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Ernesto Cofiño: Pediatrician

Ernesto Cofiño, a pioneering Guatemalan pediatrician, was the first married member of Opus Dei in his country.

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Dr. Cofiño, the first physician in Guatemala to specialize in pediatrics, supported numerous social and educational projects, including some sponsored by other members of Opus Dei. He focused especially on improving the situation of

indigenous children, many of whom at the time lived in dire straits.

Early Life

Dr. Ernesto Cofiño first learned about Opus Dei in 1953. He was fifty-four years old and had long been the leading pediatrician in Guatemala. Born in 1899, he studied medicine at the University of Paris, where he specialized in pediatrics under Professor Robert Debré, the foremost French pediatrician of his generation and one of the founders of modern pediatrics.

When Cofiño returned from France to Guatemala in 1929, Guatemalan doctors still treated children as small adults. Pediatrics was not even recognized as a specialty in the country. The early years of his private practice of pediatrics were an uphill struggle, but he eventually became the wealthiest families' pediatrician of choice. Among his

private patients, however, there were always many children of poor families whom he treated gratis, frequently paying for their medicine out of his own pocket.

In 1935, Cofiño won an appointment at the medical school as its first professor of pediatrics. He frequently attended international congresses and spent a year as a guest of the United States State Department working at Duke University and the Mayo Clinic. In 1949, he and his wife spent six months in France, Belgium, and Holland studying recent advances in pediatric social work.

Cofiño's vision of pediatrics went well beyond therapy. He stressed preventive medicine, hygiene, and improvement of social conditions, especially for the native population, which suffered from discrimination, poverty, lack of education, and malnutrition. From 1939 to 1960,

Ernesto was the director of pediatric medicine in the country's leading hospital.

He was very demanding of himself and of those who worked with him. Other medical directors arrived at ten or eleven in the morning, but he arrived at 6:30 AM and insisted that everyone who worked in his department arrive on time. As a young man, Cofiño could be quite harsh in correcting mistakes. Over the years, however, his wife, Clemencia, gradually helped him learn to treat people more kindly.

In the 1940s, with the support of the Lions Club, Cofiño established a residential care facility for children with tuberculosis in the small town of San Juan Sacatepéquez. For many years, he spent weekends with his family in a small country house nearby and dedicated most of the weekends to caring for the patients,

primarily children of poor indigenous families. In addition to providing medical treatment, Cofiño poured out affection on the children. At Christmas, he regularly dressed up as Santa Claus and distributed gifts.

In the 1950s Cofiño led a government-sponsored national tuberculosis vaccination campaign. He was also named director of the national government-sponsored orphanage. Originally, the institution had been private but had been taken over by the government. It was woefully inadequate in every way. The buildings were in terrible condition, and the orphans were malnourished and received virtually no education. When they reached the age of eighteen, they were turned out on the street with no skills, and often turned to crime as the only way of surviving.

Cofiño completely transformed the institution. He established small-scale living units in place of sprawling dormitories, upgraded educational programs, and created an environment in which the children were treated with respect and affection. When the orphans reached adulthood and left the orphanage, Cofiño gave them a key to the front door so that they would have a place to go in difficult moments.

Before Cofiño's arrival, families interested in adopting were not screened to ensure that the children would be well cared for. Some orphans ended up as little better than slaves of the families who adopted them. With the help of his wife, who had a degree in social work, Cofiño instituted a modernized program of adoption and foster care focused on the needs and well-being

of the children, rather than on the whims of potential adoptive parents.

Encountering Opus Dei

God played a very small role in Cofiño's life as a young man. In his own words, his "dealings with God came down to a social religion of weddings and funerals." After his marriage in 1933, he began to attend Sunday Mass with his wife. Shortly thereafter, he met a priest, Fr. Rossell, who would become archbishop of Guatemala in 1939. The two became good friends, but for many years Cofiño continued to show little interest in religion.

In the early 1950s, however, he began to feel that God was asking something more of him. He asked Rossell to recommend a priest who could guide him. The archbishop introduced his fifty-four-year-old friend to Father Antonio Rodriguez, a recently ordained, twenty-six-year-

old Spanish priest of Opus Dei who had just arrived in Guatemala to begin the Work's apostolate there.

