

Pedro Casciaro: the Story of a Sensitive Man

Pedro Casciaro was one of the first members of Opus Dei. He met Saint Josemaría when he was studying mathematics and architecture in Madrid. That restless, sensitive and somewhat cold young man, religiously speaking, began to form a closer relationship with God and discovered his vocation. It was the beginning of an exciting adventure and the path that led him to a full life, as José Carlos Martín de la Hoz recounts.

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In the history of the institutions of the Catholic Church, such as the Prelature of Opus Dei, the life and work of their founders, in this case, St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, is naturally given priority in regards to both study and research.

But it is also important to know about the human and spiritual personality of those first faithful of the Prelature who followed the founder in the early years, for an understanding of the history of the Church and the history of the Prelature of Opus Dei... when everything still had to be done, when in fact the only thing that existed in Opus Dei was the holiness of its founder. These people, these young people, were worthy of God's and

Saint Josemaría's trust because of their fidelity and loyalty.

One of these people is Pedro Casciaro Ramírez, a young man from Murcia who was based in Albacete, where his father was a member of the municipal council and a professor of Art History. Pedro Casciaro's father was one of the most active members of the Republican left, Manuel Azaña's party, and during the Civil War he became the president of the Provincial Council and the president of the Popular Front in the city of Albacete. He was a man with a great social sensitivity; a political man who was agnostic and was, as a whole, rather cool towards the things of God, but who was deeply attached to his wife, a woman of great culture and great piety.

Pedro Casciaro's discoveries in Madrid

When Pedro Casciaro moved to Madrid in 1934 to begin his studies in order to enter the Madrid School of Architecture, he brought with him the baggage of years of study, of life, of youth in Albacete, and also in La Manga del Mar Menor, where they spent the summers with his grandfather, an Englishman who lived in Alicante. Pedro arrives in Madrid with the baggage of a lifetime of intellectual curiosity, and is therefore a very restless man in regards to all cultural and artistic matters. At the same time, because of his mother, he has a certain spiritual life, a certain knowledge of God.

When he arrives in Madrid and enters the life of the Spanish capital, it is very fascinating how the horizons of this young man were widening. He has to study mathematics for two years to be able to enter the School of Architecture and at the same time prepare for the

entrance exam with its famous artistic drawing and linear drawing tests, which were not at all easy and required time to prepare at the academy.

Pedro Casciaro meets many people in the Spanish capital. These were times of republican life, of the Second Republic, of great vehemence, of an active cultural life, of art, poetry, literature. There was a kind of explosion of life in the capital, while at the same time a political world was emerging: diatribes, discussions, different models of society.

Pedro, a sensitive man, as I have already said, comes closer to God in that world. He discovers Saint Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei. He discovers the student residence in Ferraz Street, where a completely new panorama opened up for him.

His contact with Saint Josemaría, with the students in that residence, gave him a longing for God, a great curiosity about God. We could say that he suffered the impact of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. St. Josemaría was a great teacher, a great guide of souls, a great spiritual director, and he knew how to instill in Pedro's soul that eagerness to find Jesus Christ in everyday life: in daily life, in the business of art, of mathematics, of study.

A few months after meeting the founder of Opus Dei, after coming into contact with this new world of Jesus Christ, of a deep Christian life, he ended up having a great conversion to the spiritual life and discovering his vocation to Opus Dei.

In this sense, all his dreams, all his intellectual and artistic aspirations, with his vocation, experienced a great widening of horizons: going

beyond where he had never dreamed of going before.

Valencia: dazzlement and suffering

That is why, when the Spanish Civil War ends, Pedro, like all the others — like all the young men of his generation — has undergone a great transformation, a great human and spiritual maturation. By the end of the conflict, St. Josemaria has a group of people around him who have survived, who have come out of the civil war unscathed, on whom he can depend.

One of them is Pedro. Pedro, who lived in that small student residence in Ferraz, is going to be sent by the founder to start the new student residence in Valencia. Once he finished the mathematics degree that he had begun as a means to enter architecture, he decided, because of the shortage of people and the urgent need for hands to do Opus Dei and

also to materially support the life of the residence, to set aside his architecture studies. So he moved to live in Valencia to run the residence, while at the same time teaching mathematics at the University.

The city of Valencia left a great imprint on his soul. He was a man who spent his summers in La Manga del Mar Menor, and therefore in Alicante, in the knowledge of the sea along the Levantine coast, and was fascinated with the city of Valencia with its colour, its light, and the joy of its people.

Pedro is a man with a great sense of humour, a very refined person, intellectually. There is a part of Pedro's character that we would call long-suffering. He is one of those people who are so sensitive that things touch him, affect him more than usual. It is also true that, like all artists, they enjoy contemplation and

personal relationships more than others. For him, running a student residence in Valencia, working directly with and training young university students as he had been trained before the war by Saint Josemaría, is an exciting adventure, but at the same time, a great ordeal.

He enjoys the progress, the growth of those young students, while at the same time he suffers, sometimes unspeakably, because at times they don't use their freedom well, or because sometimes, precisely because they are young, they don't know how to have the right attitude in their behaviour, in their conversation, and sometimes they are insensitive or brusque.

Launch of the Colegio Mayor Moncloa and ordination to the priesthood

Pedro was called by St. Josemaría to Madrid shortly afterwards to

establish a large student residence with 100 spaces in Ciudad Universitaria, which would eventually become Colegio Mayor Moncloa, which is still one of the great university institutions of the Complutense University of Madrid.

He brings from Valencia a fun custom which is Las Fallas. Las Fallas is a traditional celebration held annually in commemoration of Saint Joseph. The term "fallas" refers to both the celebration and the artistic monuments burnt during the celebration. In fact, in that hall of residence they still burn the fallas during the festival of St Joseph.

