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Trial by fire: the early years of Opus Dei

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I am going to confine myself to one aspect of the life of St Josemaría, namely his reaction to the anticlericalism of the Second Spanish Republic.

St. Josemaría Escrivá often described himself as “anticlerical” for two reasons. First, because his exalted conception of the priesthood led him to reject its use for temporal ends, and second because his appreciation for the autonomy of the lay members of the Church led him to reject efforts by the clergy to dictate to them in areas that properly belong to their free choice.

During the Second Spanish Republic (1931-39), St. Josemaría faced an anticlericalism entirely different from his own. It found expression in an atmosphere of hostility to the Church and particularly to priests and religious, in legislation designed to eliminate or at least lessen the Church’s influence in the public life of the country, and in violent attacks on church property and on priests and religious.

All of this put to the test two important aspects of St Josemaría's spirit, namely love for freedom and respect for the autonomy of lay Catholics in political life.

The anticlericalism that characterized much of the Second Spanish Republic had deep roots in Spanish history, but limitations of time prevent me from exploring them here. Suffice it to say that the replacement of the monarchy in 1931 by a Republic brought to power political parties and leaders for whom the Republic represented not merely a different form of government, but a different, radically secular, vision of life and society.

Only a few weeks after the proclamation of the Republic, on May 10, 1931, riots broke out in Madrid. They soon degenerated into three days of violence directed primarily

against churches, monasteries and convents throughout Spain.

The provisional republican government did not provoke the burning of the convents, but it was very slow to react to the violence, at least partly because many of its members were more or less sympathetic to the rioters. For several days, the government did nothing to control the riots. Once it did intervene, the violence ended quickly, but by that time approximately a hundred churches and convents had been burnt. The government's inaction during the early days of the rioting convinced Catholics throughout the country that the new regime was an implacable enemy of the Church.

Catholics' sense of the Republic's hostility to the Church soon increased as the provisional government began to implement its

program. It established full freedom of conscience and cult. Religious instruction was made voluntary in state schools. The chaplain corps of the army and navy were dissolved. The Church was deprived of representation in the National Council on Education. Government officials were prohibited from attending public religious acts.

In a tolerant, religiously pluralistic society like your own, many of these actions would seem acceptable. Spanish Catholics had, however, been reared in a society in which a large majority of the population was at least nominally Catholic and in which close cooperation between church and state had been the norm for centuries. Not surprisingly, a majority of Spanish Catholics viewed all of these measures as hostile to the Church.

Parties hostile to the Church had an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly elected in the summer of 1931. They were not interested in a bloody persecution like that going on at the time in Mexico or the Soviet Union, but they did intend to reduce religion to a purely private phenomenon with no repercussion in public life.

Their efforts to do so struck most Spanish Catholics, many of whom drew no distinctions between their religious faith and their social and cultural traditionalism, as unjustified attacks on religion.

The draft constitution prepared by the constituent assembly during summer and fall 1931 contained a number of provisions that directly affected the Church.

The most important was Article 26 which provided for the dissolution of the Jesuits and the confiscation of all

their property. Other orders were subject to the threat of dissolution if the government felt their activities were a danger to the security of the state. In addition, religious orders were forbidden to own any property beyond what was strictly necessary for the maintenance of their members and the fulfillment of their specific aims.

The most damaging provision of Article 26 from the point of view of Spanish Catholics was one that forbade the orders that were permitted to continue working in Spain to engage in education. This sectarian provision demonstrates the determination of the anticlerical majority of the assembly to undermine the church at any cost. Spain was suffering from a desperate lack of schools, and the members of the assembly listed education among their top priorities. Yet they were attempting to force the closing of

schools that were educating a substantial portion of the country's students because they hoped this would reduce the Church's influence in the country.

Like all other fervent Catholic, St. Josemaría followed these events closely and suffered because of the damage they did to the Church and to souls. In addition, as a priest he suffered direct consequences of the environment of increasing hostility toward the clergy.

