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THE FOUNDER OF OPUS DEI

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Born in Spain in 1923, Vasquez de Prada first met the founder of Opus

Dei in 1942. In the years that followed, he was able to spend time with him on numerous occasions. A historian and cultural attaché who lived and worked in London for more than 30 years, he has published several studies of eminent figures of the English Catholic Church, especially Thomas More and John Henry Newman. In an earlier work, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, published in Spain in 1983 but never translated, he drew a fascinating and insightful portrait of the figure of Blessed Josemaria.

Vasquez de Prada's new biography represents, however, a much more ambitious project which will eventually include 3 volumes. Volume I relates the story of Josemaria from his birth in January 1902 to 1936, when the Spanish Civil War broke out. The remarkable thing about this Volume is the way in which the author has managed to

develop two distinct ideas about Blessed Josemaria and the Work (as he used to call Opus Dei before he gave it that name) without really separating them. The first is that his life was one of total dedication to the birth and development of Opus Dei. The second is that the origin of Opus Dei cannot be explained in strictly natural terms: it clearly involves a supernatural element.

What links these two ideas is the particular charisma of the founder of the Work. The point is emphasized at the very outset of the book: “ In relation to God, the track of his life runs straight, simple, and deep. One might summarize it by saying that he dedicated himself body and soul to fulfilling the plans of God with regard to Opus Dei. On October 2, 1928, after ten years of waiting, and of having premonitions of something that was going to come, he was led by the hand of God into the saga. The

young priest received the mission of carrying out Opus Dei, and was granted the corresponding charisma. From this date on, God and Josemaria – Josemaria led by the hand of God, that is – will have together one long and amazing adventure.”

Josemaria was well aware of this special vocation from God – a vocation he answered by spreading the message that all Christians, not only priests and religious, are called upon to become holy in ordinary, everyday life. In his diary, with his usual very colorful style, he referred to himself as a “poor little bird” which can fly only a short distance. However, an eagle snatches it up “and in his powerful claw the little bird soars, soars very high, above the mountains of the earth and the snow-capped peaks, above the white and blue and rosy clouds, and higher yet, until he is looking directly at the

sun...And then the eagle, letting go of the bird, tells him, 'Go on, fly!' ” His message about the universal call to holiness eventually became a central theme of the Vatican II Council.

Another captivating feature of the book is that it manages to convey the mystical aspect of the path followed by Josemaria while never neglecting any of the very human and earthy details of his youth and young adulthood. As a child, he suffered the loss of three sisters. He also witnessed the bankruptcy of his father's business brought about, according to friends of the family, by “the fact that a business partner of his did not act

as a good partner”. The family experienced humiliation, moral suffering and poverty. While Josemaria was studying to become a priest, his father died, which meant that he had to assume responsibility

for the material well being of his mother, sister and young brother. These “divine caresses”, as he called them, were meant to prepare him for his life-long work of proclaiming to the world the message that joyful dedication to

ordinary family and professional tasks is what God proposes to most of us as a path to holiness.

For those who, in spite of all the information provided over the years about the structure, activities and objectives of Opus Dei, still have some doubt about its true nature, Vasquez de Prada’s biography will be a valuable source of information. One can hardly imagine a more complete rendering of the social, political and cultural circumstances in which Opus Dei was born. Even the financial difficulties of its early beginnings are presented with a degree of detail that should satisfy

the most inquisitive minds. Volume I also documents more extensively than any other book the key role played in the formative years of the Work by the sick and dying who were assisted in various ways by the young priest who crisscrossed the poor districts of Madrid in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The spiritual foundations of the Work were laid by the sufferings joyfully offered of hundreds of people who never lived to see the Work, except perhaps in the eyes of Josemaria Escriva.

But the most interesting aspect of this biography is the additional light it sheds on the spiritual life of Blessed Josemaria. While much was already known about his internal struggles and his life of prayer, the extensive quotes from his diary and personal notes reveal some of the most intimate aspects of his interior life. We are told, for example,

of a drive for prayer and penance, which his spiritual director had to slow down. The point is illustrated by excerpts from Josemaria's personal notes to the effect that this director "will not let me undertake any heavy penances...He will only let me do what I was doing before, no more, and two fasts (on Wednesdays and Saturdays), and six and a half hours of sleep, because he says that if I do more, I'll be of no use to anyone in two years' time."

The 655 pages of Volume I consist of 450 pages dealing with the biography as such. The remaining 200 or so pages consist of some 30 pages of Appendices (including files from the archives of various universities and seminaries containing personal data about the student Josemaria) and 150 pages of endnotes. The latter contain a wealth of information drawn from the founder's writings, particularly his personal notes, and from

testimonies given in the context of the procedures leading to his beatification. There now is probably more information available about the personal life of Blessed Josemaria than almost any other well-known figure of the 20th century.

Volume I was originally published in Spanish in 1997. An Italian translation appeared in 1999. The English version, published by Scepter Publishers in early 2001, was followed by a French version last fall and, most likely, by versions in many other languages. Publication of Volume II in several languages, including English, will take place in 2002, which marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Opus Dei's founder, as well as the 10th anniversary of his beatification by Pope John Paul II. The canonization of Blessed Josemaria was announced by the Holy See last December and is expected to take place before the end

of the current year. (At the time this article is being printed, the exact date of the canonization is not known. However, an announcement from the Holy See regarding a date is expected for late February.)

As a final comment, reference should be made to the quality of the English translation. The book reads as if it had been originally written in American English. Given all the subtleties and nuances of such a fine piece of research, this is no small accomplishment.

Richard Bastien is an Ottawa-based consultant and free-lance writer.

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