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Opus Dei: Reality, Experiences and Myths

Ray Santos shares the story of his life as a security guard and the discovery of his vocation in a speech delivered in Rome on the occasion of St. Josemaría Escrivá's birth centenary.

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My name is Ray Santos, a true blooded Filipino. But my name is a combination of English and Spanish. Ray means beam of light in English

and Santos means Saints in Spanish. My name is just one of the ordinary Filipino names but lately I discovered the reason why God gave me this name. Whether this is by coincidence or not, I do not know but it sounds interesting to relate to you.

I am married to a simple woman and blessed with one lovely daughter. I spent most of my life working as a Security Guard for an Agency in the Philippines contracted to provide security services to companies of various sizes. Just to give you an idea of how much a Filipino security guard earns, my monthly salary is just enough to cover daily food, minimum clothing and basic public school education. I cannot afford to rent a house or apartment, so I stay in a 30 square meter house in a “squatter area” at the heart of Metro Manila. Most of my neighbors are either unemployed or under-employed. I am lucky to be employed

so I am grateful despite my meager income. In our country, more than thirty (30%) of our population live below the poverty line. Our neighborhood is just one of the hundred similar places in various parts of Metro Manila. For those of you who have visited the Philippines, your memories of our country will surely include squatters and street children all over.

My first encounter with the teachings of Saint Josemaría Escrivá was when I worked in a big multinational company producing wires and cables named Phelps Dodge. The President happened to be a supernumerary member of Opus Dei. His surname was also Santos. The complete name was Ramon B. Santos. True to his name, he is another aspirant to become a “saint”. His dream is, just like any son of Saint Josemaría, to make sure, if possible, all of his employees will try to understand the

value of sanctification in ordinary work. According to him, when the time comes that the first employee he meets at the gate greets him [with a special greeting of members of Opus Dei], then it would be a clear indication that that employee is one of the thousands happy followers of Saint Josemaría. That employee will surely “contaminate” with cheerfulness and sanctity the rest of his colleagues.

For this to happen, Phelps Dodge included in its corporate-wide human resource development program: doctrine classes, retreats, recollections and work values seminars. This type of development program was unique. It was a company benefit that was non-monetary and the positive effect on the employees and their families were real, albeit non-quantifiable.

To augment my income, I had to accept the special assignment of driving the officers and employees attending out-of-town activities such as retreats and work values seminars when my security shifts would allow. Mr. Santos, the President, trusted me a lot for this special assignment. His trust was not based on our similar surname. He never said a word but I could feel that he was proud of me being another hard working Santos in the company.

With the special formative activities as part of the benefit package, the company was blessed with many employees receiving a vocation to Opus Dei. Most of them were managers. This made me conclude that Opus Dei was only for the rich and for managers. I guessed that I should not even aspire to belong. I just performed my normal duties as best as I could.

As security guard-driver, I had no choice but to wait for the activities to end no matter how long they would take. So instead of doing nothing, once, the retreat coordinator encouraged me to attend and listen to the talks, meditation and classes.

As I listened, I started to discover my wrong doings. I realized that I had to change. With a small opening, the ray of light comes in. My name Ray--a beam of light--started to have a new meaning. You may call it a coincidence.

I realized that I had to start changing in dealing with my wife, fellow security guards and neighbors. My sudden turnaround was a big surprise for them. The first lesson I learned from Saint Josemaría was that sanctity is not just for the rich and the managers but also for a security guard like me.

Secondly, it was the first time I learned that marriage is not a second class vocation. It is a first class vocation and my wife should be my first apostolate. I admit here in public that my wife and I were separated for one year due to frequent and unbearable quarrels. She must have been the happiest person when I made a complete turnaround. I started to go home early every day. When I say early it means early in the evening not early morning the following day, which was my usual practice. We started to go to Sunday Mass together. Started helping in the household chores. In the Philippines, men believe that if you are the head of the family all you need to do at home is rest and command. Now I cannot afford to rest and I have to follow my wife's orders. I have to fetch water from the common neighborhood pump. I have to help my wife wash clothes. And most especially, I have to make up for

one year of lost time due to our separation.

Many of my friends tried to shy away from me especially when I gave up heavy drinking. Their common observation: “I was a different kind of Ray now”. I told them, that time will come when they would understand me. I started to pray every day to Saint Josemaría Escrivá using his Prayer Card for each one of my friends. It took them one year to realize that real friendship is introducing your friend to God since all of us should be friends of God.

In my work, I made it a habit to say spiritual aspirations as I go around inspecting the property. I tried to imitate Saint Josemaría’s practice of spreading Hail Mary’s praying for people all over without them knowing it. When I leave the company premises, I ask Saint Josemaría’s help to guard the whole

property while I am out. True enough, one night, I received a radio message at 2:00 in the morning that the guards caught a robber inside the plant. I went to check the situation. Nobody was hurt. Nothing was lost. Saint Josemaría was at work while I was asleep. It has been tried and tested in several payroll hold-up cases in our company that seeking the help of Saint Josemaría always results in safety and security of lives. Robbers and hold-uppers are always alive and safe when caught.

I was promoted to the position of Supervisor of the Security Guards not because I and the President shared the same surname but because of dedication and performance. I had a big edge over the other security guards, especially when God called me to live my life as a supernumerary member of Opus Dei last December 26, 1997. This was God's best Christmas gift to me. Now

I had to be true to my surname Santos. Call it a coincidence, Ray Santos acquired a new dimension when I discovered the light of my vocation to become a saint.

The struggle to live my vocation in the environment where I came from was not easy. Daily life became more exciting because the nature of my job is to be “on call”, and I had to learn to squeeze out time to attend my formation activities and fulfill my spiritual plan of life. Saint Josemaría always took charge when I was out.

Eventually, Phelps Dodge closed down its Manila plant to transfer to Tarlac, 150 kilometers North of the city. Before it was transferred, I took the opportunity to show a big smile and to greet Mr. Santos with a warm hello [and the special greeting of members of Opus Dei] instead of a formal salute when he entered the gate one morning. It seemed like a

silent meeting of minds. He knew that I had joined Opus Dei already. He may not have had enough time to convince all his employees to appreciate the teachings of Saint Josemaría because he was about to retire, but at least the first person at the gate, a security guard named Ray Santos now understood that it is possible to sanctify oneself in the middle of the world. According to him, I am another Santos trying to be a saint in the middle of the world.

After Phelps Dodge, I accepted the job as take charge guy of one of the biggest construction barracks in Metro Manila. This time I had to deal with 600 all male construction workers, mason, carpenters, security guards, laborers, steel men and helpers. Many of these workers had left their families in the provinces to earn a living in Metro Manila. My first concern was how to help them make good use of their weekends

and rest days. The Catholics among them did not even go to Mass on Sundays.

This time, I was the only son of Saint Josemaría in a more exciting environment. I had to do my part to “re-christianize” that environment despite all odds. Firstly, I conducted Catholic doctrine classes and organized Sunday Masses in the barracks. Secondly, I organized sports festivals, fund-raising activities and credit cooperatives for the sick, injured and financially needy employees. Everybody was happy with the results. I am sure that Saint Josemaría really wanted me to pursue these apostolic works. That was why he worked harder helping me from heaven when I was working in the barracks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, being here in Italy speaking in front of you is another of God’s rewards. Never in

my wildest dreams have I thought of traveling abroad. Never in my wildest dream have I thought of having a chance to deliver the stories of my life to such a distinguished audience. It really pays to be a Santos, a struggling saint in the middle of the world. God takes care of the rest.

Ray Santos

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