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A Chance Encounter with Father Josemaria, 1929

Rafael Poveda joined Opus Dei as an Associate in 1950. Years later he realized that a young priest he'd met in 1929 was actually St Josemaria, when he recounted a simple little event that he, Rafael, remembered perfectly...

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Rafael Poveda Longo was one of the first people to ask for admission in

Opus Dei as an Associate, in 1950. He worked as a clerk on a Supplies Committee in Spain, and died in Madrid in 1992, after long years of faithfulness and generous dedication to God and other people as a member of Opus Dei.

His childhood had one small point of contact with the history of the early years of Opus Dei: when he was ten, he met a very young, friendly priest who appeared in his classroom one day in May 1929, at the school run by the Damas Apostolicas in Isabel La Catolica Street.

Many years later, now a member of Opus Dei, he made a surprising discovery. Watching a film of a meeting with the Founder of Opus Dei and several thousand people in Buenos Aires, he realized that the young priest he'd met in 1929 was actually St Josemaria. There could be no doubt about it, because the

Founder recounted a simple little event that he, Rafael, remembered perfectly...

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“May 10, 1929 was my eleventh birthday. Early in the afternoon we went to the Church that the Damas Apostolicas had in Nicasio Gallego Street. We joined a group of boys from the various schools run by the Damas Apostolicas in Madrid, who had all come for Confession as we were making our First Holy Communion the following day.

That church was simply a chapel, not very big, and had two rows of benches with a central aisle and two narrower side-aisles. To the right of the nave, in some spaces framed by arches, there were two confessionals. The first was in the same place it is now, on the right just as you go in, and the second was nearer the sanctuary, where the tomb of Luz

Rodriguez Casanova is now. It was she who was preparing us for our First Holy Communion; she died some years later in the odor of sanctity.

One of my friends, who'd already made his First Communion and had been to Confession several times in that church, recommended me to go to the priest who was in the second confessional, who was young and approachable. Unfortunately there was a long queue of boys waiting to go to Confession there, and as it was my birthday and I wanted to get straight home for a birthday tea with my friends, I decided to go to Confession with the first priest, because there were only three or four kids queuing up there.

The priest in the first confessional was an elderly, rather ponderous, peaceful-looking man. I began my Confession, and after I'd finished the

priest spent a fair amount of time giving me advice, but in such a quiet voice that I could hardly hear him. As he went on, I was distracted by the row of buttons on his cassock, which seemed endless. Then I started wondering how many buttons there were, and began to count them. I'd almost got to the end when the priest realized and asked me what I was doing. I told him, quite simply. And he must have been really annoyed, because he started scolding me in a voice that seemed to me quite thunderous.

Then I could hear my companions, at the other confessional, all laughing at the commotion I'd caused. When I looked round I saw that the other priest was also looking out to see what the noise was about. Then I recognized him – he was the young priest who gave catechism classes in the district called Colonia de los Pinos, and who had come to our

school to explain what Confession was.

The older priest, very crossly, told me to go and kneel before the altar and say sorry to our Lord for what I'd done. And there I stayed till Confessions were over, when, his peaceable expression restored, he came over to ask me with a smile whether I'd repented. I said yes, and went home satisfied, though disappointed because I was the last to leave the church and I was going to be late for my birthday party, and also feeling a little humiliated because of all my companions laughing at me. That episode remained as a memory of a little childhood humiliation, and I never even told anyone about it.

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More than 50 years went by, and one fine day I saw a film of a get-together that the founder of Opus Dei had in

Buenos Aires in 1974. During that get-together he talked about the apostolate he had done during the early years of Opus Dei, hearing the Confessions of thousands of children who were preparing for their First Holy Communion, and then he told the following story:

‘I used to go and hear children’s Confessions, and I tried to take some elderly priest along with me, because by looking after children, older people become young again. Once there came with me a priest who was quite elderly and venerable looking. He was a scholar who had spent his life writing, hearing Confessions, and preaching... Perhaps for that reason he had also developed quite a venerable paunch. The chapel where we were hearing Confessions was not very big, so that we were quite near one another.

Suddenly I heard some noise. I looked round and saw that priest – a very holy and gentle man – was almost beside himself, scolding a little boy. When we finished, I asked him, “What happened?” And he told me. That elderly friend of mine forgot that he was hearing a young boy’s Confession and started to talk to him at length, giving him some serious advice. He must have gone on for some time because the boy, who was after all just a child, got bored looking at the priest’s venerable stomach, saw the shiny buttons on the cassock and began to count them: one, two,... When the good priest realized, he said, “Little boy, what are you doing?” And the boy answered, “Thirty-five! I’ve counted thirty-five buttons on you!” And my friend, gentle and holy as he was, lost his temper because he had not learned to become a bit of a child himself.’

“When I heard that,” continued Rafael, “it gave me quite a jolt. The circumstances were so clear, matched so perfectly, that it couldn’t possibly relate to two different events. Then I connected that young priest’s face and movements that had engraved themselves on my memory as a child, with the Founder of Opus Dei as he can be seen in the filmed get-togethers.”

“The fact that so many years later Msgr. Escrivá remembered that little story in such detail makes me think that he very probably prayed for the boy at the center of the incident. And I think,” Rafael concluded, “that perhaps that prayer of the Founder of Opus Dei had quite a bit to do with my calling to Opus Dei twenty years later.”

“I was always struck by our Founder’s intense priestly activity throughout Madrid during those

early years of Opus Dei. He visited poor areas in the outlying districts all around Madrid: Tetuán, Dehesa de la Villa, Campo del Moro, Vallecas, etc., looking after the sick in their slums, helping the kids and going to hospitals to console those suffering there, seeking in the offering up of their afflictions, the foundations and strength of the Work that God was asking him for. All he had, as he himself said, was ‘God’s grace, cheerfulness and nothing else. I had neither virtues nor money. And I had to do Opus Dei.’ ”

“He spent thousands of hours on this apostolate, and was convinced that he was only able to take Opus Dei forward ‘because of the hospitals: that General Hospital in Madrid, crowded with people who were sick and desperately poor, lying in the corridors because there weren’t enough beds; that King’s Hospital, where there was nothing but

tuberculosis, and in those days it was incurable...’ ”

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Extracts from *Antes, más y mejor* by Lázaro Linares, published by Rialp, Madrid, 2001, pp. 43-49.

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