Cofiño had always seen his profession as a service to others but was amazed to discover that his work and the rest of his daily life could be an encounter with God. With Fr. Rodriguez's guidance and support, he rapidly began to develop an intense Christian life. In 1956, he joined Opus Dei as its first married member in Guatemala. Twenty-five years later, on his eightieth birthday, Ernesto observed that his vocation to Opus Dei "changed the entire panorama of my life, without taking me out of the place I occupied in life. God's call, the vocation, is a living light that makes you see the meaning of your life."

His youngest son observes: "He gave himself to God in Opus Dei with all the strength of his heart, with what

was deepest in his soul, with all his enthusiasm. The last decades of his life were years of plenitude. He discovered a deeper, more supernatural sense in work. It was no longer enough to carry it out well from the human point of view. He had always done that. Now he could convert it into prayer, into praise to the Creator, into love of God."

Despite being almost sixty years old when he joined Opus Dei, Cofiño aspired and struggled to grow in virtue, correct his defects, and develop an interior life of prayer and dialogue with God. His effort to live the spirit of the Work also led him to treat his wife, children, and siblings with greater refinement and charity. His wife commented to Fr. Rodriguez, "I don't know what you have done with my husband, but it is marvelous."

With the passage of the years, he met with some success in controlling his temper and in being more flexible. During Cofiño's visit to an elderly woman to ask for a contribution to an Opus Dei center, the woman began reminiscing about her life. Cofiño cut her off, saying he had to go. After they left the house, a friend who had accompanied him on the visit pointed out that the woman was lonely and needed to talk. A few days later Cofiño visited her again and let her run on at length about her memories.

Living in God's Presence

In the final hours of 1969, when he was approaching seventy years of age, Cofiño wrote an extensive note which gives us an insight into his relationship with God. Looking back over the past year, he concluded that "the agreeable and favorable events as well as the ones that were

unfavorable, painful or simply annoying" all contributed to "showing me the constant presence of God in the expressions of his Will." He thanked God above all for the "difficult or annoying moments and events, which are the ones that bring me closer to the Lord." "You, Lord, were very close to me. Each morning when I awoke, my first thought was for you and then a conversation with you about events, resolutions, or problems. Meditation and thoughts and then, every day, almost without exception, you came to me. You were the nourishment of my soul."

Looking forward to the new year, Ernesto formulated resolutions: "We are children of God. I am a son of God. I should repeat that to myself many times throughout the day. Although it may seem incredible, it is true: I am a son of God. Through his divine will, he deigns to come to me and to make my misery worthy of

receiving him. He brings me closer to himself. He makes me participate in his divinity."

To live in keeping with the dignity of a child of God, Cofiño resolved to fight against "whims, meanness, pride, sensuality, neglect, and inconstancy. With, your help, Lord, I will be forward, to pick myself up, and begin again. As a child of God, I will try to fill my life with love as you have taught me to do. To love everyone without distinction: those who are pleasant, to thank them for the pleasure they give me, and those I find unpleasant because they give me an opportunity which I have not sought out, to mortify myself. I will try to see only what may be understandable, and perhaps justified, in the conduct of those who might be cruel or unjust to me."

Turning his attention to apostolate, he continued, "There are many, very

many, along the edge of the road, waiting for a word, a helping hand that shows them your way. There are many, very many, who are thirsty and longing for a drop of water, of the water of Life with which you have filled me." He concluded his reflections with an aspiration to Our Lady which he had learned from the founder of Opus Dei: "*Cor Mariae Dulcissimum, iter para tutum*" (Most sweet heart of Mary, prepare a safe way).

Throughout his life, Cofiño lived soberly, spending little on himself and generously helping others. When he learned that a young doctor, who had not yet succeeded in establishing himself in a practice, was working as an unpaid volunteer in the orphanage, he endorsed his monthly paycheck over to him and assured the young physician that until he could establish himself financially he would give him half his salary as

director. At one point, he mortgaged his house to be able to help a former student buy a home.

