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The First Associates of Opus Dei

In this episode of Fragments of History, historian Constantino Áncel traces the history of the first associate of Opus Dei and describes how the vocation to the Work as an associate spread through various Spanish cities over the next few years.

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The vocation to Opus Dei is the same for all its members. There are simply different ways of living out this same call, depending on each person's

circumstances. In this episode, Constantino Áncel recounts the path by which the first male associates joined Opus Dei, starting in 1950.

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From the very beginning, Saint Josemaria made it clear that belonging to Opus Dei requires a calling, a divine vocation, the content of which is the same for all its members: seeking holiness in the middle of the world by sanctifying their professional work and the secular realities in which they live. This is analogous to belonging to the Church, in which, although there is a

diversity of members, all of them have received the same baptism incorporating them into the Church's mission, and all are called to Christian perfection.

Likewise, in Opus Dei, there is a unity of vocation. The vocational phenomenon is identical for everyone, because they share the same call to attain holiness in their ordinary life, according to the spirit of Opus Dei. The means of sanctification are the same, the right to receive formation is identical, and the Work has the same duty to provide spiritual and formational help to all its members. Everyone fully participates in the apostolic mission of the Work.

Within this unity of vocation, what distinguishes numeraries, associates, and supernumeraries is their varying degree of habitual availability "for tasks of formation and apostolic

activities.” This availability depends on personal, family, and professional circumstances. It is not a matter of greater or lesser effort in seeking holiness and living out the apostolic mission, which we all fully carry out.

The first associate of Opus Dei

In the Work’s early years, the people who followed Saint Josemaría were mostly young university students. However, the foundational vision was much broader, encompassing people from all sectors of society.

At first, the canonical legislation and theological doctrine of the time did not allow for a single institution to welcome the variety of people that Opus Dei was called to reach. This changed in 1950. In this podcast, we will explore the history of the first associate and, from there, see how the vocation to Opus Dei as an associate spread among men in the following years. A later podcast will

analyze its expansion among women.

The first person to request admission as an associate was Francisco Navarro Rodríguez. What was his journey like? He was born in Valdepeñas, in the province of Ciudad Real, in 1922. His father ran a grocery store, and his mother took care of the household. He completed his primary and secondary education in his hometown. The moral and religious education he received in his family was basic and not particularly fervent. With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the impossibility of practicing any form of Christian worship, he experienced a certain spiritual decline. When the war ended, at the age of 17, he began studying Commerce, earning a qualification in Mercantile Expertise; a mid-level degree.

The following year, in 1940, an event made him reflect and reorient his spiritual life. He fell ill and had to rest for three or four months. During that time, he read the New Testament in one sitting and, by the end, reached the conclusion that he needed to change his life, as he had been somewhat distant from the Church. His religious practice had consisted only of saying a brief prayer to the Virgin Mary before bed and nothing more; he did not go to church at all. So he made a general confession and started going to Mass on feast days and receiving Communion every two or three months. (Frequent Communion was not common at the time.)

After he recovered, he continued his commerce studies and decided to prepare for a competitive exam to enter a nationally established bank, which was to be held in the last quarter of 1941. Faced with the

challenge and eager to secure the position, Navarro made a decision: “It occurred to me,” he later explained, “to make a ‘pact with the Lord’: if I passed the exam, I would receive Communion daily for six months.” He succeeded, and being a man of his word, kept his promise. When the six months were over, he felt the need to continue receiving Communion daily.

A couple of years later, in April 1943, he requested and was granted a transfer to the provincial capital, Ciudad Real. There, he said, “I hoped to further develop my banking career and also deepen my interior life.” In the provincial capital, he became involved in the activities of Catholic Action, where he met Nicolás Úriz, who had just been appointed chaplain of the youth section. Father Úriz needed someone to serve as president, and he chose Navarro for the role. The two of

them dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to the task, and in a short time, the number of young people participating in Catholic Action's activities increased significantly.

