

Friends Until Death

Saint Josemaría was a man with many good friends. He always valued friendship as one of the great treasures of life, and he left this message as a legacy to the faithful of the Work. Pablo Pérez, Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Navarra, spoke of St Josemaría's lasting and deep friendship with Francisco Moreno and Enrique Giménez Arnau, two friends he met in his youth in Zaragoza. This is an English adaptation of that account.

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In the history of Opus Dei, the role played by its founder is very special. Today I would like to refer to an aspect of Josemaría Escrivá's personality and life that has left a strong mark on the history of Opus Dei. I will first recount two incidents of his friendships, and then we will dwell a little on the legacy he passed on to people about how to live friendship.

Josemaría, the friend who always went to see him

The first friendship I would like to mention is Josemaría's friendship with a classmate from the seminary in Zaragoza. St. Josemaria's parents lived with his sister Carmen and his younger brother Santiago in Logroño when, in 1920, he moved to the

Seminary in Zaragoza. There, between 1920 and 1923, he lived with a man by the name of Francisco Moreno, who was one of his closest friends at the Seminary in Zaragoza, so close that Francisco would take him to his village, a village in Teruel, to spend the holidays, and sometimes Josemaría would take him to spend some time with his parents in Logroño.

It was with Francisco that St. Josemaria shared his concern about the situation of his father, a man who had owned a small business in Barbastro, who had been ruined and was now old, tired and forced to work as a clerk in a fabric shop. Francisco remembers how he comforted Josemaría when he was worried about his father. He also remembers how his family became so fond of Josemaría that he was practically another son. In short, it was a close friendship which

Francisco Moreno wrote extensively about when he heard of Josemaría Escrivá's death. What he wrote is included in Ramón Herrando's book *The Seminary Years of Josemaría Escrivá in Zaragoza, 1920-1925*, a very interesting book for getting to know the personality of the young Josemaría Escrivá — although it has yet to be translated into English.

Well, Francisco was ordained a priest in 1923. He returned to Zaragoza to live in the Seminary of San Carlos, which was in the same building as the Seminary of San Francisco de Paula, and there he kept in touch with Josemaría. He was studying Canon Law as well as exercising his priestly ministry when a crisis arose in 1924, and Francisco decided to leave the priesthood. This caused Josemaría Escrivá great chagrin and a great concern to get his friend to return, to reconsider what he was doing, and to rediscover his vocation.

In fact, he left for Barcelona immediately after finishing that course. (We have the testimony of a telegram from Josemaría Escrivá's father, who asks him when he is going to return from Barcelona). He went to see him there. This man had already looked for another job and was far from his initial intention of living as a priest.

This quest for Francisco's recovery continued for a long time, at the same time as Josemaría was going through very difficult times. That same year, on November 24 — to remind us a little of the environment in which he moved — his father died in November, and those Dickensian scenes of 1924 took place: first on November 27, when Josemaría returned to Logroño and before the body of his father. His brother, Santiago Escrivá de Balaguer, remembered him clearly, as he was six years old at the time. He recalled

that his brother said solemnly before his father's remains: "I will never abandon you. I will never leave you alone," referring to his mother and his siblings.

That Christmas was very sad because their father was absent, because they had no financial means to celebrate. His brother Santiago also remembers how the most special thing they could do was that Carmen bought some marzipan and it turned out that it was bad. And they couldn't eat or drink anything, not even a sad treat — or joyful treat in this case — to celebrate the important feast of Christmas.

Whenever I recall these scenes I think of a Dickensian atmosphere, with all its sadness and gloom surrounding it. And I am greatly surprised by its contrast with the joy with which Josemaría Escrivá lived all that time. Besides the difficulty of

losing his friend or the loss of his friend's vocation, Josemaría also faced a series of contradictions in the seminary because there were some people who suspected that Josemaría would end up following the same path as Francisco because, at the end of the day, by going to study law, Francisco seemed to be somehow preparing a way out of the priesthood, something which made Josemaría suffer a lot.

In the end, that friendship was not lost; it continued. Josemaría kept trying to keep in touch with his friend as much as possible, trying to bring him back. They did not see each other often, but Francisco remembers how after the war ended, Josemaría immediately got in touch with him. As soon as he knew where he was, he spoke to him, told him about Opus Dei, explained what he was doing, and insisted once again that he should get back on his feet.

He never listened to him. In fact, he ended up obtaining laicization in the 1960s, 40 years after that first crisis.

But he always remembers that Josemaría was the friend who went to see him, who loved him dearly and who always told him the truth that he should change. It is very moving to read this man's testimony about their youthful friendship and how their lives were intertwined.