St. Josemaría continued to wear his cassock on the street, as had been the custom in Spain. As a result, he found himself increasingly the object of insults. In earlier years he had occasionally encountered hostility simply because he was a priest, but after the proclamation of the Republic, the insults became more frequent and more aggressive. In the midst of this hostile environment, he

struggled, not always successfully, to control his temper and to "pelt with Hail Marys," his attackers.

During summer 1931, St. Josemaría decided to make a novena to a recently deceased nun he had known, visiting her tomb each day in a cemetery located in a poor neighborhood of Madrid. Every day of the novena brought with it new insults. Once on his way back from the cemetery, a bricklayer came at him shouting, "A cockroach! Step on it!" Despite his resolutions not to pay attention to such things, St. Josemaría was unable to contain himself. "What courage," he retorted, "to pick a fight with someone who walks past without offending you!" The other workers told the bricklayer to shut up, and one of them tried to excuse his fellow worker's conduct. "It's not right," he said with the air of someone giving a satisfactory explanation, "but you have to

understand, it's that he hates priests."

Another day a boy shouted to his friends, "A priest! Let's throw stones at him!" St. Josemaría recounts his reaction: "Without even thinking about it, I shut the breviary I had been reading, and faced them: 'You brats! Is that what your mothers teach you?'" "I added other words," he concludes, without specifying what they were. On several occasions St. Josemaría was hit by stones, and once a well-aimed soccer ball struck him full in the face.

By mid September, 1931 St. Josemaría was able to record in his notes:

I have to thank my God for a noteworthy change. Until recently the insults and jeers I received for being a priest (mostly since the coming of the Republic, before only rarely), made me angry. I made a

resolution to entrust to Our Lady with a Hail Mary those from whom I heard vulgar and obscene expressions. I did it. It was hard. Now, when I hear that sort of ignoble words, I usually feel moved with pity, considering the misfortune of the poor people who do those things. They think they are doing something good, because people have taken advantage of their ignorance and passions to make them believe that priests are not only lazy parasites but their enemies, accomplices of the bourgeoisie that exploits them.

St. Josemaría finished his note with a characteristic exclamation that reflected his conviction, that God intended to do great things through Opus Dei: "Your Work, Lord," he concluded, "will open their eyes!"

If St. Josemaría found it hard to put up with insults and attacks aimed at him precisely because he was a

priest, he was more deeply saddened by the overtly anti-Catholic stance of many of the new leaders of the Second Republic and the harm they might do the Church. On April 20, 1931 he wrote in his personal notes:

May the Immaculate Virgin defend our poor Spain and may God confound the enemies of our Mother the Catholic Church. The Spanish Republic. For 24 hours, Madrid was one huge mad house… Things seem to have calmed down… and the Heart of Jesus keeps watch! This is my hope. How often these days, I have understood, I have heard the powerful cries of our Lord, that he loves his Work.

When St. Josemaría learned of the decree of dissolution of the Jesuits, he was deeply distressed. He wrote,

Yesterday I suffered when I learned about the expulsion of the Jesuits and the other anti-Catholic measures

adopted by the Parliament. My head ached and I felt sick until afternoon. In the afternoon, dressed as a layman, I went [to the Jesuit's house]. Fr. Sanchez and all the other Jesuits were delighted to suffer persecution... What serenely beautiful things he said to us!

For our purposes today, the essential thing is not the suffering that St. Josemaría endured because of anticlerical attacks on the Church or on himself personally. The interesting thing is that although he was extremely concerned about attacks on the Church, he took no part in the debate raging among Spanish Catholics over how best to defend the Church. Many believed that the only way was to overturn the Second Republic and bring back the monarchy. Other Catholics argued that the form of government was not an essential matter. Catholics, they said, could and should

work within the republican framework to protect the Church's rights. Passions ran high on both sides of the debate. Opposing views were often taken as a sign of wrong headedness or a lack of zeal in the service of the Church.

From his seminary days when he had been repelled by the clericalism that characterized large parts of the Spanish Church, St. Josemaría had been convinced that priests should respect the right of lay Catholics to form their own political opinions and to join political parties of their own choice. He was also convinced that all Catholics should respect the choices of their fellow Catholics, even when they did not agree with them about how Catholic principles should be applied in a specific situation.