Francisco Navarro devoted all his free time to the apostolate of Catholic Action while striving to improve in his profession and maintaining the Christian lifestyle he had begun after his second "conversion." His commitment to a life of piety and apostolic work led him to contemplate his existence with fresh perspective, making it clear to him that he needed to deepen his spiritual life. He described this inner transformation, which could be seen as a "third conversion," in these words: "The more I committed myself to the work of the [Catholic Action] center, the clearer I saw the need for interior life, and the greater my desire grew to give myself more

fully to the Lord. A vocation began to take shape in me — to live celibately in my profession, dedicated to apostolate — but all the priests I consulted told me that this was impossible. If I had this desire for self-giving, they suggested that I could enter a seminary for ‘late vocations’ in Salamanca or join the Society of Jesus. This was also the solution suggested by my spiritual director, but I disagreed and kept searching for another way.”

Amid this spiritual struggle, he came across a magazine article about the ordination of the first three priests of Opus Dei. The brief mention of this institution intrigued him, and he thought it might be the answer to his questions. This happened in late 1944 or early 1945. He attempted to obtain contact information for Opus Dei but was unsuccessful for several months. In the meantime, he eagerly

sought out and read anything he could find about it.

At one point, he noticed that a magazine published in Bilbao, *El Mensajero del Corazón de Jesús*, had a section for inquiries. Without hesitation, he wrote to ask if they knew the address of Opus Dei. They responded that they only knew the address in Bilbao. He wrote to that address and received a reply suggesting he contact the Opus Dei center at Diego de León 14, in Madrid. After nearly four years of searching, he finally found a way to directly encounter the ecclesial reality that had unexpectedly captivated his interest. On November 30, 1948, he wrote a letter addressed to the “Director of Opus Dei.” In it, he explained that he aspired to holiness — commonly referred to as “perfection” at the time — but did not feel called to the priesthood or religious life. He stated that he was

26 years old, worked as a bank employee, and held a certificate in Mercantile Expertise. He also inquired about the requirements for becoming part of Opus Dei, as he believed it could help him achieve the ideal he was pursuing.

A response arrived soon, on December 20, from none other than one of the three priests ordained in 1944: José Luis Múzquiz. In his letter, Múzquiz provided a list of newspaper articles about Opus Dei and added: “In any case, if you ever happen to visit Madrid, don’t hesitate to visit me so we can talk about your vocational concerns.”

Navarro carefully read the letter and wrote back on December 31. He stated that he was already familiar with the suggested literature and asked whether his lack of a university degree would be an obstacle to joining Opus Dei. He

expressed his concern explicitly: “I have doubts as to whether I meet the necessary conditions to belong to the Institute; for this reason, in my previous letter, I mentioned that I am 26 years old, work in banking, and hold a certificate in Mercantile Expertise. It is this last point that concerns me the most, as I believe higher education may be required to be a member of this institution.” Finally, he expressed his willingness to meet in Madrid, provided it could be on a Sunday or holiday.

Eventually, a meeting was scheduled for the last Sunday of February, February 27, at 3 p.m., at the Opus Dei center on Diego de León Street. However, when he arrived, it was not Múzquiz who welcomed him: just days earlier, Múzquiz had left for the United States. Instead, Navarro was received by a young man, about 30 years old, named Amadeo de Fuenmayor. During their

conversation, Navarro shared his uncertainties about self-giving, and Fuenmayor told him about Isidoro Zorzano, who had sanctified himself in the middle of the world through his professional work. It is not clear whether Fuenmayor shared Isidoro Zorzano's example to let Navarro know how he could join Opus Dei. Regardless, after that conversation, Navarro clearly understood that he could dedicate his life to God within Opus Dei.

Francisco Navarro returned to Ciudad Real, where he continued working at the bank and remained dedicated to establishing and strengthening the youth branch of Catholic Action. He made an effort to put into practice the advice he had received in Madrid, and through letters and trips to the capital, he deepened his understanding of his vocation to Opus Dei.

On December 11, 1949, he returned to Madrid once again, as Fuenmayor, who had recently been ordained a priest, invited him to a one-day retreat that he was preaching. At the end of the retreat, they went for a walk and talked. Among other things, Fuenmayor suggested that he organize a retreat for the young people of Ciudad Real in Molinoviejo, in the province of Segovia. Together with Nicolás Úriz, the chaplain of Catholic Action, he got to work, and after settling on a date, March 17, 1950, he arrived in Molinoviejo accompanied by 22 young men from La Mancha.

