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Constantly Giving Thanks

Now 92 years old, Francisco Corazón recalls how he met Opus Dei and relates the beginnings of a personal apostolic initiative that has since become an international network of rural schools for farm workers.

02/19/2008

I was born in Cordoba in southern Spain some years ago, on June 10, 1916. While studying agricultural engineering in Madrid, I saw at first

hand the poverty of the people living in the city's outlying districts. Many of them were farm workers who had been forced to leave the land because they couldn't earn enough to get by. From time to time I went to visit some of them and tried to assist them. I would ask myself what more I could do for them, but didn't see any easy solution.

When I was 20, the Spanish civil war broke out. Like everyone else in Madrid, I underwent many hardships during those years. But thanks to a lot of luck—that is, thanks to divine Providence—I came out alive. When the war ended, I married Lola and took a job with a government agency in Jaén. Our first two children were born there.

As my parents had given me a good Christian upbringing, I continued my practices of piety and twice a year received spiritual direction from a

priest friend in Cordoba. Once I told him I felt called to give myself to God, but didn't know precisely how.

"Don't worry," he advised. "God will let you know in due course."

Shortly afterwards we moved to Cordoba where I found employment in a private firm. Eventually I decided to combine that job with teaching—first, in the School of Industrial Management, and later in the School of Agricultural Engineering that opened in 1968.

Isidoro Zorzano

By the early 1950s I still knew very little about Opus Dei. But I had heard about Isidoro Zorzano and three things about him stuck in my mind: that he was an engineer (maybe that's why I took notice of him), that he had worked for the Andalusian Railroads, and that his process of canonization had been opened.

Early in 1954, I felt the need to make a retreat to prepare for Easter. So I made a reservation in a diocesan retreat house located in the foothills of the mountains outside Cordoba. I was told the retreat would be given by a priest of Opus Dei. "Great," I thought, "now I'll find out what it's all about."

Meeting Opus Dei

So I went to the retreat. The preacher introduced himself to us before supper. My first impression was not all that positive. Instead of the venerable older priest we were all expecting, we met a young, recently-ordained priest, only 24-years-old and with a big smile: "And this fellow is going to preach to us?"—I thought to myself, as did the others. "Well, tomorrow first thing in the morning we can head back to Cordoba."

After supper we went to the chapel for the first meditation. I was

amazed. This priest was opening up to me a new spirit, unknown to me up till then. The next day I went to speak with him. His name was Emilio Bonell.

Fr. Emilio said nothing about Opus Dei during the retreat. Still, God's grace led me to recognize "something" quite special behind the priest's ardent words. Anyone who hasn't had a similar experience may find this surprising. But that is how a shoot of wheat grows quietly in the ground. It's how God, little by little, sows the seed in the depths of one's soul. In "technical" terms, it's called a "vocation."

I began to realize how important this new "something" was going to be in my life, even before Fr. Emilio spoke to me about the Work several weeks later. "If you want," he said one day in parting, "I can tell you about Opus Dei the next time you come; then

you'll be able to explain it to anyone who might ask." He didn't bring it up, however, when we talked the following week. "But Fr. Emilio," I said, "aren't you going to tell me about Opus Dei?"

That's when I first heard about the sanctification of work and the pursuit of holiness in the middle of the world. I was enthused with the idea. My Christian life and professional work took on a whole new dimension. Lola, my wife, noticed a change in me and began asking about the Work. I explained what I had come to know: divine filiation, love for freedom, unity of life. Another aspect that inspired trust in me was the founder's deep Marian devotion.

I asked my priest friend back in Cordoba for advice and told him that this spirit was attracting me more and more. "What do you want me to

tell you?" he said. "I can't advise you because I don't know what it is. Act freely."

The Step

And I did act. I recall it as if it were today. It was a very warm afternoon in June 1954. We were in the mountains on vacation. It was quiet in the house because the five children were in bed recovering from measles. After attending to them, I was praying in my workroom, and decided there and then to ask for admission.

It was as simple as that. No one asked me to join Opus Dei. I knew the request for admission had to be in writing. I went to my desk and put down on paper my desire to form part of the Work. The next day I took my letter to the center, and they accepted it. And so here I am, more than half a century later, thanking God constantly for the grace of a

vocation that has been the great joy of my life.