Although he felt a lively interest in current events, because of these convictions he made it an inflexible

rule throughout his life not to express his political opinions. This attitude was not merely a personal one. It was intimately connected to his role as the founder of Opus Dei.

In Spain, as well as in many other countries, Catholics in the first third of the twentieth century promoted many organizations whose purpose was to mobilize Catholics for political action to protect the Church's position in public life. Opus Dei, which St. Josemaría had founded less than three years before the proclamation of the Second Republic in Spain had different aims and goals. As he wrote in 1932, "The Work of God was not thought up by a man to remedy the lamentable situation of the Church in Spain since 1931 … Nor have we come to meet the special needs of a particular time or country, because from the very beginning Jesus has wanted his Work to have a universal heart."

St. Josemaría saw the aim of Opus Dei as promoting among Catholics of all walks of life an awareness of the fact that their baptismal vocation involves a call to personal sanctity and a desire to live out that truth in their daily lives. A sincere personal commitment to striving to model their lives on Christ's life would, St. Josemaría foresaw, lead the members of Opus Dei, and others who lived its spirit, to try to make their society more just and harmonious, more in keeping with Christ's teaching. Their active Christian presence in society would, thus, contribute to making it more Christian. This would not be the result, however, of an effort by Opus Dei to organize Catholics for political activity. Rather it would spring from the personal commitment of its individual members to putting Christ's teachings into practice in their personal lives and in their daily work and other activities, including their

political activities. The idea is captured in a point of The Way: “A secret. An open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. --God wants a handful of men ‘of his own’ in every human activity. Then … ‘pax Chrsti in regno Christi’ -- the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.”

The fact that its aim was broader and more comprehensive than politics was not the only difference between Opus Dei and those organizations whose aim was to mobilize Catholics for political action. Such groups were often based on the supposition that all Catholics do and should agree on how best to organize society. St. Josemaría understood that although Catholics should agree on certain basic moral and religious values -- such as the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage, and the equality of all men and women before God--, they may legitimately differ on how to implement them

here and now. In a letter to members of Opus Dei dated January 9, 1932, St. Josemaría urged them to avoid "the desire, contrary to man's licit independence, to force everyone to form a single group in things that are matters of opinion, converting temporal doctrines into dogmas…"

St. Josemaría expected the members of Opus Dei to be guided in their political opinions and activities by Christ's teachings articulated by the Church, but he respected their personal freedom in deciding how those teachings should be implemented in the concrete reality of the here and now. He also insisted that Opus Dei as a group and each of its individual members should respect the freedom of others to make their own political choices, even when they might not agree with them.

St. Josemaría adhered faithfully to this spirit even in the very difficult early years of the Republic. At a time when the Church was under attack and political passions were running extremely high, it would have been very easy to think that --whatever the value of personal political freedom and autonomy under normal circumstances-- the time had come for all believers to join together in a single political front. Short of that, the circumstances would have seemed to justify St. Josemaría's making an effort to point out to his followers specific politically effective ways of implementing Christian principles in the circumstances of the moment. In fact, however, however, St. Josemaría did nothing of the sort.

Quite the contrary. The advice St. Josemaría gave his followers during the difficult early months of the Republic was so spiritual in its focus and so far removed from urging

them to take a particular course of political action that it might have been misinterpreted as suggesting disengagement from social and political life.

Shortly after the proclamation of the Republic, for instance, he wrote to a young engineer who was one of the first members of Opus Dei. “Don’t worry," he said, "one way or the other about the political change. Be concerned only that they do not offend God.” A few months later, in August, 1931, he wrote again to the same person: “I suppose that all these attacks on our Christ will have served to inflame you even more in his service. Try to belong to him more each day…, with prayer. Offer him also each day, as expiation that is very pleasing in his divine eyes, the annoyances that life continually brings with it.”