On the envelope of the last letter Navarro wrote before the retreat, in March 1950, Amadeo de Fuenmayor jotted down a note: “He should try to see me (he can whistle!),” a sign that he might soon join Opus Dei. Up to that point, Fuenmayor had not yet given a positive response to

Francisco Navarro's desire to join Opus Dei.

He had acted cautiously, as his role in spiritual guidance required him to discern Navarro's dispositions and qualities, to ensure that he understood his vocation to the Work and was ready to respond to it, as well as to determine the most suitable path for him.

In Molinoviejo, Navarro met Ramón Montalat, a layman in charge of organizing the retreat. The priest preaching the retreat was Father Jesús Urteaga. In addition to meditations and talks, there was ample time for personal reflection and prayer. Navarro spoke at length with the priest, and any lingering doubts he had were eventually dispelled. He wrote to Fuenmayor on March 24, 1950, saying: "The days in Molinoviejo have brought me a great deal of light, and I have been able to

resolve many doubts, whether with Fr. Jesús or with Ramón; but even so, I suspect that you may have something new to tell me.”

The retreat ended, and Francisco Navarro left with the intention of passing through Madrid that very Wednesday, to speak with Amadeo de Fuenmayor and express his decision to join Opus Dei. However, an unforeseen event prevented him from doing so. Instead, after an exchange of letters, they arranged to meet on Sunday, April 30. After their conversation, he wrote to Josemaría Escrivá, requesting admission to Opus Dei. In his letter, he summarized his journey as follows: “Dear Father, In 1945, when I first heard about the Work, I began to feel a desire to know more about it. I first started to do so in February 1949, when I established contact with Fr. Amadeo de Fuenmayor. Through the conversations I have had with him

since then, I have been gradually assimilating the spirit of the Work, especially after making a spiritual retreat in Molinoviejo. For this reason, I now request my admission as an internal supernumerary member [this was the terminology of the time, and is equivalent to today's associates]. Hoping that you will accept my request, I send you my affectionate greetings, Francisco Navarro Rodríguez.”

From that moment on, Navarro began participating in Opus Dei's formational activities, which, in the early months, were conducted exclusively for him. This continued until December 8, 1950, when something momentous happened: Rafael Poveda Longo and Pedro Zarandona Antón requested admission to Opus Dei as associates. Shortly afterward, on February 14, 1951, Francisco Uceda Toledo did the same.

Development and growth during the years 1950-1952

There is abundant documentary evidence to recount the path that led Opus Dei to its first associates. The stories of many of them would fill countless pages, but given the limitations of time and space, we will merely outline how the number of associates grew in the early years.

The first focal points emerged almost simultaneously in Madrid and Ciudad Real. In the capital of La Mancha, following the spiritual retreats at Molinoviejo, several young men decided to maintain and foster their relationship with Opus Dei. This effort was also supported by the work of the chaplain, Fr. Nicolás Úriz, who had requested admission to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross around the same time. To provide specific means of formation, some lay members

frequently traveled from Madrid and met with these young men, either in a park, a bar, or at one of their homes. From the outset, there was a perceived need for a dedicated venue for gatherings, they finally obtained after three years. Very soon, those who had requested admission began traveling regularly to Madrid, especially for monthly recollections.

A group began to form in Madrid through acquaintances of Poveda and Uceda, growing steadily every month. Amadeo de Fuenmayor oversaw the early stages. In August 1951, an apartment was secured on Bravo Murillo Street, in the Tetuán neighborhood. Within Madrid, there was also another group of associates, consisting of university students, mid-level degree students, and young professionals with university qualifications. They initially gathered in an apartment on Sagasta Street and later found another place on

Menorca Street, which they called "El Estudio." Both groups, along with the one in Ciudad Real, were under the same local council, meaning they shared the same local leaders responsible for their formation and apostolic initiatives. The monthly recollections, held in various churches in Madrid, were also attended by everyone.

