, to where he returned at the end of the conflict. Subsequently, in 1944, and as a result of new research, he published an extensive monograph entitled *The Abbess of Las Huelgas*.

From his return to Madrid in 1939 until 1946, the year he transferred his residence to Rome, he oversaw the development of Opus Dei throughout Spain and prepared the beginning of its expansion to other countries, two objectives that had been interrupted by the Civil War. Simultaneously he had to suffer libellous campaigns incubated in both ecclesiastical and political circles. However, he never lost the support of the bishop of Madrid who, in 1941, offered the first canonical recognition of Opus Dei. On 14 Feb. of 1943, also during the celebration of the Eucharist, he understood the way in which the priests who came from the lay faithful were to be incardinated in Opus Dei, a need he had perceived from the outset. The solution would be the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, also established canonically by Bishop Eijo on 8 Dec. of that same year, 1943.

Although the legal step taken in 1943 was important, he soon realised that for Opus Dei to develop it would need universal recognition. In this way, he continued a long itinerary that, among other things, would lead him to move to Rome and set up his residence there in 1946.

Together with his endeavour to achieve a suitable legal channel for Opus Dei, his years in Rome would be occupied with the efforts to create the instruments necessary for formation and governance in Opus Dei.

Promoting the expansion of Opus Dei around the world was the other great objective of his years in Rome. From the 1950s on, he made frequent journeys in Europe preparing its future development. From Rome, he fostered the apostolates that were opening the way in America, Asia and Africa. With his encouragement, major initiatives arose in the field of education and aid, including universities, hospitals, schools for farmers, colleges and vocational training centres in highly diverse countries and areas.

In 1954 he was suddenly and inexplicably cured of the severe diabetes he had suffered since the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and which had seriously affected his health.

Also in the 1950s he earned a doctorate in theology from the Lateran University, he was appointed an advisor to the Pontifical Commission for the true interpretation of the Code of Canon Law and the Holy Congregation of Seminaries and Universities, prelate of honour to his Holiness, and a member of the Pontifical Academy of theology.

Explicitly rejecting any attachment to a specific corporate school in theological or philosophical questions, his teachings were purely spiritual. Both his written works and his preaching, which were closely related, encompass an exposition of the whole of Christian life. Prominent in his teachings are the call to holiness and the apostolate in ordinary life, mainly through work and the fulfilment of daily tasks ; the unity of life ; awareness of the divine filiation as the foundation of Christian life, and contemplation in ordinary life, among others. The doctrine of the universal call to holiness and the mission of the layperson in the Church were confirmed and encouraged in the Second Vatican Council, of which Escrivá is considered to have been a precursor.

With regard to his written output, it can be said that in the 1930s he began to write texts aimed at teaching the followers of Opus Dei. In the 1960s he revised and completed that material, leaving it ready to be used in the teaching of those who form part of Opus Dei and, sometime after his death, to be published. In addition, since the 1950s and 1960s transcriptions and audio and video recordings of his preaching have been preserved.

In the 1960s and 1970s, two new publications were printed : *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer* (1968) and *Christ is Passing By* (1973). In addition, the following were published posthumously : *Friends of God* (1977), *Via Crucis* (1981), *Furrow* (1986) and *Forge* (1987). His works have been translated into numerous languages and distributed all over the world.

At the beginning of the 1970s he began a series of journeys he called "catechesis" that took him to various countries in Europe and America : Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Guatemala. On those journeys he was able to meet with thousands of people who came to hear him speak, attracted by his teachings and his reputation for holiness.

He died unexpectedly on 26 June 1975, the victim of a heart attack in the room where he worked. On his death, Opus Dei had more than 60,000 members of 80 nationalities and was established on the five continents. He was beatified on 17 May 1992 and canonized on 6 Oct. 2002. Escrivá's canonization was one of the first to be processed after the 1983 Code of Canon Law streamlined the procedures for canonization, and so it was processed more quickly than was typical before. Also crucial was the support of the pope Saint John Paul II.

During the canonization, in Saint Peter's Square, before a huge gathering, the pope extolled the teachings of the new saint and exhorted the people to "ensure that their interior life, namely, their life of relationship with God and their family, professional and social life, made up of small earthly realities, would not be separated but would form only one life that was holy and full of God". These words can be considered a good summary of the contribution made by Saint Josemaría to the universal Church. His mortal remains lie in the prelatial church of Our Lady of Peace, in the headquarter buildings of Opus Dei in Rome.

F.M. Requena

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