

An apostle for the laity

"Don't let your life be sterile. Be useful. Blaze a trail. Shine forth with the light of your faith and of your love. With your apostolic life wipe out the slimy and filthy mark left by the impure sowers of hatred. And light up all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you carry in your heart."

2002-01-30

Those are the opening words of The Way, written by Blessed Josemaria

Escriva, founder of Opus Dei, an organization of consecrated lay people and priests. Father Escriva, one of the holiest and most creative churchmen of the 20th century, has recently been approved for canonization along with Juan Diego, the 16th century visionary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Padre Pio, a 20th century Capuchin stigmatist. Jan. 9 was the centennial of his birth.

"You'll never be a leader if you see others only as stepping stones to get ahead. You'll be a leader if you are ambitious for the salvation of all souls" (The Way, 32).

Escriva and Opus Dei, widely criticized for their conservatism and supposed secrecy, are at the heart of one of the Second Vatican Council's greatest accomplishments - a clear theology of the laity. It is Opus Dei that is dedicated to the belief that every lay person, by virtue of his or

her Baptism, is called to play a role in transforming the world with the spirit of the Gospel. Prior to this, the Church was much more clericalized and there was no clear understanding of the role and importance of the laity.

"We are children of God, bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls, of the only brightness which can never be darkened, dimmed or overshadowed. The Lord uses us as torches, to make the light shine out. Much depends on us; if we respond many people will remain in darkness no longer, but will walk instead along paths that lead to eternal life" (The Forge, 1).

Escriva lived a life totally dedicated to God. It was a life of generosity, simplicity, courage in the face of persecution and deep piety. He prayed several hours a day and found ways of turning every

ordinary moment of the day into a prayer, belying the view that Opus Dei is made up of driven workaholics. He used to frequently say, "The weapon of Opus Dei is not work, it is prayer. That's why we transform work into prayer, and have a contemplative soul." He would pray intensely while watching the news and commended to the Lord the events that were being reported.

"There are so many men and women on earth, and the Master does not fail to call every single one. He calls them to a Christian life, to life eternal" (The Forge, 13).

During the Spanish Civil War, Catholics were being persecuted relentlessly for their faith. Priests and religious who carried out their ministries lived in mortal danger. Escriva was compelled to move from one place of refuge to another, yet

never gave up his priestly activity. Finally, he made a strenuous and extremely dangerous crossing of the Pyrenees in order to live in a part of Spain where the Church was not under persecution.

"Be convinced of this: your apostolate consists in spreading goodness, light, enthusiasm, generosity, a spirit of sacrifice, constancy in work, deep study, complete self-surrender, being up-to-date, cheerful and complete obedience to the Church and perfect charity" (Furrow, 927).

Escriva died in 1975 in Rome at age 73. Opus Dei had more than 60,000 members around the world and had established more than 700 centres, ranging from student residences to medical clinics to schools for family farming. Financial aid programs are attached to many programs but their main thrust is to provide an

integrated formation that includes spiritual training. Opus Dei has received support from all pontiffs from Pope Pius XII to John Paul II.

"Don't doubt it: your vocation is the greatest grace our Lord could have given you. Thank him for it" (The Way, 913).

Western Catholic Reporter

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(2026-02-23)