

3 Short Stories about the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross

Gerona, Hinojosa de Jarque (Teruel) and Santa María de Luneda (Pontevedra) are the starting points for three hitherto unknown testimonies of dedication to others. The historian Santiago Martínez brings us an account of three early members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross — founded by Saint Josemaría in 1943 — to which more than 4,000 clerics around the world belong today.

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Saint Josemaría founded the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, composed of clerics and indissolubly linked to Opus Dei, in 1943. Until then, Opus Dei was made up only of lay men and women, ordinary people. To help them better, Opus Dei priests were needed who knew and lived this message, who came from within the ranks of the Work itself. That is why the first members of this society were numerary members — that is to say, celibate men of Opus Dei, who were ordained priests and to whom the founder gave his pastoral assignments.

To also help the diocesan clergy, in 1950 St Josemaría asked the Holy See to allow priests incardinated in the dioceses to join the priestly society, and the response was positive.

These priests (of whom we are going to speak in this episode) remained incardinated in their diocese, and their bishop gave them assignments, changed their parish, and so on. The Work gave — and *gives* — them spiritual encouragement to try to be good, holy priests. This help is the same as the lay members of the Work receive to try to live the message of sanctifying everyday things: circles, retreats, retreats, spiritual direction, etc.

Today, this society is made up of some 4,000 priests from all over the world. Half of them already belonged to Opus Dei as numeraries before being ordained priests. And another 2,000 or so belong to dioceses in many countries, such as the Philippines, the United States, Nigeria, Latvia, Chile and Lebanon.

I research the history of this society, through archives and interviews

with some of these priests, the few still alive who applied for admission in the '50s, and others who applied for admission to this Priestly Society, or Opus Dei, in the '60s and after. It is a fascinating story, about which I would like to tell three very short stories.

A priest in the villages of the Pyrenees

Jaume Font Espigolé was born in Girona and was ordained priest there at the age of 23.

He was also one of the first in that diocese to apply for admission to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross in March 1954. He served in different villages of that diocese, such as in the Pyrenees. At that time, the village had no access roads. No wheeled vehicles, carts or bicycles could get there, only on foot. All transport was done with pack mules and — Jaume explained — it was more expensive

than the one from Madrid to Barcelona. Electricity and telephone had arrived in the village and the postal service was also working, and working very well.

Not that things were going well for the good *mossèn*. ("Mossèn" is an medieval Aragonese way of addressing priests.) That's why I chose him. Every Sunday he celebrated three Masses and preached and heard confessions in his village in the Pyrenees, but, according to him, most Sundays no one came to his confessional. He cared for other churches in nearby villages, such as Rocabruna, and after walking a couple of hours on Sundays to get there, he would often find 7 children, 5 women and 2 or 3 men at Mass, out of a total of 150 inhabitants in the village.

Faced with this, Don Jaime wondered in a letter: "The greatest

temptation we have is the inefficiency of our work. Am I useful here? This is the question I often ask myself. I don't have much work. I preach and everyone remains the same. I approach the faithful and many turn away. I get tired and they go their own way. I don't work any more, because I don't have any more work."

Spain was an officially Catholic country. But religious practice in many parts of the peninsula was scarce. In any case, what encouraged Jaume Font i Espigolé, in the midst of the cold and isolation, was to feel that he was a member of a spiritual family, Opus Dei, which had opened its doors in 1950 to priests incardinated in dioceses. Thus, in his letter of application for admission, dated the 1st of March 1954, he said: "Since that day I have been living another life, I have truly been reborn into another life. I am more

optimistic, more prayerful, more sacrificial and poorer. I am happy, today as never before, regardless of the day of my ordination. I give myself to the Work without hesitation or haggling." For Mossèn Jaume (and for many other priests), feeling understood, helped and accompanied by other priests of the Work was a good help, I think.

From Little Russia

The second micro-story is that of José Domínguez. He is — because he is still alive and in good health — a man from Pontevedra, born in 1932, in the parish of Santa María de Luneda, which overlooks Portugal. His mother encouraged him to go to the seminary and leave the village, where he looked after animals and earned some money (100 pesetas a month, about 70 euro cents today) working in the mountains in reforestation. He had to look for a

scholarship because his mother could not afford to pay for his studies.

