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Teddy Burke, the first woman to join Opus Dei in Ireland, dies

Teddy Burke, the first woman to join Opus Dei in Ireland in 1949, died on May 24th, 2023, two days before her ninety-fifth birthday.

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Teddy (her real name was Honoria (Nora), but a childhood love of teddy bears had led to her being called Teddy) grew up in Sligo, one of five

children. Educated in the Ursuline College Sligo, on leaving school, she studied French and Spanish in University College, Dublin. On June 6th, 1949, her older brother Cormac, who was also a student in Dublin and who had recently joined Opus Dei himself, talked to her at length about the call to sanctify oneself through one's work. She took his words very much to heart and with a leap of faith some days later, asked to join Opus Dei, the first Irish woman to do so and the instigator of what St. Josemaría would often describe as “the miracle of Ireland”.

Her first step was to get to know more about Opus Dei as up to then her sole source of information was her conversation with her brother, and he was only just learning about Opus Dei himself. In the summer of 1949, she spent some weeks in La Estila, Santiago de Compostela where she joined other women in a course

of formation. She returned to Ireland with the clear idea that she had to find more Irish vocations and thought first of the friends with whom she shared rooms in the student residence where she lived in Dublin. Máire Gibbons, Anna Barrett, Olive Mulcahy and Eileen Maher joined the Work over the next 12 months; they were the first five vocations who all made that leap of faith before any other women in Opus Dei had gone to live in Ireland. This is why St. Josemaría referred to it as ‘the miracle of Ireland’.

They moved to a house owned by Teddy’s uncle and continued their studies and apostolate. Teddy translated points of the *Way* from Spanish and this was the main source of their formation in the first months of their lives in Opus Dei. They had never met the Founder, St. Josemaría, but gradually came to love him through stories other

people related and they wrote to him frequently. On one occasion, Teddy wrote that the Father seemed very far away from Ireland and as he never answered their letters personally she wondered did he really exist. This time he replied personally saying as a postscript to his letter ‘Teddy, see how the Father is writing to you! May God bless you’.

The apostolic endeavours of these first five met with some opposition initially, as Opus Dei was not well known in Ireland at the time and the prevailing clerical approach among Catholics meant that its message of holiness in the middle of the world was poorly understood. For some months, St. Josemaría advised Teddy and the others to “grow on the inside” and to sustain the future growth of Opus Dei in Ireland by curtailing their apostolic enthusiasm temporarily.

During this time, Teddy gave classes in Spanish and French while studying for her MA in literature. In 1953 she moved to the first university residence for women run by Opus Dei in Dublin, Northbrook. In 1954, she moved to Spain for a year-long course of formation in Los Rosales, a centre of Opus Dei outside Madrid. Shortly after returning to Ireland, she went to Rome to study in the Roman College of Holy Mary.

She came back to Ireland on completing her studies and spent the next fifteen years working on the developing apostolates in Ireland. She then moved into the teaching profession and taught French for many years in vocational school in Ballinrobe, Co. Mayo, travelling every day by car from Galway, where she lived. On her retirement, she lived first in Ballyglunin Park Conference Centre in Galway and

latterly in Lismullin Conference Centre, County Meath.

Teddy had a lifelong passion for the works of G.K. Chesterton and knew all of them well, reading and re-reading them and constantly finding pleasure in them. She maintained a lively correspondence with her many friends as she grew more infirm and unable to travel. She loved to be in the presence of young people and they naturally gravitated to her gentle, smiling presence.

Her last years were spent in a nursing home close to Lismullin, due to her increasing frailty and need for nursing care. Through the regular visits of the people of Opus Dei she supported the apostolic developments in Ireland with her prayer and constant good humour. She was pre-deceased by her sister, Maura, the first Irish Associate vocation, and her brother, Mgr.

Cormac Burke, who had opened her eyes to the wonder of a vocation to Opus Dei so many years before.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam.

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