

We started calling him “Father”

Lola Pardo Conde is from Valladolid, Spain. Through her brother, the family came to meet Father Josemaria in the 1940s. It was the beginning of a family friendship and the discovery of her path of sanctity – she became a Supernumerary in 1964.

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I remember that I met the Father – that was what we called St Josemaría

– after the end of the Spanish Civil War.

He used to come to Valladolid with some other people in Opus Dei, and began to meet university students, among them my brother Adolfo. To start with, they would meet in the various hotels where he stayed, the Hotel España, Hotel Castilla, and others. As his apostolic work grew and intensified, they rented an apartment which they called El Rincon, “The Corner”. On May 2, 1943, the Father blessed the apartment and brought a statue of our Lady, which was placed on the shelf over the fireplace in the living-room. The Father would have get-togethers with the students there, and formed them in the spirit of Opus Dei; he also guided their prayer.

Our first meeting with Father Josemaria

My mother had just been left a young widow with five children, and she was concerned to know where it was that my brother Adolfo was going to study every evening. One evening our tutor came to our house and started saying bad things to my mother about Opus Dei. She was very upset and spoke to my brother about it. He told her that in Opus Dei they only talked about God, studied, and said the Rosary; but that for her own peace of mind, she could go and talk to the priest who had founded Opus Dei the next time he came to the city.

So she did. St Josemaría arrived in Valladolid, heard about my mother's concern, and told my brother that he would come to our apartment, which was at 13 Recoletos Street, on the first floor. He arrived halfway through the afternoon. His face combined priestly dignity with cheerfulness and warmth. We were all very much struck by his great

joyfulness and his slow but spontaneous way of talking. We all started calling him “Father”. In the course of the conversation, my mother said with her customary frankness, “People say you are Freemasons.”

The Father’s voice did not lose its cordial serenity. His reply was, “My daughter, they can say whatever they like.” He went on to explain to us that the people in Opus Dei only try to love God, the Church and the Pope, and to bring many souls closer to God through doing their ordinary work well. He made it clear that he loved and respected all the institutions of the Church, and stressed that people in Opus Dei were not religious, because God wanted them to be in the middle of the world.

Just like the first Christians

He looked at us five children very affectionately as we sat there following his words without blinking, and told us that we were the ones who had to conquer the world, to set Christ on the pinnacle of all human activities. We would achieve that, he said, if we prayed a lot, just like the first Christians. Then he talked to us about his daughters, referring to the women who belonged to Opus Dei, and said that they would like to visit us.

Several weeks later the founder of Opus Dei came to lunch with us. We were all looking forward very much to seeing him again, as we were still much impressed by his great faith in all that he was doing.

One day that priest will be a saint...

After the Father left, my brother Michael, who was about ten, told my mother, "You'll have to take great

care of that chair, Mum, because one day that priest will be a saint.”

A few days later Encarnita Ortega came to visit us. She was one of the first women to ask to be admitted in Opus Dei. She invited us to do a retreat in the Zurbaran hall of residence in Madrid. My sister Maria Luisa and I both went.

The first meditation was given by Fr Jose Luis Muzquiz, one of the first three people of Opus Dei to be ordained to the priesthood. He had a very bad cough. The following morning St Josemaría appeared, and said to us, “Unfortunately for you, that son of mine has fallen ill, and you’ve got me instead! I’m no good...”

When he began the prayer with the words “My Lord and my God...”, it made a deep impression on me. You could tell he was absolutely immersed in God. Then he spoke about the infinite value of the Holy

Mass. From then on I have gone every day without fail except when I was ill.

I'll always remember that first retreat with affection, as I am deeply grateful to God for being lucky enough to do a retreat with St Josemaría. It did my soul a lot of good in spite of my youth and immaturity.

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Years later, in 1964, I asked to be admitted to Opus Dei as a Supernumerary. Afterwards I saw the founder in get-togethers with many people. In one of them he told us that we had to love our husbands' defects provided that they are not offences against God. He said the same thing to them with regard to their wives.

I never thought I would live to see the Father's canonization; it has been

one of the happiest things I have ever experienced. I thank God for it really and truly. And I still have ringing in my ears the words I heard St Josemaría say at the start of the meditation on my first retreat: “My Lord and my God!”

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