His father was a member of the Communist Party and had emigrated to Argentina before the Civil War. After the war he took Don José's mother and his two brothers to Argentina. He tried to get his seminarian son to go to Argentina, so that he would not become a priest. But Don José refused, was ordained a priest in 1960, and applied for admission to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

His humble origins and concern for the simple people marked the life of this priest. As a seminarian, he spent the summer months in Bilbao and Zaragoza, working in the naval workshops, rubbing shoulders with the workers. Later, his bishop assigned him to the parish of Lavadores, a neighbourhood in Vigo

known colloquially as Little Russia because of the many communists who lived there. He himself, he told me, thinks that he would also have been a revolutionary in those years of the '60s and '70s, which were years of great political turmoil in Spain, had it not been for Opus Dei.

Moreover, his parish activity in the service of the diocese also led him to be chaplain for many years in a school in Vigo. He explained to me that he was never at the crossroads of choosing between prayer and action, worrying about the things of worship or helping those most in need. In fact, the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross helped him to put into practice much of what he had learned in the seminary, about the inclusive nature of love for God and for others, particularly the poorest.

From Teruel to Peru

The third story is that of Don José de Pedro. He was one of the sons of the postman of Hinojosa de Jarque, in Teruel. His mother died when he was 9 years old.

In 1957, when he was 26 years old and had been a priest for two years, he went to Peru to lend a hand in the territorial prelature of Yauyos, which the Holy See had entrusted to Opus Dei. Don José wrote every fortnight to his family recounting his wanderings in Matucana, in the Peruvian province of Huarochirí. They kept the hundred or so letters he wrote to them during the six years he stayed in Peru.

There, he did literally everything... All the good things you would expect from a priest, of course. He was not a great catechist, or a wonderful liturgist, or a wise writer. His letters paint a more complete picture of a man than that.

He gave sacraments to many people: baptisms, communions, anointing and visits to the sick, weddings... He gave catechesis and classes in a school for boys and girls. He made improvements in some churches and in the rectory, and renewed the ornaments and objects of worship.

He distributed packages of food and clothes to those affected by landslides, which dislodged stones and water and buried everything in their path). He also started a credit union to provide low-interest loans to local people who had lost everything in these natural disasters.

In the first year of his stay there, he summed up some of his work: "Up to today, the 18th of September, 1958, I have baptised 170 children; I have heard the confessions of 1,300 people; I have distributed 1,007 communions; I have performed 30 marriages, 300 sermons, 160 hours in

a car, 70 hours on horseback and 13 on foot. Every day I write these things down: I want to know, when I return, the sum of it all."

The truth is that measuring the good that a priest can do is an impossible task in this world. I imagine that he did all he could and that he did not lack the help of his bishop, Ignacio de Orbegozo, and the other priests of Yauyos. And the same when he returned to Teruel, his diocese of origin, where he served until his death in May 2020, in twelve parishes... But this is one of the many other things that I do not have time to recount nor you to hear about now!

In the service of the Church

What has the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross brought to these priests? It has helped them to have a spiritual life. As one of them said to me, "the gift of God; that we ordinary priests

have a hunger for holiness," a hunger for God that always includes concern for others, for other priests in the first place and for all the faithful. In short, it has helped them to be faithful to their priestly vocation.

I think it encourages them to be loyal to their bishops and to the Pope, fulfilling the tasks entrusted to them and heeding the sacramental, pastoral and magisterial orientations of the Church. It also encourages them to seek out young men from their parishes to go to seminaries.

And finally, by reminding them that they must sanctify themselves with their professional work, which is the ministry as a priest, they try to take care of the places of worship, and above all, to serve the parish communities, bringing spiritual consolation with the sacraments and accompaniment, alleviating if they

can their material needs, as the Church has always done.

In short, the Priestly Society urges them to have a very big heart to welcome everyone and to serve everyone in whatever they need.

It is, of course, a very high ideal. It is difficult for a historian to conclude whether every priest in this Priestly Society lives up to that ambitious aspiration. But I would venture to say that, in the first decades of its life, many priests of this priestly society believed in that ideal. And that in the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, turbulent and difficult for the history of the church and for societies where there are Christians, they have offered their fellow citizens the kind face of Jesus of Nazareth.

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