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The stuff of martyrs: death shed new light on the life of a remarkable priest

On January 9, Opus Dei celebrates the birthday of its founder. In some places members also remember Fr. Sal Ferigle, who died on January 9, 1997. Fr. Sal started Opus Dei's work in the United States in 1949, and helped start things off in Japan in 1958 and in Australia in 1963. We now re-print an article about him from Catholic World Report.

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Even as he suffered what he must have recognized as a life-threatening heart attack, he thought *first* of administering the sacrament, and *second* of his own survival.

Father Salvador Ferigle died in Boston on January 9, 1997. Because he shunned the limelight, Father Sal-- as he was invariably identified--was not particularly famous. But after his death, friends and acquaintances began to realize that they had known a very special priest.

Born in Valencia, Spain, in 1923, Salvador Ferigle emerged as an unusually gifted student at the University of Valencia, studying chemistry and physics and graduating with honors in 1946. In the next decade he would earn one

doctorate in physics from the Illinois Institute of Technology and another in theology from the Pontifical Lateran University. Throughout that academic career he compiled a record of almost monotonous excellence: invariably, in every class he took, he was given the highest available grade.

When he came to the United States, Ferigle was not just planning to study physics. He and Father Joseph Muzquiz came to America with the blessing of the founder of Opus Dei, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva, in order to establish that lay movement in America. In 1949 those two men founded the first center of Opus Dei in Chicago. By 1996, there were Opus Dei centers in 35 different cities across the United States, and 3,000 American men and women had pledged their lives to the lay movement.

Varieties of ministry

The remarkable growth of Opus Dei in the United States can be attributed, in no small part, to the zeal of those first two pioneers. For Sal Ferigle there would be more opportunities to bring "the Work" to new lands; after his priestly ordination in 1956 he helped launch new centers of Opus Dei in Japan, the Philippines, and Australia as well. Then returning to America, he served brief stints in Milwaukee, Washington, and St. Louis before settling in Boston in 1971. For most of his remaining years he was the chaplain for a student residence just off Harvard Square.

Working with students, however, was only one aspect of Father Sal's ministry. He also organized an apostolate among Spanish-speaking people in the Boston area. He put together an ambitious religious-

education program for St. Aidan's parish in nearby Brookline. He organized an annual "seminar for seminarians" to help train young men for priestly life. He taught courses, both formal and informal, in theology and Church history. He earned an enviable reputation as a confessor and counselor. Every Saturday there were lines outside his confessional at St. Aidan's; when they heard of a particular knotty moral problem, knowledgeable Catholics became accustomed to saying, "That's one for Father Sal."

When Father Sal died, his body lay in state in St. Aidan's church for a day, and scores of people filed past to pay their last respects. The remarkable thing about that tribute was not the depth of emotion that was displayed, but the amazing diversity of the people whose lives this simple priest had touched. There were young students and elderly priests,

investment bankers from the leafy suburbs and poor immigrants recently arrived from Honduras. Somehow, in a remarkable variety of ways, Father Sal had touched these diverse lives and drawn these people gently into his orbit.

Service before survival

If any single incident could be said to capture the dedication which Father Sal displayed, it was an event which occurred in the evening of Christmas Day, 1996. One of his housemates came to Father Sal's room, and asked the priest to hear his confession. Of course Father Sal assented.

As the young penitent began, he noticed that Father Sal appeared to be ill; he was pale and shaky, and perspiring freely. But he heard out the confession, and gave absolution, before collapsing on his bed and asking for help.

As it happened, while he heard that confession Father Sal was experiencing a massive heart attack, which virtually destroyed the organ. But even as he suffered what he must have recognized as a life-threatening episode, he thought *first* of administering the sacrament, and *second* of his own survival.

Rushed to the hospital, Father Sal survived for a few more weeks--long enough to make his own peace with God, greet a stream of visitors, and give his friends a final priestly blessing before a second heart attack finally killed him. He died quietly, but as one admirer put it, on Christmas Day he had already shown that "he was made from the stuff of martyrs." May he rest in peace.

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