From Madrid he then spent time in Bilbao setting up the Colegio Mayor Abando, the first large residence that Opus Dei set up in the Basque Country. And soon after, in 1946, while he was preparing his classes at the university or at the Ramiro de

Maeztu school in Madrid, he was helping the founder in the various tasks he was given and running the residences I mentioned, and doing the necessary priestly studies. In 1946 he was ordained a priest and went to live in Madrid, where he held an important position in Opus Dei because Saint Josemaría, who had moved to Rome to direct the expansion of Opus Dei from Rome throughout the world, entrusted him the great weight of being the head of Opus Dei in the city of Madrid and therefore in Spain, which is the place where Opus Dei is most developed.

Expansion of Opus Dei: Mexico 1948

In 1948, a new human and spiritual adventure began in the life of Pedro Casciaro. It was the moment when Saint Josemaría entrusted him with the task of starting Opus Dei in Mexico. It was the great expansion of

Opus Dei in Latin America. In Latin America, first in Mexico... And from Mexico Opus Dei would spread to all the countries of the American continent, all the way from Canada to Chile.

Pedro has a lot to do with the establishment of Opus Dei in America. Because it begins first in Mexico. This is interesting because the opening of Opus Dei to the whole Latin American world is going to call for that sensitivity that we spoke about before, that sensitivity that is noted in Pedro's great trust in God, his great abandonment into God's hands, because Saint Josemaría has instilled in him that essence of the spirit of the work, which is divine filiation.

But he is a man who suffers; he is a man that is affected by things and is subject to tension headaches and from time to time, the figure of Pedro

withdrawn into a dark room is something normal, not very common, but the occurrence of Pedro locked up in a room because of a headache happens several times a year. It is interesting to note because it is possible to be a saint with a headache. And Pedro will bear it with good humour and downplay the significance of these periodic disappearances due to the headaches.

Another intriguing point about the world of Mexico is that it is the world of another culture, another sensibility, another way of looking at things. The Mexican world, the Latin American world, the sensibility of those men and women is different from what he has known so far, and this will sometimes produce great tension in Pedro because he can speak in a clumsy way, because he can be cutting, because he can be imposing, things that he does not

want to be, but it is the way of the Spanish character that sometimes comes out of him and that he has to conquer and ask for forgiveness. At the same time he can't let it put him in a listless mood or slow Opus Dei's progress down. That's why that mixture of knowing how to say things gently and at the same time being on top of things until they work out, until things are done well, is part of the spirit of Opus Dei: sanctifying work, that is, doing work with human and supernatural perfection at the time, the moment when God expects it. "At God's pace," its founder used to say.

Montefalco, a call of the Holy Spirit to care for those in need

There is a very significant anecdote from Pedro's first ten years in Mexico, which coincides precisely with that stage of a person's deep spiritual maturity. A few months

after arriving in Mexico City, that immense Federal District, he went on an excursion one day. They were filling up at a petrol station when a 10-12 year old boy came up to them and, of course, spoke with that endearing Mexican accent. He told Don Pedro to take him with him. He explained that he had no family, that he had nothing, that he had no future. And he said: "Take me with you". Don Pedro obviously didn't take the boy with him, but he sensed, he realised that it was a call from the Holy Spirit so that Opus Dei would soon grow, develop and reach out to the world of the countryside, to the world of the discarded, as Pope Francis says.

So when, after a few months, he was given the remnants of a burnt-out hacienda, or property, called Montefalco, a few kilometres from Mexico City, he thought that this was the answer and so he set off. And

what was a burnt hacienda in the Zapatista revolution, little by little became an orchard, a small orchard. The undergrowth began to disappear, then a female student residence, a male student residence, a boys' and girls' school, vocational training centres, and a house of spirituality were set up.

This is Montefalco, the great adventure of Montefalco, which would later be followed by the adventure of the Tultepec Institute in Guadalajara and so many other social educational initiatives, the Pan-American University, the IPADE Business School, where Don Pedro was chaplain. So many things that God wanted to set in motion with his grace and his impulse.

Back to everyday life

The last thirty years of Pedro's life were spent in Mexico City. It is very interesting to consider what Pedro

Casciaro's life consisted of during the last thirty years. After experiencing the trepidation of life in Opus Dei in its beginnings, in the Civil War, in the setting up of these residences, the setting up of Opus Dei in its expansion to various countries, it strikes me how he ends up returning to that daily life, to being Opus Dei day by day, to sanctifying work, to converting human relationships into relationships of friendship, of deep understanding, of affection for others.

In a way, it seems that the story of Opus Dei, in the story of Pedro Casciaro, in the story of each of the faithful of the Prelature, is a reproduction of the real life of mankind: there is a moment of birth and a moment of expansion, of maturation, and finally one arrives, like the rivers, at the final channel, at the mouth of the river. If you stand at the Ebro river, at the end of the

mouth of the river, in Tortosa, and one sees how the wide, gentle water, a deep riverbed can be likened to the life of man: birth, growth and finally the water that flows towards the river mouth.

Thirty years of Pedro Casciaro, from 1965 to 1995, in which everything seems to be routine. He is a priest at an Opus Dei centre, collaborates with the Pan-American University as chaplain, works at IPADE business school and other institutions, works in other cities, directs souls. It seems like a boring life when contrasted to the first years of his youth and his early maturity. But it is quite the opposite. What he does in those last thirty years is very important as it is the fruitful life of a person who, at the end of the day, spends it day by day in the service of God, in the service of others. Because love for God and love for others will converge in that marvellous richness

of the life of grace, in the soul of a person, which ends in holiness and in the fruitfulness of an apostolic life.

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