Different friends

Well, here's a second case of friendship, also from the Zaragoza years, this time with a fellow student at the Faculty, Enrique Giménez Arnau, which was to have a certain significance in an episode that I have studied in some detail, namely the ethics classes for journalists given by Josemaría Escrivá in 1941.

In the 1925-26 academic year, Giménez Arnau was a law student in

his first year. Josemaría Escrivá had just been ordained. He had been ordained in the year 25 and had begun a degree in Civil Law. And he says that among the students the only thing that distinguished Josemaría from the students was his cassock, but he was just one of their classmates. He describes that "he chatted with us in the cloisters of the faculty, he took part in our student concerns, in our fears and the antics of the exams."

Giménez Arnau was then seventeen, six years younger than Josemaría. And there was another element that differentiated them but which ended up strengthening the bonds of friendship between them: Enrique knew little Latin and needed it to pass his examination in Canon Law. Josemaría offered to give him private lessons and from there the young priest's friendship with the Giménez Arnau family was born. Josemaría

was not at all well off, as we have just recalled, but very markedly refused to charge Enrique, who belonged to a well-to-do family, for his lessons. This is another symptom of that friendship, lived intensely, generously, from the heart, always going beyond whenever he could to help his friends in their particular situations.

The war separated them... As did Josemaría's move to Madrid after the war. And they didn't meet until during the war, in Burgos in 1938, when they met in a street — it was a great surprise when they met — and Josemaría invited him to assist him at the Mass he was going to celebrate in a convent. And there they had breakfast together, Giménez Arnau recalls, with one of those delicacies that the nuns prepare in convents, some kind of pasta or something like that. And he remembers perfectly how Josemaría encouraged him to

eat, even though it was a Friday in Lent that day, pointing out to him that the mortification was not exactly in the quantity, but in something more profound. And bringing that memory to mind, Gilmer Arnau writes: "an air of joyful sanctity transcended in Josemaría."

The strong friendship with him ended up leading to his asking him to baptise his first son later on, to his inviting him to be a teacher in those courses for the training of journalists in 1941, and to a friendship that lasted all his life without Josemaría Escrivá ever speaking to Giménez Arnau about Opus Dei because he understood that it was not his path.

It is another example of how he loved his friends, friends who were different from him in age, different in other aspects of their opinions, of all kinds, political or professional,

but who had a very important place in his heart.

This way of understanding the relationship with others, the way of seeing how a friendship can be formed, how human relationships should be, is something that Josemaría Escrivá instilled in the people of Opus Dei from the very beginning.

An endearing spirit of friendship

There is a very amusing testimony, or at least I find it so, because surprisingly, it is written by a very prominent man in ornithology in Spain, José Antonio Valverde, one of the founders of the Spanish Ornithological Society, who died in 2003, and who wrote a book of several volumes entitled *Memorias de un Biólogo Heterodoxo* (in English, *Memoirs of a Heterodox Biologist*).

And in that book you can read the following: "Ángel Jolín," who was one of the first faithful of Opus Dei in Valladolid — this is a footnote of mine — I return to Valverde's phrase: "He was one of the many people who in times of trouble offered me friendship and courage. He was a haemophiliac, and as a doctor he fearlessly saw an end already near, because every joint haemorrhage was followed by a reduction in his already diminished movements. When I met him, he used walking sticks and could bend his elbows very little. Ángel and I felt in some ways like kindred, limping spirits. He had a house in Laguna de Duero, very close to the now dried-up pond where we used to go bird-watching on the short walks we could do, propped up by our walking sticks. He also often invited me to a residence where there was a small library that housed a treasure, the book *Mammals of the Iberian Peninsula* by

Ángel Cabrera. It was a flat where university students and graduates met to study and pray in silence; a strange but friendly atmosphere. One could not praise a tie or a lighter without being offered them on the spot, with hardly any possibility of cordial rejection. A group of them, excellent rowers, used to go up the Pisuerga river many kilometres upstream, on day trips combining sport, swimming, hunting and ornithological observations. I knew quite a few of them before and they were, without exception, excellent people."

That's the end of Valverde's quote, which has always amused me, but it is very striking how these first members of Opus Dei in Valladolid in particular have this spirit of close friendship with the people they live with, of generosity in their relationships with others. In a way, as the current Prelate of Opus Dei

says in a pastoral letter he wrote last year, St. Josemaría had found in the Gospel stories that friendship was a form of apostolate. And so it was incarnated in Opus Dei. And so it will be passed on.

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