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## **“Saint Josemaría literally saved my life”**

The story of Fernando, a nightclub doorman in Portugal who dreamed of being a soldier, and who eventually found God thanks to a movie about the founder of Opus Dei.

06/23/2022

I'm Fernando, and I live in Pinhal Novo, Portugal. I'm married and have one son Tomas, who is now 21. I am the second of three brothers. I

was baptized and had a Catholic education. Life's tribulations started early. My parents divorced when I was 6 years old and my father died young, when I was 15. The impact on me of these first years of life was strong and negative. I gave up the practice of the faith and a Christian way of life, and followed mistaken paths.

I always studied only half-heartedly, and at the end of high school I joined the army. My dream then was to be a soldier. I also thought about taking a course in electronics at the Naval Academy. But these proved to be just teenage dreams.

At the same time, I tried not to give up my passion for sports. I really liked soccer, but rugby even more. I ended up taking a computer technician course. All this happened at a long distance from God and in bad company. At that time, to tell the

truth, the worst company was myself.

Thank God I always managed to recover. There were a lot of nights out, discotheques, large quantities of alcohol, and I never really faced life maturely. At times we think we are eternal, and the hypothesis of God doesn't even arise.

## **I meet my wife**

I worked for 12 years in a small electronics company, and later in a market research company in the pharmaceutical sector, where I met my future wife. We got along very well, and she started to put me on the right track. And we fell in love.

I changed jobs again and went to work for a German IT security company in Lisbon. The topic of security has always been very prominent in my life. Very early in Pinhal Novo we formed a group of

friends, and I was always the security guard at parties. When people became rowdy, I expelled them, often when they were drunk. I was hired to work in security for student parties at the University of Lisbon Faculty of Law. Once they even invited me to look after security at the Rolling Stones concert at Alvalade Stadium.

I decided to move in with my (future) wife. We were already spending a lot of money to support two households and it seemed like the most logical thing to do. But then, we had our first child. When I became a father, the change was even stronger, as I began to forget the “I” and look more at the “him.” The center of life became my son, his well-being and good education. For his sake, and obviously for us too, we decided to get married. Difficult circumstances did not allow for a Catholic marriage, only a civil one.

## **Next stop: Cahora Bassa in Mozambique**

That was a terrible time in my life, but my instinct to survive found a way for me to keep going. A narrow and ill-defined way, but I realized I would have to work hard to try each day to be a better person than the day before. I enrolled in several higher education courses, but was never able to finish them.

In 2006 I accepted a challenging project: working on the safety of the Cahora Bassa Dam in Mozambique, at the time the third largest hydroelectric dam in the world. We were at the moment when Portugal was about to hand over the management of this project to the Mozambicans, and my team had to ensure the safety of the final phase of the work.

I had to bring a small team from Portugal and hired about 20 people

on site. We learned a lot in Africa, and were humbled by how good the people were. We had to learn to work in challenging conditions and to be very efficient from a logistical point of view, since the dam is located in in the middle of nowhere and nothing is easy to obtain.

Those were 3 very difficult years: many trips with a lot of stress which brought me serious health problems. I had two near-strokes and I was advised to rest.

## **Dragons appear in my life**

I'm a movie lover. And in the midst of my near despair and attempts to rest back in Portugal, I watched movies compulsively. I like to watch historical films, where I can learn something. One day, at the television video club, a film about the Spanish Civil War was shown. Out of nowhere, without looking for it, I stumbled upon the movie "There be

Dragons.” I thought at first it would simply be a film about the Civil War, which anticipated the greater conflict in the Second World War. To my surprise, it was mainly about a priest whose life was bound up with the events and who is now a saint, Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei.

I looked for information on Google about Opus Dei and found the official website with the possibility of sending inquiries. I did so hoping to learn more about Opus Dei and eventually be able to have a connection with it, which I thought would probably be impossible for someone like me.

To my surprise, a few days later, I received an email from a member of Opus Dei who lived in Palmela. This first meeting was important. I asked many questions, and learned about seeking sanctity through work and

that Opus Dei also had activities for me. At the time I thought: “I have to hold on to this to get out of this deep pit.”

I began to attend the days of recollection. I enjoyed the meditations: being able to talk to God face to face with the help of a priest. I began to have spiritual direction, which is what really changed everything in my life.

### **After 40 years I went to confession**

One day in 2016 (I remember it very well), I realized that I was living in sin and that weekend I went to speak with my parish priest at Pinhal Novo about a Catholic wedding for us. I was unemployed then and had few resources. We could only invite a few guests. In preparing for marriage, I went to confession. It was a deep cleaning, more than 40 years after my last confession, and it gave me enormous peace.

After our marriage, I saw that the next step would be to prepare for Confirmation, which I received with some younger people in the parish in 2017.

From that moment on, I realized that what I had learned in the formation of Opus Dei and in the preparation for the sacraments I could not keep to myself. I offered to help in the parish as a 1st and 2nd year catechist and I put a lot of effort into this task.

My wife realized that I was changing... for the better, she said. My son Tomas and my sister also noticed the change. Since my conversion, I have always tried to give a joyful witness as someone who lives their faith in a coherent way.

I remember that I made my first retreat in Sintra shortly after this. It seemed to me that God was asking me to be more generous. I remember a conversation with the priest when I

asked what a plan of mortification was, a difficult word for me. I remember that he patiently explained the meaning of sacrifice to me and suggested some small mortifications that I could offer daily: waking up and going to bed at the right time, and a small sacrifice at each meal.

Formation never ends and I realized I had to deepen my knowledge of the faith by reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other spiritual books. I began to appreciate the value of the Mass and that God waits for me every day in the Eucharist. I also remember the day when I was given the Scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and when I was taught about devotion to Our Lady.

Recently, through prayer and with the help of my spiritual director, I discovered my vocation to Opus Dei as a Supernumerary. Like the first

Christians, we are asked simply to love God and our neighbors, and to have a life of piety that any Catholic should have. And all of this with the goal of being a better person, in God's eyes, tomorrow than you were today...

Saint Josemaría literally saved my life. Now I can't let a day go by without reading or hearing some of his words, an inexhaustible source of inspiration to continue on the merry-go-round of life, continuing to fall but always getting up again.

The big difference is that now, if I'm at rock bottom, I look up and see many people offering me their hand to get back on my feet again. I like to see them as donkeys eager to lead souls to God. I never found any dragons in Opus Dei. I found cheerful and docile donkeys, always ready for another load to be placed on their back.

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