Ernesto could have easily purchased a mansion, but to the end of his life he continued to live in the first house he had bought after his marriage, and with the same furniture. He bought only one or two new cars in his lifetime; the rest were secondhand. He gave generously to his children, the church, the apostolates of Opus Dei, and many people in need. An index of his concern for the poor is that toward the very end of his life when his mind was failing, he would become agitated and frequently ask his nurse if he had delivered a check to people in need.

In 1963, Cofiño's wife died unexpectedly of a cerebral hemorrhage. Their youngest child was only nine years old at the time.

Later in life, that boy reflected: "After her death, my father could have turned in on himself, focusing on his sufferings and mourning her absence. But he thought about us and fought against his own sorrow. He understood that his children, and especially I who was still a child, needed his joy and his smile."

Ciudad Vieja

At about the same time that Cofiño joined Opus Dei, Fr. Rodriguez approached him and several other professional men about creating a university center with a residence. At the time, Guatemalan universities were overcrowded and understaffed. Students had few opportunities to meet with the professors outside of class, and the level of academic instruction was low. There were few places where students could interact with others outside their field or meet leading figures in the

professions, culture, the arts, and public life.

The proposed university center would not be a mere dormitory. In addition to providing an environment conducive to serious study, it would help enrich students' college experience. Although it would not have a formal instructional role, the center's goal was to be in some ways like one of the colleges of Oxford. Fr. Rodriguez proposed that Dr. Cofiño and the other men he initially approached along with their friends take responsibility for the financial, organizational, and technical aspects of the project. Opus Dei would help them give a Christian orientation to the undertaking.

Cofiño, who had a rare gift for inspiring enthusiasm for his projects, began recruiting friends for the board. "This university center is such

an important and indeed decisive project," he told them, "that I have decided to dedicate to it all the salary I receive in one of the hospitals I work in."

The first meeting of the board had to be postponed because the president of Guatemala had been assassinated and the whole country was under a state of siege. Nonetheless, the project moved forward quickly. By summer 1957, the board had located a possible site: a large house in a neighborhood called Ciudad Vieja, from which the center would eventually take its name. The location had many advantages; among them was one which could not be taken for granted at the time in Guatemala City: it was on a paved street.

The rent was high, but by soliciting the support of friends and taking out personal bank loans they were able

to sign the contract and pay the first month's rent in August 1957. From that date until shortly before his death in 1991, Ernesto viewed the project as his personal responsibility. To help furnish the house, he asked friends to donate furniture they no longer needed. When he learned that the authorities had shut down a clandestine casino, he and his wife purchased at auction some green velvet curtains which they thought would work well in the future oratory of the center. "This is really sanctifying the world," he commented, "because those curtains are going to go from the roulette room to the best place you could imagine."

In January 1958, the first resident moved in. The board had calculated that the center would be economically self-sustaining with twelve residents. In the first year, however, there were only six

residents, a number of whom were unable to pay the full fees. Cofiño and the other members of the board soon realized that they would need to find donations not only to pay the rent, but also to create a scholarship fund so the residence could accept students from poor families.

Samuel Camhi Levy

One of the people Cofiño approached for scholarship money was Samuel Camhi Levy, a Sephardic Jew born in Izmir, Turkey, who had emigrated to Guatemala in 1924 with no money. He had barely established a small business when the Great Depression of 1929 drove him to the verge of bankruptcy, but over the years he had become very wealthy. Since his painfully poor youth, he had been determined that if he ever made money, he would use it to help poor children and young people.

Levy responded generously to Cofiño's request for scholarships, and the two became such good friends that Levy's children began to call Cofiño, "Uncle Neto." The two men shared a passion for cooking and frequently fixed family dinners together. Levy soon became involved not only in Ciudad Vieja but in several social works promoted by Cofiño and other members and friends of Opus Dei. When Cofiño was working with a small group of people to establish a school for working-class students that would be called Kinal, Levy lent them a building.

In 1963, Levy was contacted by Junkabal, a girls' school situated in perhaps the poorest neighborhood of Guatemala City. The school was a few hundred yards from the edge of a massive dump where destitute families lived in shacks built on top of the junk and spent their days

combing through it in the hope of finding something they could use or sell. Junkabal was in such serious financial difficulty that it could not pay the rent on the modest building that housed the school. As a result, its promoters were seriously considering closure. Levy was so impressed by the work they were doing that he purchased the building for them.

