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# Holiness within reach

St. Josemaria's message of seeking holiness in the ordinary situations of each day has given inspiration and hope to many that heaven is within everyone's reach.

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“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 laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the

university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of life. Understand this well, there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations and it is up to each of you to discover it". (St. Josemaría Escrivá, Homily, Passionately loving the world).

Ten years ago, on the 6th of October 2002, this message was confirmed when then Pope John Paul II canonized Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, priest and founder of Opus Dei in Rome. Today, people from all walks of life in the five continents find inspiration and hope in the thought that heaven is within reach.

## **The man, the mission, the Institution**

Born on 9 January 1902 in Barbastro Spain, St. Josemaría was the 2nd of 6 children of Jose and Dolores Escrivá.

Being devout Catholics, the Escrivás ensured that Josemaría learn early on, the truths of faith and Christian practices of piety like prayer, frequent confession, communion and almsgiving.

He was also schooled in suffering that strengthened his character. He lost three sisters due to illnesses, witnessed the bankruptcy of his father's business and the consequent reversal of the family fortune.

Unknown to him, God made use of all these events to prepare him for a special mission. One winter night, as he looked out the window, he saw a set of bare footprints in the snow made by a Discalced Carmelite. What could have been an otherwise insignificant event made a deep impact on him. Josemaría began to think, "if this friar could do this sacrifice for God, what am I doing for Him"?

It was a turning point. From then on, his was a constant search for the will of God through prayer and sacrifice. In his sincere desire to follow the divine plan, he decided to become a priest, renouncing his ambition to become an architect.

Perhaps to prove his faith, Josemaría faced still another setback: the death of his father just before he was ordained on 28 March 1925. He was then left to care for his mother and two siblings, which he did with great responsibility. He made this compatible with his pastoral duties: ministering to the sick, the poor and young children. At the same time, he did apostolate with professional men, university students and manual workers, awakening in them high Christian ideals of service.

Three years after becoming priest, God's plan was finally unravelled to Josemaría. While attending a

spiritual retreat in Madrid, on 2 October 1928, God made him “see” Opus Dei (Work of God): an institution composed of ordinary men and women from all walks of life, to live and spread the message of holiness through the fulfilment of ordinary professional work and family as well as social duties. Josemaría was to be God’s instrument to open up a new path of holiness for all the baptized.

From then on, Josemaría dedicated all his energies to the “Work of God”. Undeterred by difficulties, not even by the bloody civil war in Spain, he attended to the poor and the sick, taught catechism, put up student residences, inspired the setting up of initiatives in service of those marginalized in society and formed many young men and women to face up to their responsibilities as Christians and citizens of their country.

To complete the picture, on 14 February 1943, while at Holy Mass, Josemaría again “saw” that God wanted him to found the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association organically united to Opus Dei to provide spiritual and ascetical guidance to secular priests, helping them find holiness through their pastoral duties, strengthening their disposition to remain always at the disposition of the Bishops and attend to the needs of their dioceses.

In 1982, Opus Dei was erected by then Pope John Paul II as the first Personal Prelature, a new juridical configuration in the Catholic Church, different from religious orders or secular institutes. It is a hierarchical structure that may unite priests and lay people under a prelate appointed by the Pope. Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature has the specific task of promoting holiness among ordinary Christians, helping them “learn to

turn all the circumstances and events of their life into opportunities to love God, to serve the Church and all souls” (text of the prayer card of St. Josemaría). Wherever Opus Dei works, a synergy is sought between the Prelature and the local dioceses. The faithful of Opus Dei look to the Prelate and his delegates for their personal spiritual and doctrinal formation while following all the directives of the Bishop in their diocese. This synergy reflects a core aspiration of Opus Dei: to serve the Church as she wants to be served.

St. Josemaría did not live to see the Opus Dei established as Personal Prelature but worked hard and prepared everything for it. From Madrid, he moved to Rome where he pushed the growth of Opus Dei until 26 June 1975 when God called him to His presence. At his death, Opus Dei was in the five continents with over 60,000 members of 80 nationalities.

He also brought close to 1000 men to the priesthood.

## **Opus Dei in the Philippines**

Stable apostolic work by faithful of Opus Dei started in the Philippines in 1964 when three professional men who met and joined the institution while in Harvard came back to the Philippines. They set up the Maynilad Cultural Center in Singalong to offer formative activities to university students and young professionals.

A year after, three female faithful came to the Philippines from Spain in order to carry out parallel apostolic work setting up the Mayana School of Home and Fine Arts and later Tanglaw Residence in Leon Guinto Street, Manila.

Today there are more than 50 centers of Opus Dei in Metro Manila, Laguna, Batangas, Cebu, Iloilo, Bacolod.



Likewise, apostolic trips are done to Pampanga, Bicol, and Palawan in Luzon, Samar and Leyte in the Visayas, Cagayan de Oro and Davao in Mindanao.

To facilitate its apostolate, Opus Dei has put up a few corporate undertakings mostly dedicated to prepare Christian men and women to give witness to their faith in their ordinary lives. Mostly educational in nature, some of these undertakings are the University of Asia and the Pacific, the Foundation for Professional Training Inc. that runs five schools preparing young women from the underprivileged sector for work in the hospitality industry like Banilad Center for Professional Training in Cebu, Habihan School in Quezon City, Maligaya Institute of Culinary Arts in Manila and the Punlaan School in San Juan.

Said corporate undertakings however are few in number since Opus Dei's main activity, in the words of its founder, is a "great catechesis": continuing formation to enable the faithful and all those who come close to the means of formation, to live their faith through prayer, sacraments and firm knowledge of Christian doctrine.

Jing Gomez // Enrich, October 2012

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