Standing alone, these texts might seem to suggest indifference to politics and concern only with religious matters. That was not the case. St. Josemaría encouraged an active interest in politics and seriousness in the fulfillment of civic responsibilities. In sharp contrast to the clerical one-party mentality that prevailed among Catholics at the time, however, he believed that it was up to individual Catholics to make their own choices about how to implement the Church's teaching in practice. Even in the intensely politicized atmosphere of the early years of the Second Republic, he scrupulously refrained from expressing his own political preferences, limiting himself to encouraging all those who sought his advice to take seriously their civic duties and to exercise their rights as citizens in ways that would make the society more Christian, and encouraging them not to attempt to

convert their own political opinions and preferences into dogmas which all Catholics should adhere to.

Respect for the freedom of others was not only characteristic of St. Josemaría as a person. It was also central to Opus Dei, the institution he founded.

Respect for freedom was evident in Opus Dei's first center, a small academy called DYA which offered classes in law and architecture. At a time when the university was torn by political conflict and many students neglected their studies to attend political rallies, DYA offered an oasis of Christian charity and understanding. Its first director, Fernández Vallespín, said its tone was "peace, love of God, and serenity despite the adverse circumstances of the social and political environment."

A framed parchment hung on one wall of the study room. It contained the Latin text of Christ's words at the Last Supper: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. In this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35). Despite mounting political tenions, St. Josemaría encouraged the young men who came to DYA to put this commandment into practice in their daily lives, no matter how difficult. He repeatedly warned them against the danger of sectarianism and urged them not to let political differences degenerate into hatred. "We may differ on political issues," he said, "but that is no reason why we can't walk arm in arm down the same side of the street."

Students who came to DYA were asked to leave their political

differences at the door and to avoid political arguments. This made it possible to welcome students of different political opinions, avoiding the prevailing atmosphere of intense political polarization that often made it difficult for students to live and work harmoniously with anyone who did not fully share their political views.

DYA's emphasis on study and its prohibition against political arguments were not the result of lack of concern for the society and its problems. On the contrary, St. Josemaría and Vallespín urged the young men who came to DYA to cultivate a sincere concern for others and for the society. They stressed that the students had an obligation to contribute to the peace and progress of society by bringing to it Christ's message of love, rather than the spirit of division and hatred that seemed to be spreading in Spain.

Outside DYA, the students were free to take part in whatever political organizations they wished; but St. Josemaría and Vallespín insisted that they not let their legitimate political difference poison their relations with other students who militated in other groups.

A dramatic example of the effect of St. Josemaría's emphasis on respect for those with different, even radically different, political opinions occurred in a Madrid jail. In August 1932, Adolfo Gómez, a young member of Opus Dei was arrested for his part in a coup attempt. As soon as he heard about the arrest, St. Josemaría set out to find him. He located him promptly and began to make daily visits to the jail dressed in his cassock, despite the danger of being persecuted for visiting political prisoners. St. Josemaría did not just talk to Gómez and the few other

prisoners he already knew, but reached out to others.

After a few months, the jailed, right-wing conspirators were joined by a large number of anarchists, who had been arrested for political crimes during an attempted revolution in the south of Spain. The two groups were arch rivals. They were housed in separate sections of the jail, but shared the same patio during recreation periods. The young right-wing conspirators were infuriated by daily contact with people whom they considered bitter enemies of their faith as well as of their political ideals. St. Josemaría, however, urged them to reach out to the anarchists and to make friends with them. They heeded his advice and the two groups ended up playing soccer, not against each other, but in teams made up partly of students and partly of anarchists. One of the students who played goalie with two

anarchists as defenders later recalled that he "never played a cleaner and less violent soccer game." Even after they were freed from prison, some of the students stayed in touch with the anarchists, a few of whom eventually returned to the Church.

In conclusion: the anticlericalism of the early years of the Second Republic presented an occasion to affirm St. Josemaría's determination that Opus Dei should respect the freedom of its own members and of all Catholic men and women. Even in the extreme circumstances of the time, St. Josemaría not only personally respected the freedom of the members of Opus Dei and others who sought his spiritual advice and guidance. He also worked tirelessly to inculcate in them a profound love of freedom, which found its first and most important expression in respecting the opinions and political

options of those with whom they disagreed.

The events I have discussed thus far occurred in the earliest phase of Opus Dei's history. The respect for the freedom of its members and of all Catholics that inspired them is, however, a constant in Opus Dei's history because it is an essential part of its spirit.