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In the King's Hospital — 1932

An excerpt from "The Founder of Opus Dei" (Vol. I)," by Andres Vazquez de Prada, which shows some of the difficulties Saint Josemaria had to confront in getting Opus Dei started.

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By virtue of the new republican Constitution, churches and religious associations and institutes were henceforth to be deprived of economic help from the national and local governments. Worse still, it was

planned that there be a total abolition, within two years, of the budget for the clergy. The idea was to finish off the Church, if not by armed violence, by a starving off of its ministers.

One of the clerics affected by those measures was Father Jose Maria Somoano. Ordained in 1927 by the bishop of Madrid, this young priest in 1931 held the position of chaplain at King's Hospital [Hospital del Rey]. This hospital was in the far northern reaches of Madrid, about four miles from downtown, out in the country and effectively isolated. Its actual name, Hospital Nacional de Enfermedades Infecciosas [National Hospital for Infectious Diseases] explains its isolation. It had been inaugurated in 1925. (The name King's Hospital came, of course, from the previous regime.) In it were treated epidemic and other contagious diseases, including the

dreaded tuberculosis, at that time the sickness that filled the most beds and resulted in the most deaths.

On January 2, 1932, Saint Josemaria, accompanied by Father Lino, another young priest, went to King's Hospital to speak with its chaplain, Father Somoano, who turned out to be very eager to hear about the Work. The Founder would write in his journal two days later, "this friend now belongs to the Work." (It was at this time that Father Josemaria, as we shall soon see, was getting his first priest followers.) In the eyes of the Founder this priest was an excellent acquisition, a first-rate vocation, a real treasure for his apostolic work—in short, a lever for moving the heavens. In his journal he wrote: "With Jose Maria Somoano we have obtained, as they say around here, a wonderful 'connection,' because our brother knows, admirably, how to channel the suffering of the patients

in his hospital so that the heart of our Jesus, moved by such beautiful expiation, will accelerate the hour of his Work.”

So highly did Father Josemaria value this kind of prayer, the prayer of suffering, for the development of the Work that he considered this great contribution to be more than adequate grounds for admitting a soul to Opus Dei. “Yesterday,” he says in his journal, “Father Lino told us about a sick woman at King’s Hospital, a soul, very pleasing to God, who could be the first vocation of expiation. By unanimous common consent, Lino will tell her ‘our secret.’ She may die before beginning officially—most likely she will, because she’s in very bad shape—but then her sufferings will be worth all the more.”[1]

At first Father Josemaria visited the hospital sporadically, but soon he

was coming regularly. Within a few weeks he came to realize the refinement of soul of Father Somoano, for whom “just the thought that there were priests who went up to the altar without the proper dispositions was enough to make him shed tears of love and reparation.” So many were the profanations, assaults, and sacrileges perpetrated by the revolutionary masses in the spring of 1931 that Father Somoano was moved to offer his life for the Church in Spain. One of the nursing sisters heard him make that offering in the chapel—he did not know she was there. Father Josemaria, who knew nothing of this, was surprised to hear Father Somoano say, on several occasions, things like “I am going to die soon; you will see.” Somewhat intrigued, he wanted to ask him in private why he was saying such things, but for one reason or another the right occasion for this never presented itself.

Father Somoano died on the night of Saturday, July 16, 1932, after two days of agony. He had been poisoned. On Monday he was buried. Father Josemaria, who had placed such high hopes in this vocation, offered it up to the Lord. Father Somoano had died a martyr, poisoned out of hatred for the priesthood. Upon his return from the burial, Father Josemaria wrote in his journal:

July 18, 1932: The Lord has taken one of us: Jose Maria Somoano, an admirable priest. He died, as a victim of charity, at King's Hospital (where he had been chaplain to the end, despite all the laicist fury), on the night of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to whom he was very devoted. He was wearing her holy scapular, and since this feast fell on a Saturday, it is certain that he entered the joy of God that same night. A beautiful soul.... His life of zeal had won him the affection of everyone

who associated with him. He was buried this morning.... Today, willingly, I “gave” to Jesus that member. He is with him and will be a great help. I had put so much hope in his upright and energetic character. God wanted him for himself: blessed be God.

Maria Ignacia was the patient Father Josemaria had characterized as “a soul, very pleasing to God, who could be the first vocation of expiation.” The Founder tenderly nurtured that priceless vocation, encouraging her in her work of expiation and, with her, offering to God the cruel pains she was suffering. On the days when the priest visited her she could not contain her joy. The happiness of Maria Ignacia, says her sister Braulia, was then written all over her face, and she could hardly wait to give her

the good news: “Father Josemaria has been here. I am very happy.”

She spent one year in the Work, remaining faithful to her vocation, when the final phase of her Calvary began. “I stayed with her day and night,” says Braulia. “She was in terrible pain, hurting from head to foot.” Four months she spent at death’s door. Afterwards came this obituary note from the Founder, communicating the news of Maria Ignacia’s death to his followers in the Work:

On September 13, the vigil of the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, there fell asleep in the Lord this first sister of ours, of our home in heaven. Prayer and suffering were the wheels of the chariot of triumph of this daughter of ours. We have not lost her; we have “gained” her. The realization that she has gone home should immediately turn our natural

sorrow into supernatural joy, because now we are sure of an even mightier intercessor in heaven.

from *The Founder of Opus Dei*
(Volume I: "The Early Years"), by
Andres Vazquez de Prada, Scepter
Publishers, pp. 372-379.

[1] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 685. The person referred to here is María Ignacia García Escobar. The term “vocation of expiation” was used by the Founder only in the first years of Opus Dei, and he afterwards abandoned it.