It was not that a very wealthy man helped them with a small part of his surplus money. Levy had to borrow money for the purchase and mortgaged several of his stores to guarantee the loan. In later years, Levy contributed generously to the construction of a new building for Junkabal and created a foundation to support it. Although he died as a practicing Jew, in the foundation's articles of incorporation he expressly stipulated that the moral formation given in Junkabal would always be

entrusted to Opus Dei. He did this, his son said, to guarantee that there would never be any discrimination in Junkabál. "If Opus Dei is there," the son said, "my father felt sure, there will be religious freedom."

On one occasion, Cofiño was able to introduce Levy to the Founder of Opus Dei, who thanked him warmly for his support. Levy responded, "Monsignor, I want to remind you in the first place that I am not Catholic and in the second place that I am Jewish." "Come to my arms," Escrivá said as he gave him a warm embrace. From then on, Escrivá always sent him greetings for his birthday and other special occasions. Levy told his son that never in his life had anyone treated him with greater affection.

The New Ciudad Vieja Residence

By the mid-1960s, the residence no longer had difficulties finding students. Now its problem was

finding room for all the qualified students who wanted to live there. At first, they installed bunkbeds and tried other measures to increase the capacity of the residence, but eventually it became clear they needed a bigger building. The board member who took care of the accounts thought the project was crazy but voted to move forward anyway. He said, "I have learned one thing in Opus Dei: In apostolic undertakings, we cannot work only with economic logic, which teaches us that two plus two is four. We have to add a decisive third factor: God plus two plus two."

About this time, during a meeting in Rome with Escrivá, Father Rodriguez commented that Cofiño and his fellow board members were thinking of building a new residence for forty students. "Forty?" the Father asked with surprise. "Only forty?" "Bigger than that, Father?" Fr. Rodriguez

asked. "How many were you thinking of? Sixty?" "Bigger!" "A hundred?" Rodriguez asked hesitantly. "Bigger, still," the Father responded with a chuckle.

The board members were shocked, but they decided to try. This, of course, required a major fundraising effort. Cofiño commented:

"Everybody is embarrassed to ask for money. I'm not." Fr. Rodriguez, who knew him well, adds: "I think that at the beginning he must have found it hard to ask for money, like everyone else. But his love of God made him overcome that sense of embarrassment, thinking about the good that would be done from that university center and contemplating daily with his own eyes so much poverty, so many people in need, so much forgetfulness of God. He saw Ciudad Vieja University Center as a powerful motor for human, professional, and spiritual progress

in all of Central America. That center would form many professional men who would contribute decisively to peace, understanding among people, and development in all sectors of those countries."

Close friends of Cofiño donated a large tract of land, and an architect designed a building that was daring for its time but fit well with local taste and architectural traditions. The project moved forward quickly and opened in 1968 with 134 beds. From the beginning, a high percentage of the students received scholarships. The residents included young men from indigenous families who had never been outside their small towns, boys of mixed race whose families were often poor, and students from prosperous families of Guatemala and other countries of Central America. Dr. Cofiño and the staff of the residence worked hard to ensure that they all lived together in

harmony, following the insistent teaching of St. Josemaría, "There is only one race: the race of the children of God."

Cofiño was named the first rector of Ciudad Vieja, a position he held virtually to the end of his life. He did not consider rector an honorary position. He spent much of his time in an office in the residence. In 1959, he retired from both the hospital and his teaching position at the university, partly to make way for younger colleagues, but in large part because he wanted to dedicate more time to Ciudad Vieja. He worked untiringly to develop educational programs, form new members of the board, raise money, and above all mentor individual residents. He urged them all to pursue professional excellence and encouraged many of them to go abroad to complete their studies. Ernesto was extraordinarily cordial, and the residents soon

learned that they could count on him not only for good advice but a sympathetic ear. He took a real interest in each of them, remembered their names, and prayed for them. Each student who approached him came away with the impression that he was someone special to him, a person, not just a resident or student.