Outside Madrid, growth was initially concentrated in cities where there was already an Opus Dei center. In these early years, this was the case in Zaragoza, Barcelona, Valencia, and Granada, with some activity also in Santiago de Compostela and Salamanca. It took longer to establish a presence in Valladolid, Bilbao, and Seville. We will highlight a few examples.

In Barcelona, the first person to request admission was Francisco Javier Hervada, a law student who

frequented the Monterols University Residence. He felt called to celibacy but did not believe his vocation was to be a numerary. In the autumn of 1951, he requested admission. To help other young men discern their path, the directors of Monterols considered three possible approaches.

First, they encouraged residents from Catalonia to reach out to more people from Barcelona and nearby towns. Second, they spent more time caring for young unmarried professionals without a university education who attended recollections, meditations, or spiritual direction at Monterols. Third, they sought out places where they could meet young workers, around factories and social gathering points.

Upon evaluating the potential help from Monterols' Catalan residents, they found that their numbers were

not significant, and few were from Barcelona and its surroundings. Among the young unmarried professionals mentioned earlier, some would join Opus Dei as associates in early 1952. However, the most effective plan turned out to be the third approach. Julián Herranz recounts that the directors of Monterols asked some residents to seek out young workers and employees to introduce them to Opus Dei and its means of formation. Since they had no particular preference at first, they decided to approach one of Barcelona's most well-known industries, La Maquinista Terrestre y Marítima, which then employed nearly three thousand workers. But this was not the only location. They also went to Poble Nou, Badalona, Hostafrancs, Hospitalet, Terrassa, and Sabadell. This initiative was led by Diego Martínez Caro, Javier de Pedro, Julián Herranz, and others. Initially, they proceeded somewhat

adventurously, as they had no fixed locations for meetings or talks, relying instead on available spaces like secluded corners of bars. However, they soon obtained an apartment for the first Opus Dei center in Barcelona, called "El Palau," on Balmes Street, which became their reference point.

In Zaragoza, a young administrative professional wondering about his vocation was directed to the Opus Dei center by his spiritual director, a Carmelite religious. He found the answer to his restlessness there, joining Opus Dei in November 1951. At the local Catholic Action center he frequented, he spoke with some friends, and a couple of them became interested in Opus Dei's apostolic work. These were workers employed in various workshops around the city. Thus began a chain reaction, and apostolic work expanded among the city's mechanics, leading several

to request admission. They soon secured a venue for their gatherings.

By 1950, Opus Dei had already established extensive activities in Valencia, with a significant number of supernumeraries in the capital and surrounding towns. This provided fertile ground for the development of associates in the city and province. Although documentation from 1951 and 1952 is scarce, it is known that by the end of the 1951-52 academic year, there were already some associates in Valencia. Notably, they came from diverse locations: Titaguas, Llombai, Foios, Pobla de Vallbona, Canals, and other nearby towns. They were guided by Juan Antonio Paniagua and Constantino Gargallo, with Fr. Miguel Rivilla assisting as a priest. Soon, they were able to use an old mansion on Samaniego Street, which became available after the opening of the La Alameda Residence.

Associates also began to emerge in places without an Opus Dei center and where there had been no initial plans to establish one, such as Teruel, Logroño, and Girona. In each of these cities, the process began with one individual expressing interest in learning about Opus Dei. This led to an exchange of correspondence and visits from Zaragoza or Barcelona to these towns to provide support for those who had requested admission.

Common features of the apostolic work

We have spent some time considering the process that led Francisco Navarro to request admission to Opus Dei because it is particularly enlightening in understanding the characteristics of an associate. Each vocation follows a unique path, certainly, but there is a common thread among those who sought admission: in one way or

another, they were searching for the meaning of their existence, eager to find an ideal worth dedicating their lives to. In their inquiries, they typically encountered the traditional avenues of dedication to God: religious life or the priesthood. That is why, when they discovered Opus Dei, they experienced a certain sense of enlightenment and became convinced that this was the path they had been looking for.

