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“The first women of Opus Dei were a revolution”

An interview published in "Diario de Navarra" with historian Inmaculada Alva, co-author of a recent book about the first women in Opus Dei.

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An interview by Sonsoles Echavarren with Inmaculada Alva published in *Diario de Navarra*.

The young women who in the thirties and forties of the past century

followed the message of the founder of the Work, then a young priest and today Saint Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, were truly pioneers. These university women could even be called “revolutionaries,” in those years when women were still viewed as minors and needed permission from their father or husband for almost everything. The historians Inmaculada Alva and Mercedes Montero, professors at the University of Navarre, have published a book about these ground-breaking women entitled *El hecho inesperado. Mujeres en el Opus Dei (1930-1950)* [An Unexpected Happening. Women in Opus Dei (1930-1950)].

Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer founded Opus Dei in 1928. Initially it was only for men. When and why did he decide to accept women?

It was on the 14th of February in 1930. While celebrating Mass he

received a new light: his message of striving for sanctity in the middle of the world and the need for God's light to reach everywhere would be crippled if it didn't include women and families.

This was a surprising decision in Spain before the Second Republic and in a society that didn't recognize the rights of women...

At that time only 8% of university students were women. And the majority studied humanities or pharmacy, which were considered the most feminine fields. There were women who worked professionally (as teachers, nurses...) but usually, even if they did so, when they married they would devote themselves full-time to their family. Women's success was in the home.

Given this background, how did the founder get in contact with the first women in an era when they

left their family home only to marry or enter the convent?

What St. Josemaria did was something quite revolutionary. In the 30's very few women committed themselves to his apostolic work because they didn't understand his message very well. The majority were very pious women who eventually went into the convent. In this decade, the founder was the chaplain of several hospitals in Madrid. There he met two sick women, Maria Ignacia Garcia Escobar and Antonia Sierra, who were the first women in Opus Dei. They understood that their mission was to pray and offer their suffering so that the Work would go forward. Other women also came, all between 20 and 30 years of age, the majority holding down a job. For example, Carmen Cuervo and Modesta Cabeza, who was a pianist. The latter experienced the burning down of a

church when she was in it, and suffered such a great shock that she ended up for a while in a mental hospital.

But the Civil War paralyzed everyone's efforts...

St. Josemaria, before moving to Burgos, sought refuge in the Honduran Legation in Madrid. From there he exchanged letters with one of the first numeraries, Miguel Fisac, who was hidden in his home's false ceiling to escape being executed for his faith. His sister, Lola, brought these letters to him. During those years, some code words were employed to avoid suspicion from the censors. The founder in his letters calls himself "the grandfather" and refers to the members of the Work as his "grandchildren." Jesus is "Don Manuel," and the Work is called "the grandfather's business." Thanks to

these letters, Lola Fisac learned about the message of Opus Dei, and at the end of the war she asked for admission.

The conflict comes to an end and the country begins reconstruction. Does the same thing happen to Opus Dei?

Yes, it is a second birth. But Spain regresses and women end up in even poorer conditions than in the early 30's. The Work has very few women. The first two have died, and the founder asks the few remaining ones, many of them now connected with Catholic Action, to speak to their friends about the greatness of the Christian vocation of the laity.

And does the average person in the street understand this message? Because many families criticized their daughters who left their homes...

That's true. The first ones sewed, prayed, and did little more. But soon some women arrived who truly grasped the founder's message (Narcisa González Guzmán, Enrica Botella, and Encarnación Ortega). At the same time, some persons viewed Opus Dei as a bit "half baked." Once, one of the students of Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri (another of the first women in the Work, who was a chemistry teacher in a school in Madrid) said that her teacher was involved in "something strange." "They're nuns who paint their nails and work in publishing," she wrote. During those years, the women of the Work devoted themselves primarily, but not exclusively, to domestic tasks in the men's centers.

Then they couldn't dedicate themselves to their professional work?

The founder assured them that, with the passage of time, only about 10% of the women of the Work would need to dedicate themselves to domestic work, and among his daughters there would be physicians, architects, journalists...He assured them of this when women were still only 8% of university students in Spain.

But nevertheless, he encouraged the start of a publishing house and a residence for university women in 1947.

These were two milestones. Minerva publishers, the first publishing house in Spain run by women and for women, was seen as a way to help encourage cultural studies. The founder realized the importance of university women for spreading the Christian message in society. And many students in medicine, the physical sciences, philosophy and

letters, began to ask for admission to the Work. Among the first was a young woman from Navarre, Rosario Arellano, whose brother was already a numerary. She was planning to be married, but after making a retreat with the founder she discovered her own vocation as a numerary.

In 1950 Opus Dei's international expansion began. Did the women have to abandon their professions?

It was similar to what happened with the men. Just as the founder asked many of the first numerary men to become priests for the sake of the apostolate, many women were asked to go to the United States, England, Mexico, Argentina, Guatemala, etc., to spread the apostolic work and open centers. Everyone had to make sacrifices.

And today, 70% of the women in Opus Dei are married women?

In the 40's, the typical member of Opus Dei was a numerary man with a university degree; at present the situation is entirely different.

Women now comprise the majority of the members of Opus Dei. 70% of the women are married (supernumeraries), many of them having attended the university. As a numerary, I am very grateful for having been able to write this history. I have researched something I am familiar with, which is also my own story. We hope that our book will help to open people's eyes to a reality in the Church that is still largely unknown.