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Saint Josemaria Escriva, priest and founder of Opus Dei: Universal call to holiness in the midst of ordinary life

We reprint an article that appeared in the Atlantic Catholic by Fr. Patrick O'Neill, who was ordained last year for the diocese of Antigonish in Nova Scotia

2003-02-26

Saint Josemaria Escriva, priest and founder of Opus Dei: Universal call to holiness in the midst of ordinary life.

By: Father Patrick Joseph O'Neill

*Reprinted with permission from
Atlantic Catholic, (Nova Scotia) Week
of January 19, 2003*

Saint Josemaria Escriva was born in Spain in 1902. He was raised in a modest Catholic family. His father was a local merchant who later went bankrupt and struggled to maintain the family. For many years Saint Josemaria asked for guidance to know his vocational call. He eventually discovered that he was called to be a priest and was ordained to the priesthood on March 28, 1925. He moved to Madrid and worked as a priest while studying for a doctorate in canon law which he received in 1927. He felt inspired by God to found "Opus Dei" (Latin for

‘the work of God’) which he did in 1928. He saw this movement as a path for lay men and women to seek holiness through their family life and professional duties. In 1930, he founded the women’s apostolate of “Opus Dei”. With the support of his local bishop, Escriva opened the first center of Opus Dei in Madrid in 1933.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in Madrid in 1936, religious persecution forced Fr. Escriva to exercise his priestly ministry clandestinely constantly hiding from soldiers by moving from place to place. As time passed Opus Dei began to expand throughout Europe and other parts of the world. In 1943 Escriva founded the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross which includes Opus Dei members ordained to serve its apostolates, as well as diocesan clergy who continue in their diocesan responsibilities. In 1946 Saint Josemaria Escriva moved to

Rome in order to universalize the movement. Four years later, the Holy See granted definitive approval of Opus Dei. Today Opus Dei has about 84, 000 faithful from ninety nations. Ninety eight percent of the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei are lay men and women, most of whom are married. There are some 1, 800 priests of Opus Dei. In 1957 at the invitation of Cardinal Leger, the first members of Opus Dei came to Canada; today, there are about 500 members of Opus Dei in this country.

Following the death of Josemaria Escriva on June 26th, 1975, a third of the world's bishops and many other people petitioned the Vatican to initiate his cause for beatification and eventual canonization. By 1978, 10,000 favors received through his intercession had been reported. 6,000 people wrote to the Pope requesting a cause be opened for canonization, including 69 cardinals,

241 archbishops, 987 bishops, and 41 heads of religious orders and communities. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints initiated the cause on February 19th, 1981.

Cardinal Saraiva Martins, its Prefect, described Escriva as “one of the eminent figures of the 20th Century. He promoted the holiness of the laity with untiring fervor, and promoted many initiatives that brought the leaven of the Gospel to the society of our times”. Escriva has been described by Pope John Paul II as a precursor of the Second Vatican Council. He anticipated by 30 years much of which was eventually contained in the Council’s “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People” specifically its direction on the Spirituality of Lay People in the world of today. Likewise, Escriva highlighted the mission of the laity as renewing the temporal order seeing this as their distinctive task. Saint Josemaria Escriva was canonized by

Pope John Paul II on October 6th, 2002 in St. Peter's Square; his feast day is June 26th.

Opus Dei is a personal Prelature of the Church created in 1982 by the Holy Father. A personal prelature is a juridical structure which reflects Opus Dei's theological and pastoral nature. This is a new concept in the Church envisioned by the II Vatican Council. A bishop is appointed by the Holy See to be its leader and shepherd. Belonging to the prelature are the priests, deacons and seminarians associated with it and indeed the laity who dedicate themselves to the apostolic work

The entire purpose and goal of Opus Dei is to promote among Catholics of all social classes a life consistent with their faith. Opus Dei assists people as they seek to grow closer to God and serve their brothers and sisters. It reminds us that all the baptized are

called to seek sanctity and spread the Gospel through faithful witness in words and actions. *“Our professional vocation is an essential and inseparable part of our condition as Christians. Our Lord wants you to be holy in the place where you are, in the job you have chosen for whatever reason. To me, every job that is not opposed to the divine law is good and noble, and capable of being raised to the supernatural plane, that is inserted into the constant flow of Love which defines the life of a child of God. (St. Josemaria Escriva, Friends of God, p. 60)”*.

The principal and primary message of St. Josemaria Escriva is that all people are called to personal holiness. No one is excluded from this call; it is universal. During his life and indeed through his intercession, Saint Josemaria Escriva inspires many people with the conviction that sanctity is possible in

the midst of life and the world. Opus Dei focuses on work and daily life as an occasion for spiritual growth and an opportunity to contribute and make the world a better place. In speaking of Opus Dei, Blessed Pope John XXIII said, “*Opus Dei is destined to open up in the Church unsuspected horizons of universal apostolate*”. The movement focuses on unity of life, prayer and sacrifice, charity, apostolate, and fidelity to the Holy Father.

I have personally read many writings by Saint Josemaria Escriva; his life and witness are indeed inspiring. He is especially appealing to people in our day because of his great simplicity in devotion and faith. It is said that he seems to parallel Saint Therese of Lisieux. Many who met Saint Josemaria Escriva have commented on his witness to holiness; for example, the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of San

Salvador wrote this of him on July 12, 1975: *“I was fortunate enough to have met Monsignor Escriva and to have received from him encouragement and strength to remain faithful to Christ’s unchangeable doctrine. He managed to unite in his life in a continuous dialogue with God and great humility: it was clear that he was a man of God”.*

Over the years I have been able to meet many members of Opus Dei. They are indeed faithful and in deep love to serve Christ and His Church. In October of 2002, I was very blessed to visit the Opus Dei Center in Rome just one week after St. Josemaria was canonized. I was able to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass upon the Altar where the newest saint’s body is entombed.

As Saint Josemaria Escriva inspires so many in the world, he enables us to believe that “little things, done

with great love, become big things in the eyes of God.”

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Fr. Patrick O'Neill / Atlantic Catholic

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