A Tireless Fundraiser

Cofiño's dedication to raising money for scholarships and the operating expenses of Ciudad Vieja and other centers of Opus Dei was astounding. Even late in his life, he often approached five or six people in a single day for contributions. On one occasion when there was a particularly urgent need, he went with another member of the board of Ciudad Vieja to visit someone whose office was on the ninth floor. They discovered that the elevator was out

of order but were told that it would probably be repaired that afternoon. His companion turned around to leave, but Cofiño, who was in his eighties, started up the stairs saying, "Don't worry about it. It's only nine stories." When they reached the landing on the third floor, Cofiño stopped to rest for a moment and reminded his companion of something they had heard in a day of recollection the previous day: "We should take advantage of anything we find hard to offer it to God. . . . And we should ask him for vocations saying: 'Lord, souls! They are for You. They are for your glory!' Well, that's what we have to ask for with each step. Souls! Let every step represent a soul for the Lord."

Cofiño reached the ninth floor exhausted and had to rest for about fifteen minutes, but eventually he was able to ask for the help he had come to seek. Although that visit was

successful, not everyone was receptive to his requests. On one occasion, a receptionist refused to let him see the person he had come to visit and threw him out rudely. Far from taking offense, Cofiño, who had noticed that the receptionist had symptoms of a serious illness, gave her a slip of paper with the names of two doctors, saying, "I have written down here the names of two physicians. I would advise you to go see them as soon as possible." A few months later Cofiño proposed to the person who had accompanied him on that visit to try again. When his companion objected, "Don't you remember how that fellow's receptionist treated us?" he brushed it off and insisted on going back. When they arrived, they encountered a new receptionist who said she would call the office manager. The office manager turned out to be the former receptionist, but this time she greeted Cofiño warmly:

"Doctor! I'm so glad to see you again. You saved my life. I went to see one of the doctors you suggested, and he told me that I was suffering from a very serious illness, but now I have recovered." This time they had no difficulty getting in.

As we have seen in talking about his work with Samuel Levy, Cofiño's efforts were not limited to supporting Ciudad Vieja. At the end of the sixties, when pro-abortion groups were beginning to gain strength in Guatemala, Cofiño began collecting signatures for a pro-life petition. He also founded an association for the defense of life and began to give talks and conferences on the value of human life. He argued not only on scientific and moral grounds but also from his experience as a pediatrician. His presentations were backed by the passion and experience of a man who had fought for many years

against poverty, injustice, social marginalization, and the lamentable situation of many indigenous women. Not content with making prepared remarks, he made a point of talking personally with any participant who wanted to see him and tried to help them find solutions to their situations. The Congress of Guatemala invited him to talk about life issues at a plenary session.

He also worked diligently to support other centers of Opus Dei as well as charitable activities with no connection to the Work. For five years after his retirement, for instance, he served as the head of the Guatemalan branch of the German charity Caritas, which at the time was distributing food to some ninety thousand people. It is not possible to explore all Cofiño's charitable works here. Suffice it to say that they reflected the same generosity, spirit

of service, and confidence in God as his activities at Ciudad Vieja.

A Guest in His Own Home

In 1979, Cofiño's youngest son, José Luis, announced that he had become engaged. Knowing how important it was to his father that his grandchildren be brought up as good Catholics, José Luis struggled to find the right moment to tell him that his fiancée was not Catholic. The first day he brought her home, they didn't talk about religion while the three of them were together. During a period when José Luis was out of the room, however, the topic did come up. The conversation went very smoothly and proved to be the first in a long series. The young woman later said she found their conversations seemed like those of a father with his daughter. After a while, she began to accompany Cofiño and his son to

Sunday Mass, and eventually, she was baptized.

José Luis and his wife wanted to move in with Cofiño so that he would not be alone. Ernesto strongly opposed that plan, not for his own sake but for theirs. "You need to have your own house and solve your problems in peace. I would just get in the way." Eventually, however, his sister convinced him that the young couple really did want him to live with them, and he gave in.

The house had been Cofiño's home for fifty years, first with his wife and then as a widower. It cannot have been easy for him, but he quietly stepped back and treated the house as the home of his son and daughter-in-law in which he was a guest. The young woman had little experience with housekeeping, but he made her feel that it was her home in which she was free to change curtains,

move furniture, and do—or undo—whatever else she wanted.