St. Josemaría

Six years later, in October 1960, I had the good fortune to meet St.

Josemaría when he came to the University of Zaragoza to receive an honorary doctorate. Getting there was quite an adventure, the roads being what they were back then. We made the trip as best we could, in an old contraption that kept breaking down. After the exhausting trip, I fell asleep and dreamed that the Father would greet me personally the next day.

And so he did. It all happened unexpectedly. He asked Lola and me about our children. We showed him a photo, and he blessed them one by one.

St. Josemaría used to say that we would spend the final years of our

life in the Work giving thanks. I thank God for everything: for Lola, a good and holy woman who died 18 years ago after giving herself generously as a supernumerary in Opus Dei. She brought many people to God. I was always meeting friends and acquaintances on whom she had left a Christian imprint. I also thank him for my eight children (some of whom received a vocation to Opus Dei), for my ten grandchildren, and for the growth of the apostolate all over the world—in particular, in my beloved Córdoba.

Everything Starts Small

That meeting with St. Josemaría deeply moved me. It made me ask myself what more I could do for God in my profession, in my daily life. I knew that from the beginning St. Josemaría had dreamed of initiatives that would raise the level of farm workers in every aspect of their lives

—human, professional, spiritual. I had the good fortune—that is, God gave me the grace—to take the first steps in converting that dream into a reality.

My thought was to begin a school for agricultural workers who were foremen. I hoped that eventually it would become a corporate apostolate of Opus Dei, but at first it was simply an idea, a personal project influenced by my human aspirations and professional orientation. So I got to work on it, realizing that full responsibility for it would rest on my own shoulders.

It isn't easy to start any project, and this one was no exception. With the hours I devoted to my large family and my work, where would I find the time for this new undertaking? But little by little the first steps took shape with the help of friends and acquaintances who shared my

interest in the idea. I spoke with a government official and traveled to Granada to meet with specialists in the cultivation of olives. As I wanted the school to have an oratory, I also spoke with the bishop, who gave his enthusiastic support. When it came time to install it, I had to borrow everything: the chalice, the paten, the missal....

The hardest part, as usual, was money. The plan was to start with thirty persons ready to contribute thirty thousand pesetas [\$500] and with volunteers to do the teaching. People responded in different ways, all with generosity. One friend, Bernardo López Baena, told me I could ask anything of him short of taking part in the project because he was quite busy and had no time for anything new. He added: "Ah, but as for the money, don't worry: Here's the thirty thousand." In those years, thirty thousand pesetas was quite a

lot of money. Another friend, Juan Lobera, left us his country home in San Eduardo; it was to be the location of the Farm School. His family would find another place to spend the summer. Many people came forward to help out, one after the other—for instance, Pepe Guerrero (he had many friends in Cordoba) and his cousin, Andrés, who held an administrative position in the department of agriculture.

From the First Farm School to the Association of Schools for Rural Families

And so with a lot of trust in God and many hours of work, taking one step at a time, without the required resources, the project went forward. I was the first director of the Farm School, which opened in 1962.

At first we were concerned only with the human development of farm workers in Andalusia, and especially

the ones around Cordoba. But St. Josemaría had a more universal outlook. When Andrés Guerrero spoke to him about our project in the Guadalquivir River Valley, he said, "No, my son; you have to think about the whole world!"

And so it happened. As the years went by, the project grew and adapted to new circumstances. José Manuel Gil de Antuñano recast the initial idea, and thanks to the help of many people like Manolo Verdejo, the overall plan took shape.

Relying on our own experience and on what was happening in other countries, the Association of Schools for Rural Families was born to carry out the initial idea of helping farming people, but on a larger plane. A key promoter was Joaquín Herreros, who had had first hand experience of *Les Maisons*

Familiarers , the family housing project in France.

Today these initiatives on behalf of rural people, whether modeled on the Schools for Rural Families or other similar ones, have spread all around the world. Thousands of farm workers are receiving human, professional, and spiritual formation in them. So I have yet one more reason to constantly give thanks to God.

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(04/13/2025)