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Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei

On January 9th 2002, members, cooperators and friends of Opus Dei worldwide celebrated the centenary anniversary of the birth of Blessed Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer – the founder of Opus Dei. In Nigeria today, many persons have not heard about Opus Dei. Those who have, do not know the objectives of Opus Dei and people question: Who is Josemaria Escriva? What Is Opus Dei about? In this brief write-up, we give highlights of

the life of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, and the aims and objectives of Opus Dei

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Blessed Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer was born in Barbastro, Spain on 9th January 1902. He was the second child of Don Jose and Maria de los Dolores. He was christened Jose Maria Julian Mariano at the baptismal font of Barbastro Cathedral. He was from a strong Christian home. His mother was a beautiful and elegant woman of great dignity and refinement. She was calm, simple, kind and of very good humour. She took care of the home. Don Jose, his father worked as a textile merchant. He was a man of great good will and Integrity. Josemaria was brought up in the love and fear of God. He learnt fast and

imbibed the wonderful teaching of his parents. Even as an adult he continued to remember his mother's warning that the only thing to be ashamed of is sin. At school, Josemaria was a calm, studious, pensive, neat and well-behaved boy. A priest once exclaimed, "You could see his parents had brought him up carefully". He stood out for his talent, brilliance and piety. Although one of his colleagues had thought he would be a good priest, Josemaria never thought the priesthood was for him. When eventually he knew he had a vocation to be a priest, he commenced his studies in the Seminary of Logroño, with the approval of his parents, as an external student in 1918 and moved to Saragossa in September 1920. He was ordained Priest on 28th March 1925.

As a young teenager, he knew God wanted something special of him and

in fact this accounted for his desire for the priesthood. But on 2nd October 1928, while attending a retreat he pondered on this question of what God wanted of him and by divine intervention he saw clearly, an assignment from God, which as he later put it simply, expected him to:

"Tell men and women of every country and of every condition, race, language milieu and of state of life... that they can love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life and their normal social relations."

This assignment was later to be known as "Opus Dei" - The work of God. To execute this assignment the young priest gathered a few young men who shared his vision. In 1943 he founded the priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which is intrinsically united to Opus Dei. On 16th June 1950, Opus Dei received its definite

approval from the Holy See on 28th November 1982 it was established as a personal prelature. Josemaria lived all his life for Opus Dei. "Through a life of constant prayer and penance, exercising, heroically, all the virtues, with the loving dedication and untiring concern for all souls and with a continuous and unconditional self surrender to the will of God, he fostered and directed the expansion of Opus Dei throughout the world." The Holy Mass was the root and centre of Josemaria's internal (interior) life. He had a tender and strong devotion to Our Lady and St. Joseph. He died on 26 June 1975 and his cause of canonization was presented in Rome on 19th February 1981. On 9th April 1990, Pope John Paul II declared the heroic nature of Josemaria's Christian virtues and on 6th July 1991 decreed the miraculous character of a cure attributed to his intercession. The Founder of Opus

Del was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Rome on 17th May 1992.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá published extensively. He is credited with about 10 . The most popular of his books, The Way was first published in 1950. It is now available in 39 languages and over 3.5 million copies have so far been sold.

But what is Opus Dei? The Founder of Opus Dei taught that everyone is called to holiness. Of course, he was not the first to put this forward. Throughout the history of the Church, everyone, whatever his situation in life, has been constantly urged to follow Christ's way seriously. For example: St. Francis de Sales, among other saints, had shown his concern for ordinary Christians. However, while St. Francis proclaimed sanctity for everyone, he spoke of a specific "spirituality for lay people." But Josemaria Escriva

stated that all persons, regardless of their state in life, had received the same call to holiness. Three salient points of his preaching are:

I . The Christian laity should not abandon or despise the world , but should remain within it, loving and sharing the life of ordinary men and women;

II. While staying in the world, they should learn to discover the supernatural value of the normal circumstances of their lives, including the most prosaic and material details;

III. As a consequence, everyday work, the activity that occupies and fills the greatest number of hours of ordinary people can and should be sanctified and used as a means of Christian apostolate.

Ous Dei is not complicated. Its aims are simple: sanctity and apostolate in

and through ones ordinary work. It encourages ordinary lay people living in the world to strive for heroic sanctity without changing their state of life or occupation. Opus Dei opens its arms to everyone.

The members of Opus Dei receive a continuous formation to make them live in line with the spirit of the Work. This formation helps them relate their spiritual life to their professional work, family and social activities in the belief that it is in those everyday activities that the laity can have an encounter with God.

Opus Dei has spread over the years. It started in Spain on its inception in 1928 and spread to Italy, Portugal, Ireland and England in the 1940s. From 1940 to the early 1950s Opus Dei spread to Mexico, United States, West Germany, France, Western Europe, Latin America, the Far East

and Africa. Opus Dei came to Nigeria in 1965 and today has centers in cities such as Lagos, Ibadan and Enugu. It has over 80,000 members worldwide and they come from about 80 nationalities. The main message of the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá which the members spread is that: God is calling you to serve him in and from the ordinary material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us everyday in the laboratories, in the operating theatres, in the army barracks, in the University chair, in the factory, in the workshop in the field (farms) in the home and in the immense panorama of work.

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