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The Vocation of Josemaría Escrivá (1918-1928)

First published in "Scripta Theologica", this article by Jose Luis Gonzalez Guillon analyses a singular event, whose centenary we commemorate: the footprints in the snow made by some discalced Carmelites led St Josemaría to discover his vocation in the Church and deepen personally in the Christian mystery.

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The lives of people who have been declared saints by the Church, are marked by events in which they felt interiorly called by divine grace. In the case of founders, these events have a charismatic component that signal the developmental growth of the institutions they set up.

Josemaría Escrivá's life followed this trend. A particular event, whose centenary we are commemorating now – the footprints made by some Carmelites in the snow – led him to discover his vocation in the Church and to a personal deepening in the Christian mystery. This article analyses the contents of what Escrivá himself would describe as “*barruntos*” (inklings or intuitions

that something was afoot), that is to say forebodings that God wanted him for a particular mission.

“All of life is vocation”. From the beginning to the end of his existence, God calls each one, sometimes clearly and other times barely noticeably, through life’s stages and circumstances. Within the rich and varied theological and juridical panorama that touches upon the Christian vocation, our study (a clearly historical one in nature) analyses the moment when José María Escrivá felt that God was passing by in his life, and how things evolved from that moment to when he received his mission to found Opus Dei. We will study a decade that began towards the end of 1917 or the beginning of 1918 – which he once called the moment “of my vocation in Logroño” – and which ended in October 1928 with the foundation of Opus Dei. These ten years coincide

with his adolescence and life as a young man, a stage of life in which each person learns to love in freedom and forms high ideals.

1. Setbacks of a Christian family

José María Escrivá was born in Barbastro, Huesca, on 9 January 1902. His father, José Escrivá Corzán, was born in Fonz (Huesca) in 1867, although his family came from Balaguer in Lérida. His mother was Dolores Albás Blanc. She was from Barbastro and had ascendants from Aínsa, Huesca. José María's parents were married in 1898, four years before he was born, and they lived in a rented house in Main Street in Barbastro, off Plaza del Mercado (Market Square). Their first child, Carmen, was born in 1899.

The population of Barbastro was no more than six thousand. Despite its small population, Barbastro had been a home to an episcopal see for

the past eight centuries. The economy revolved around agriculture, like cereals, or wine and oil production. Merchants and small business owners lived among the farmers and day labourers. There were various political tendencies ranging from the Carlists, those who supported the old regime, to republicans and socialists. Liberal thought dominated social and cultural circles without any serious political or social conflict.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, José Escrivá and two business partners formed a chocolate manufacturing and sales business. In 1902, one of the partners withdrew with an agreement that he would not set up another similar business in Barbastro. José Escrivá co-founded with his partner a new limited company called 'Juncosa and Escrivá'. At first, it went well. The Escrivá family became comfortable

and relatively well off. As was usual at that time, they had four house servants. José Escrivá had a deep sense of solidarity, shown by the alms he would give to people in need, his financial contributions to the Catholic Centre of the city, and the organisation of religious conferences for his employees.

When he was four days old, José María was baptized in Barbastro Cathedral, which was also his parish. Shortly afterwards, on 23 April, he received the sacrament of confirmation. In 1904, when he was two, he suffered acute meningitis. Given no hope by the doctors, his mother prayed a novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and made a promise, that if the boy recovered she would make a pilgrimage to a hermitage dedicated to Our Lady of Torreciudad, twelve miles from Barbastro. The little boy got better and his mother took him in arms,

riding to Torreciudad in thanksgiving.

The Escrivá family was very united. From his parents, José María learned virtues, like hard work and order. They also taught him to pray with a simple piety, without affectation. As he would recall later on, “Our Lord prepared things so that my life was ordinary and commonplace, with nothing particularly notable. He arranged it so that I was born into a Christian home, as homes usually are in my country, with exemplary parents who lived and practised their faith.”

In the following years, three more children would arrive: María Asunción, Chon, in 1905; María de los Dolores, Lolita, in 1907; and María del Rosario, in 1909. Sadly, one after the other they died as infants. Rosario died aged nine months,

Lolita died when she was five years old, and Chon when she was eight.

Despite these hard setbacks, in the main José María's childhood was normal and cheerful as he increasingly opened out to society and the world. Between 1905 and 1908 he went to a nursery school run by the Sisters of Charity; and from 1908 to 1915 he was a pupil at a school of the Piarist fathers. In 1912, the year in which he started secondary education, he made his First Holy Communion at school, benefiting from Pope Pius X's provision that people should start to receive communion from the age of reason. When he received Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, José María asked for the grace never to commit a mortal sin.

Due to the economic situation at the time and to his old partner not keeping his word that he would not

set up a rival company to their chocolate business, 'Juncosa and Escrivá' went into crisis. Juan Juncosa and José Escrivá took their old partner to court. The judge in Barbastro declared in their favour in 1910. After an appeal, the regional court of Saragossa also declared in favour of Juncosa and Escrivá, but it lowered the compensation due to them. The company, which by that stage was in process of liquidation, lodged an appeal. In May 1913 the Supreme Court rejected the appeal and they were ordered to pay for the costs of the lawsuit. 'Juncosa and Escrivá' folded and went into administration. In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of some creditors. The business was definitively finished.