There is a common denominator that explains the growth in the number of associates in every city: relationships formed through friendship or work. In order to expand their circle of acquaintances and broaden the scope of their friendships, there was a shared approach in all places, both on an individual level and in fostering apostolic work. The usual practice was to share common interests: sports, excursions, or short gatherings at a nearby country

house. In Catalonia, hiking in the mountains was a well-established tradition, as was rowing, due to the proximity of the sea. A similar situation existed in Madrid, though there the sea was replaced by the Retiro pond. In Zaragoza, they would set out on foot to nearby locations, often by a river (especially in summertime) where they would swim, play sports, share a meal with extended conversation, take part in acts of piety such as praying the Rosary or spending time in meditation, and talk while walking together. Something similar could be said of Granada. There were no grand plans, partly because the number of members and the available resources did not allow for them.

Spiritual activities for those outside of Opus Dei began to be organized when the number of people involved grew. Basic Christian formational

talks were given, as well as St. Raphael circles for those who had been around longer. Monthly recollections were preached, particularly in Barcelona and Madrid. In smaller cities, during those years, there were no opportunities to hold such gatherings.

The backgrounds of the early associates varied from place to place, often depending on the social or professional connections of the first members of Opus Dei. In Zaragoza, for example, the work was carried out in a predominantly working-class environment; in Girona, among telegraph operators; in Barcelona and its surroundings, primarily with students pursuing mid-level degrees; in Ciudad Real, among professionals grouped under the general category of employees; in Santiago de Compostela, within academic circles; in Granada, among people from rural

areas, and so on. From the outset, university students were among those who joined, both in Madrid — where a group was formed with a dedicated meeting space — and in Barcelona and Valencia. In terms of age, most were under 25, either students or young professionals. Some who were over thirty also requested admission, but they were the exception. The variety of personal circumstances makes it impossible to define a single, specific profile for associates, as they came from all sectors of society, with diverse professions and backgrounds.

Workshops

One activity that, in addition to serving its specific purpose, helped associates from different cities to meet and connect were the week-long workshops. The directors of Opus Dei placed special emphasis on

ensuring that these gatherings became a milestone in the associates' formation, especially during the early months.

The first week-long workshops were held in Molinoviejo in the summer of 1952. They provided an opportunity to present the characteristics of the vocation to Opus Dei in a vivid and personal way. Associates from all over Spain attended in two successive sessions. The first had 22 participants from Madrid, Girona, Terrassa, Barcelona, Ciudad Real, Valencia, Cádiz, and Santiago de Compostela. The second was slightly larger, with 28 attendees from Madrid, Zaragoza, Ciudad Real, Girona, Terrassa, Barcelona, Badalona, Valencia, Logroño, and Granada. Among those who had requested admission before these gatherings, 19 were unable to attend.

In order to participate, they had to overcome challenges on three fronts: professional, financial, and family-related. In the workplace, the issue was particularly significant for employees, office workers, and laborers. At that time, summer vacations were not yet formally regulated, and in many cases, time off was granted as a special leave, rarely exceeding fifteen days.

Financially, there were no insurmountable obstacles, as the cost of the gathering was adjusted to match the participants' means, though in many cases, additional funds had to be secured, either by dipping into savings or working extra hours.

Then there was the family factor. Those who had reached the age of majority (which was 21 at the time) had greater freedom. Younger participants, however, required parental authorization. But whether

of legal age or not, many had family commitments. In the end, very few had to stay home due to family reasons.

Those workshops were a milestone in the early history of the associates. Even though not everyone could participate, the experience at Molinoviejo helped achieve several key objectives. One was the launch of a comprehensive formation plan that would serve as a model for the future. Another, no less important, was a deeper understanding of the nature of the associate vocation and a greater appreciation of the founder's role. A third was the tangible experience of the universality of Opus Dei and the reality of family life within it. Upon their return, the participants came back enriched with new insights and a renewed enthusiasm that fostered the growth of the apostolate.

Before closing, I want to emphasize that this account has sought to present the emergence of the associates as a new way of living the same vocation to Opus Dei, and that, therefore, we are dealing with a fundamentally spiritual phenomenon. Attempting to reduce it to sociological categories or mere statistics would distort a proper understanding of this reality, because it would overlook what takes place within the depths of conscience. With the perspective of time, we can recognize the outstanding conduct of many of these early members, and even say that their lives were heroic and holy.