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Inklings of Love: St. Josemaría Before Opus Dei

What events shaped young Josemaría's life before 1928? How did he discover his priestly vocation? In this article, José Luis González Gullón takes us into the early years of St. Josemaría Escrivá's priesthood, a key stage in his spiritual journey, when he had not yet founded Opus Dei but already intuited that God was asking something great of him.

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One hundred years ago, St. Josemaría became a priest. He was twenty-three years old. Despite his youth, many events had left an indelible mark on him. Born in 1902 in Barbastro, in northern Aragón, Josemaría spent his first ten years in a serene, joyful, and Christian environment. However, shortly after receiving his First Communion, death entered his home. Within a few months, three of his sisters died from various childhood illnesses, which were common at the time. In addition, his father's business failed, forcing the family to move to another city: Logroño.

Arriving in Logroño was difficult for Josemaría. Along with the natural restlessness of adolescence, he was troubled by his parents' suffering. In

the midst of this crisis, he discovered that God was calling him. It happened suddenly. He saw some Discalced Carmelites walking barefoot in the snow. He began spiritual direction with a Carmelite priest, who soon suggested that he might have a vocation to religious life.

“All I thought about was love”

After a period of discernment, Josemaría decided to become a secular diocesan priest. He shared this with his father, who asked him if he had truly considered the consequences of his decision: “It is very hard not to have a house, not to have a home, not to have a love here on earth. Do you understand the sacrifice that the priestly vocation entails?”

Josemaría replied: “All I thought about, just like you when you got married, was love.”

Deep down, he knew that becoming a priest was only a partial response to his vocation. There was something more that he did not yet understand, something that for the moment remained hidden. Later, he would say that between 1918 and 1928, he lived through a period of *inklings*, hints that God was asking something of him that he could not quite grasp yet.

He spent two years at the seminary in Logroño. During that time, his younger brother Santiago was born. Josemaría saw this as a caress from God; he had prayed that his parents would have another child so that his absence would be less painful when he left home.

"As beautiful as falling in love"

From 1920 to 1925, he lived at the seminary in Zaragoza, receiving the classical formation of the time, which emphasized adherence to rules, the

practice of virtues, and spiritual growth through Christian living and theological study. In 1921, he went through a vocational crisis: the seminary rector suggested that he not continue toward the priesthood, as he had received negative reports from a seminarian tasked with evaluating his peers' conduct. After a period of prayer and spiritual guidance, Josemaría reaffirmed his vocation, and the rector encouraged him to continue.

In 1923, Josemaría completed his theology studies and began studying law. He imagined himself as a professor of Canon Law or Roman Law (academic positions sometimes held by priests).

During those years, his interior life deepened. In prayer, he felt his heart expand. He described it as “an experience as beautiful as falling in love.” Those presentiments did not so

much lead him to think about a future foundation as strengthen his intimate relationship with Jesus Christ: “I began to have inklings of Love, to realize that my heart was longing for something great — and that it was love.”

To nurture his prayer life, he went daily to seek the intercession of Our Lady at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar.

Priestly ordination

On 14 June 1924, he was ordained a subdeacon along with his classmates. He spent the summer at his parents’ home in Logroño and returned to the seminary in October. Shortly after, on 27 November, his father died from a hemorrhage. The loss was a heavy blow, and Josemaría considered leaving the seminary, not becoming a priest, to support his family financially. However, he chose to trust in God and move forward.

On 20 December, he was ordained a deacon.

After Christmas, his mother and siblings moved into a small apartment in Zaragoza. Then, on 28 March, Bishop Miguel de los Santos Díaz Gómara ordained him a priest. Two days later, Josemaría Escrivá celebrated his first Mass in the Holy Chapel of the Virgin of the Pillar, accompanied by his mother, siblings, and a few relatives. He offered it for his father.

After a brief stay in the village of Perdiguera, where he substituted for an ill parish priest, Josemaría spent the next two years in Zaragoza as a chaplain at a Jesuit church. Whenever possible, he assisted the poor in the outskirts of the city, in the impoverished neighbourhood of Casablanca. In March 1927, he completed his law studies and moved

to Madrid with his family to work on his doctoral thesis.

In Spain's capital, he would find the answer to those ten years of preparation. On 2 October 1928, while on retreat, he understood that God was calling him to remind the world that laypeople and secular priests are called to holiness.

That day, Opus Dei was born.

José Luis González Gullón

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