Cofiño was an excellent cook. When his young daughter-in-law took over the kitchen, she still had much to learn; but if a dish turned out poorly or was burned, he seemed not even to notice. Far from showing off his gifts as a chef or giving lessons, he treated her with great understanding and affection without saying a word about the burnt or spoiled dish. On the rare occasions when he saw something in the house that really did need to be corrected, Cofiño suggested something to his son but said nothing directly to his daughter-in-law.

Although some friends expected the arrangement to work out poorly, the young couple and the eighty-year-old lived together happily. His son, writing to his children about their grandfather, attributed their ability

to get along so well to the fact that "he was not a little old man of eighty years of age, loaded with complaints, who needed to be taken out to sit in the sun in the morning. Rather he was a good father, amusing, likable, and optimistic. He was full of hopes and projects and was always finding new ways to help others." After his death, his daughter-in-law recalled, "He was always smiling. His smile is engraved deep in my heart."

Brushes with Violent Death

In 1987, when Cofiño was going with a friend to solicit money for scholarships, they were assaulted by two armed men who ordered them to get into the back seat. As they drove off at high speed, the bandits ordered them to hand over their wallets, watches, medals, and rings. Cofiño could not help crying as he handed over the wedding ring he had worn for more than fifty years. When the

leader decided to kill them and throw them at the side of the road, Cofiño began to pray out loud. The bandits ordered him to "shut up once and for all, old man." He responded calmly, "I always pray, and more now. I am praying that the Lord may give you his light because you are on a very bad path." Hearing this, the leader shouted to his companion, "Let's get out of here." When they pulled over to the side of the road, the man who had been covering them with his pistol opened the door and helped Cofiño get out of the car. As he did so he held out his hand and wished Cofiño good luck. Ernesto responded, "No. I won't shake your hand now, because you're on a very bad path. I will pray a lot for you that you may find God. And when you do, I will be very happy to shake hands with you." From then until the end of his life, Cofiño prayed regularly for the two bandits.

This was not the first time that Ernesto had had a close call with violent death. In 1971, he left an academic conference in the middle of a torrential rainstorm. When he got out of the car in a lonely spot to take a shortcut to his destination, someone grabbed him from behind, began to choke him, and threw him to the ground. As the robber was trying to pull the ring from Cofiño's finger, he suddenly jumped up and began to run away because a police officer was approaching.

Cofiño later wrote about the experience in the third person: Although at the moment the victim may not have invoked the name of God, he had undoubtedly had it in his heart throughout the day. As he usually did, that morning he had attended Holy Mass and had received the Body of our Lord. He had said his usual prayers, among them the Rosary. In the afternoon he had

visited the Blessed Sacrament. He concluded his account by reaffirming his confidence in God: A God whom he feels is very close, so close that he not only lives in his heart but gives himself to him as the only food. God our Lord had given that man a series of tasks to carry out. . . . But that man, who should have been fully mature, continuously exposed himself to many dangers. . . . The Lord must have thought that he needed to teach him a lesson that he would never forget again. For that man what happened has a very deep sense: to feel in his flesh the real loving presence of Our Father God, protecting him and saving him. When he told relatives and friends about what had happened, he said he was convinced that the policeman had been his guardian angel.

Living with Cancer

At age eighty-two, Cofiño began to have pain in his jaw. At first, he gave it no importance, thinking that it was caused by his dentures, but eventually he consulted a dentist, who told him that he had jaw cancer. With characteristic decisiveness, Cofiño immediately flew to Houston for treatment. That night, he reported, "We slept very well." One of his biographers comments: The phrase in itself could not have more human content, the joy of being able to say one slept well. But coming at the end of the day in which he had been clearly told that he had cancer of the jaw, it seems rather the joyful prayer of a man who treats God as a friend and says to him "You know very well what you dispose and do. Why should I worry?" And he goes to bed and sleeps well.

Although the operation removed a large part of his lower jaw, Cofiño returned to normal life and

continued working actively. A few years later, a student asked him how he was doing. He responded with a smile: "I feel well. The only thing is that I can't see or hear. I can't walk, and I have no sense of smell or taste." On his ninetieth birthday, he wrote, "I prepare for death, living each day as if it were the last day of my life. In this way, I carry out each activity as well as I can, offering it to the Lord."