José Escrivá paid his creditors with his own family money, as his business funds were insufficient to cover it all. He was not legally

obliged to do so, but he thought in conscience that he should. His wife supported his decision but some of his in-laws did not. The Escrivá family was bankrupt. José Escrivá had to do without his house-workers and he began to feel the pinch. José María suffered an interior crisis as these difficulties came on top of the pain he was feeling from the death of his sisters. However, the serene Christian abandonment of his parents in the face of these setbacks helped him maintain his trust in God.

In March 1915, José Escrivá found work as a shop assistant in *La Gran Ciudad de Londres*, a shop that sold fabrics in the city of Logroño. After the summer of that year, his family moved to the capital of La Rioja, which at that time had a population of 24,000. The Escrivá family faced the problems that go with a change of this kind and the initial absence of friends.

Carmen graduated as a primary school teacher, a degree she finished in 1921. José María carried on with his secondary education in the Instituto General y Técnico, that later came to be called Instituto Práxedes Mateo Sagasta. He went there in the mornings, and in the afternoons he went to the school of San Antonio de Padua for support classes, a common thing to do at the time.

2. Discovering the call

In December 1917, José María Escrivá was in his final year of studies in Logroño. Around that time, he was going through a period of certain confusion. As well as the normal doubts adolescents have, he experienced a certain rebelliousness towards his family situation – the wounds from the deaths of his sisters and the financial ruin of his father were still open – and because he had changed city and left his friends. As

he would recall later, “I rebelled against the situation at the time. I felt humiliated.” In contrast, the serenity and great trust in providence that he found in his parents made an impression on him, as he saw them suffer in silence.

Between 9 December 1917 and 6 January 1918, there were twelve days on which it snowed in Logroño, with varying intensity. The worst came at the end of December, with heavy snowfalls and minimum temperatures of 16 below zero recorded on 30 December. At least one old person died at home from the cold.

On one of these days, after a snowfall, José María Escrivá was in Main Street. Maybe he was on his way home to number 12 Sagasta Street, near the iron bridge, or perhaps he had left home for San Antonio de Padua school. When he

was near where the Marist brothers were, in an area called *Costanilla*, he suddenly saw some “religious Carmelites, barefoot in the snow” and his reaction was to ask himself: “If others make so many sacrifices for God and for their neighbour, am I not going to be able to offer him something?” So, he thought about becoming a priest, something that until that time he had not imagined would be for him.

3. The secular priesthood

As soon as he was 16 years old, perhaps a few days after his birthday, the young José María made his way to the priory where some Carmelites were living, on the outskirts of the city on the other side of the railway, on the side of a road called *Vuelta del Peine*. A few weeks previously a community of Carmelite brothers had been formed, comprising only three people. They

were Brother Pantaleon of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who had arrived around the end of November 1917; Father Juan Vicente de Jesús María, who arrived in the city on 11 December; and Father José Miguel de la Virgen del Carmen, who joined on 20 December.

José María Escrivá began to have spiritual direction with Father José Miguel. He increased his practice of Christianity, which led him, in his words to “daily communion, to purification, to confession and to penance”. A few months later and realising his good dispositions, Father José Miguel encouraged him to consider the possibility of becoming a Carmelite. Escrivá gave it some serious thought. He even got as far as thinking that if it were his way then his religious name would be *Amador de Jesús Sacramentado* (Lover of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament), in devotion to the

Eucharist. Very soon, he concluded that God called him to be a secular priest.

That was fine, but this decision encompassed something more. José María thought that his vocation did not involve him occupying a position within the diocesan structure. In his words: “That was not what God was asking of me, and I knew it; I didn’t want to become a priest just for the sake of being a priest – *el cura*, as they say in Spain. I had a veneration for the priesthood, but I did not desire that sort of priesthood for myself.” Interiorly he felt a calling that was both clear and indeterminate at the same time, feelings that he would later call *barruntos* (inklings), that is to say an intuition that God was asking something more of him that in some sense was united to his priesthood. As he stated, “I didn’t know what God wanted, but it was clearly some form

of mission.” In that sense, being a priest was a necessary element but at the same time, his decision to be a priest did not get rid of these *barruntos*. As he said on one occasion, “Why did I become a priest? Because I believed that that was the best way to fulfil the will of God, which I didn’t know. I had had inklings of it for the previous eight years, but I didn’t know what it was, and I didn’t know it until 1928.” Only the future would show him what it meant, in his case, for a priest to be a shepherd in the Church.

In the meantime he intensified his prayer of petition – “no light came but clearly prayer was the way”, he noted – as he was “convinced that God *wanted something from me*”. Specifically, he would recite two short Latin sentences asking to know God’s plans. He used to say, “*Domine ut videam*” (Lord, may I see!); “*Domine ut sit!*” (Lord, may it be!)

