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The Founding of Opus Dei

“I was 26, had God’s grace and good humor and nothing else. And I had to do Opus Dei”. It was October 2, 1928, the feast of the Guardian Angels...

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Father Josemaría would never forget the sound of the church bells...

He was doing a retreat during these first few days of October. A little less than a year earlier his family had moved to Madrid. They were living

in a small apartment supported only by whatever he could earn. Without neglecting his ministry among the poor and sick, Father Josemaría tutored private students and taught courses in Canon Law and Roman Law at the Cicuéndez Academy. On top of that, he continued working towards his doctorate in law. That week, after his September examinations, seemed an opportune moment to attend the retreat being offered for diocesan clergy in the central house of the Vincentians.

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On October 2, after Mass, Fr. Josemaría returned to his room and began to put his notes in order: resolutions and inspirations taken down during his prayer, and meditated upon many times already. There, suddenly, he saw the long-

awaited will of God. He always used the verb *to see* on the rare occasions in which he referred to that supernatural intervention: it was an intellectual vision of Opus Dei such as God wished it to be and as it would be down through the centuries.

Opus Dei

What did he see? In an ineffable way, he saw people of every nation and race, of every age and culture, seeking and finding God right in the middle of their ordinary life, their work, their family, their friendships. People who looked for Jesus in order to love him and to live his holy life until they were completely transformed and made into saints. Saints in the world. A tailor saint, a baker saint, an office saint, a factory worker saint. A saint, seemingly like everyone else around him, but deeply identified with Jesus Christ. A

person who directs all his activity to God, who sanctifies his work, who sanctifies himself in his work and sanctifies others through it. A person who christianizes his surroundings, who with warm simple friendships also helps his neighbor to come closer to Jesus — someone whose Christian faith is contagious.

It was an overwhelming vision, a vision of the baptismal vocation lived to the full. Ordinary Christians, the laity, becoming apostles, who speak of God with naturalness, who raise Christ to the peak of every human activity. Everyday people who assume in all its depth a participation in the priesthood of Christ by offering the sanctifying sacrifice of their entire lives every day.

He envisioned a way of holiness and apostolate to serve the Church, for all of this was the Church and nothing

but the Church. The will of God was clear: open up to persons of any age, civil status, and social condition a new possibility of vocation for the Church right in the middle of the street. It was a vision of the Church that promised to bear abundant fruit of holiness and apostolate the whole world over. This would come about because Christians in the world would be able to renew the world without separating themselves from it in the least.

Father Josemaría fell to his knees, deeply moved. The bells from the Church of Our Lady of the Angels chimed, celebrating the feast of the Guardian Angels. “I was 26, had God’s grace and good humor and nothing else. And I had to do Opus Dei,” he recalled.

A new path within the Church

Prudence led him to inquire whether something like this might already

exist in the Church. He contacted Church entities throughout Europe, from Spain to Poland, eventually realizing the originality of the message he had received. God was asking him for something specific and new. He therefore began to gather together persons — students, professionals, priests — to whom he could transmit this ideal. One of them remembers him as an inspired priest who had decided to devote his whole life to the fulfillment of that plan.

“But do you think this is possible?” he asked. To which Father Josemaría answered: “Look, this isn’t something I’ve thought up; it’s from God.”

He requested prayers from everyone he knew, because he realized the huge gap between what God wanted and what he personally was capable of. The only solution was to become very holy. And this he desired with

all his soul. On one occasion, one of the Apostolic Ladies was dying. The chaplain went to visit her and later wrote in his personal diary: “Without my having thought of this ahead of time, it occurred to me to ask her, and I did ask her, ‘Mercedes, ask our Lord, from heaven, that if I am not going to be a priest who is not just good, but holy, that he take me young, as soon as possible.’ Later I made the same request to two lay persons, a young lady and a boy, and every day, at Communion, they make this prayer for me to the good Jesus.”

At the beginning he thought he should spread this ideal only among men. It was the normal thing that Catholic institutions be either male or female. But God always has the last word. On February 14, 1930, while celebrating Mass, he saw further what God wanted from him. God wished the Work to develop its apostolate among women as well.

The consequences of the activities of the women would be immeasurable, because, as the founder put it, “Women are called to bring to the family, society and the Church characteristics which are their own and which they alone can give: their gentle warmth and untiring generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition, their simple and deep piety, their constancy.” Their role is to bring God into the world precisely through their femininity.

New horizons of apostolate

Father Josemaría continued to dream, convinced as he was that the will of God would be fulfilled. Ordinary Christians were to bring Christ into the very heart of the world. God in turn confirmed this supernatural hope by introducing himself again and again into his soul. One such visitation occurred on

August 7, 1931. Saint Josemaría was celebrating Mass. “I think I then renewed my resolution to dedicate my entire life to the fulfillment of God’s will: the Work of God. (A resolution that, right now, I again renew with all my soul.) The time for the Consecration arrived. At the very moment when I elevated the Sacred Host, without losing the necessary recollection, without becoming distracted (for I had just made mentally, the Offering to the Merciful Love), there came to my mind, with extraordinary force and clarity, that passage of Scripture, *Et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad me ipsum* (“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things unto me”). (Ordinarily, before the supernatural, I feel afraid. Later comes the ‘Do not be afraid, it is I.’) And I understood that there will be men and women of God who will lift the cross, with the teachings of Christ, to the pinnacle of all human

activities. . . . And I saw our Lord triumph, drawing all things to himself.

“In spite of feeling devoid of virtue and knowledge (humility is truth . . . without exaggeration), I would like to write books of fire — books that will race across the world like burning flames and set people ablaze with their light and heat, turning poor hearts into red-hot coals to be offered to Jesus as rubies for his royal crown.”