Shortly after Cofiño turned ninety, the cancer reappeared in his jaw. Once again his first reaction was to seek aggressive treatment which might enable him to continue working for God and others for a few more years. His son-in-law tried to dissuade him, pointing out that he was ninety years old, that surgery would leave him disfigured, and that he might lose an eye. Ernesto was initially undeterred and went to Houston to consult the surgeon who

had operated on him previously. The surgeon told him brusquely that radiation would do no good and that surgery was his only alternative. When Ernesto said that he wanted to go ahead with the surgery, his youngest son, who had accompanied him, suggested that they go to the Opus Dei center nearby to pray in the chapel. Eventually, Cofiño decided against aggressive therapy and returned home.

Although much weakened physically, Cofiño continued attending classes and other means of formation at the Opus Dei center in Guatemala, taking notes and showing great interest in what was said although he was familiar with much of the material. He also continued, for a time, giving weekly spiritual life classes in his home to small groups of friends and the people whom they invited. Although the subjects were ones that Ernesto had studied deeply, thought

about at length, and prayed about, he continued to prepare each presentation carefully. He also made a point of meeting with each of the participants individually to talk about the practical implications of what they had gone over in class.

At first, Ernesto continued to take walks for exercise, but after a sudden fall, he decided to switch to a stationary bike and asked a friend who was an avid cyclist to teach him how to use it. When his friend suggested that they would need a few twenty-minute sessions, he replied, "Fine. But we will need forty minutes. For the first twenty, you instruct me on the bike. The second twenty, I instruct you on our Christian faith."

Eventually, Cofiño needed a full-time caregiver. The man was surprised at how well Ernesto treated him and at the interest Ernesto took in his life,

his family, and his problems. Above all, he was impressed by the fact that Cofiño always seemed content. He later recounted: "The only thing that distressed [Ernesto] was not being able to help others. His illness did not make him sad. I was with him all day and all night, and he never, never, never complained."

During the final months of his life, Cofiño's principal concern was getting to Mass. Toward the end, the parish priest suggested that he come into the sacristy and take a seat near the altar to be able to follow Mass better. He also wanted to say the Rosary, even though his mind was failing. His caregiver describes in detail the Rosaries of his last few weeks: He could no longer coordinate his ideas. "The first mystery," he would say and begin the Hail Mary, but after the second or third Hail Mary, he would announce the Third Mystery and shortly

thereafter the Fourth Mystery. Those Rosaries were very short. But it seems to me that it did not matter, that the Virgin understood him and that those Rosaries had special value in the eyes of Our Lord. . . . Those unusual and disorderly Rosaries were one of the prayers that I have seen prayed with the greatest devotion. I am sure that they made Our Lady especially happy because he prayed with immense faith when he was already failing and had no strength.

On October 16, 1991, the day before his death, the head of Opus Dei in Guatemala arrived with a letter from the successor of St. Josemaría as head of Opus Dei, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo: "I have been moved by your supernatural vision of the illness you are suffering. Continue to abandon yourself into the fatherly arms of God, convinced that the Lord always gives us what is best for each one of

us, although at times it may be hard to understand. I count especially on you, my son, to move forward the apostolate of the Work in the whole world. Continue to offer your pains and sufferings for my intentions. May God reward you for it."

Early the next morning, October 17, 1991, Cofiño quietly slipped away. In the words of the caregiver who was with him, "His death was like a candle that had burned itself down completely, giving all the light of which it is capable. He left quietly, almost on tiptoe, without making noise, with the God he loved so much. I have always thought that the deaths of the saints should be like that, happy and serene. I have not the slightest doubt that Dr. Cofiño was a true saint."

The archbishop of Guatemala City opened Ernesto Cofiño's cause for canonization in 2000.

This sketch of Ernesto Cofiño is from John Coverdale's book and podcast "Encounters: Finding God in All Walks of Life." *Encounters* presents profiles of people living Saint Josemaria's message of finding God in everyday life.

The profiles have been released as an audio podcast series, available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. You can also purchase the entire book from Amazon or Scepter Publishers.

John Coverdale

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