One fine day, he told his father that he wanted to enter the seminary. José Escrivá wanted to probe him and asked, "Have you thought about the sacrifice that the vocation to the priesthood involves?" José María replied: "I have only thought about Love, as you did when you got married." Seeing how resolute he was, his father was moved to tears "because he had other possible plans, but he did not oppose him. He said to me, 'My son, think it over carefully. A priest has to be a saint. It is very hard to have no house, no home, to have no love on earth. Think about it a bit more, but I will not oppose your decision.'" He only suggested to him that he should do a degree in Law as well as in Theology because these were compatible with ecclesiastical studies. José Escrivá had thought up until that time that Jose María could be an architect, doctor or lawyer. In addition, his father introduced him to Antolín Oñate, a priest he knew

who was a parish priest and administrator of the Collegiate Church of Logroño, known as *La Redonda*.

In the summer of 1918, José María completed his secondary education with good grades. After the summer period, he entered the seminary in Logroño. For two academic years, he passed his exams in Theology and took part in a catechism class on Sunday mornings. To his colleagues he was a “responsible student, cheerful, good with everyone, a little shy and pious”.

In Spain at that time, the male children had the responsibility of looking after their family. José María thought that they needed another son in the house and he prayed to God about it. José Escrivá was fifty-one at the time, and Dolores Albás was forty-one. It had been nine years since they had last had children.

Nevertheless, on 28 February 1919, ten months after José María had told his father about his vocation to the priesthood, Santiago Escrivá was born. This event made an impression on José María; he understood that it was related to his inklings and to his vocation to the priesthood: “My mother called to tell me: You are going to have a new brother or sister. This for me was to touch the grace of God: I saw it as our Lord’s doing, something I hadn’t expected.”

A year later, in September 1920, José María Escrivá moved to Saragossa to continue with his ecclesiastical studies. The capital of Aragon had a population of about 150,000 and it had a growing agricultural and industrial economy. José María went there to follow his father’s advice (the city had a university law faculty) and to finish his ecclesiastical studies in the pontifical university; he would live near his uncles, Carlos and

Mauricio Albás. Carlos was Canon at the cathedral of Saragossa and Mauricio was married. In so doing, he would avoid having to finish his Theology studies in the town of Calahorra, which was normally the destination for seminarians from La Rioja.

Carlos Albás made it possible for his nephew to enter the seminary of San Francisco de Paula, where they awarded him a minor scholarship.

As soon as classes started, José María went to the Pontifical University of San Valero and San Braulio.

However, he delayed the start of his Law degree until the fifth year of his Theology degree in order to do both degrees well. In the seminary, he received the traditional formation that was commonplace at that time.

4. The essence of the *inklings*

José María Escrivá was convinced God was inspiring these inklings of

that ‘something’ that would happen in the future. By their very nature, these presentiments were clear in some aspects and vague in others. As he said later on, “I continued to see, but without making out specifically what the Lord wanted: I saw the Lord wanted something from me. I asked and I carried on asking”.

Whenever he could, he would go to the Chapel of Our Lady of the Pillar to ask for knowledge of the divine will. He would use an aspiration, similar to others he used: *Domina, ut sit!* (Lady, may it be!); and he would strengthen his petition with sentences from the Gospel that he would say or even sing out aloud: “*Ignem veni mittere in terram et quid volo nisi ut accendatur?*” I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! And the answer: “*Ecce ego quia vocasti me!*” Here I am because you have called me.

When he arrived in Saragossa, he felt an urge, without order or design, to write some “loose notes” about different motions and events of his interior life. He described some of the inspirations, in which he felt God’s providence, as “‘operative’, because they so dominated my will that I hardly needed to make an effort”. They were unclear ideas; sometimes they even pointed to founding something, but without anything being specific.

However, the basis for these *inklings* was obvious to him. They were rooted in an intimate relationship with God, in “something as beautiful as falling in love”. Years later, he would summarise this stage of his life with the following words: “I began to have premonitions about Love, to realize that my heart was seeking something great and that it was Love.” And, as the fruit of this interior rapture, the desire to pray

and to fulfil God's will grew within him, as he wrote: "Truly God expanded my heart, enabling it to love, to repent, to serve, in spite of my mistakes."

José María had a crisis in his vocation to the priesthood because of the low level of education of some of the seminarians and misunderstandings with the rector. He sought the spiritual direction of a priest from Logroño. The priest realised that José María had the right dispositions and so told him to persevere. The young man made up his mind and received the tonsure a year later in September 1922. This meant that he was now officially a cleric and he was named inspector of the seminary by the Archbishop of Saragossa, Cardinal Juan Soldevila.

In 1923 he began a law degree at the University of Saragossa as a part-time student. It was a small faculty of

three hundred and thirty-one students, of whom two hundred and forty-two were part-time, with lecturers of national prestige. José María did not go to any lectures in the law faculty or enter for any of the examinations except for two preparatory examinations, until after he had graduated in Theology in June 1924.

This slow progress in his law degree and his desire not to be a ‘career cleric’ displeased his uncle Carlos, who wanted him to apply for positions as soon as possible. In contrast, the young man thought that “university studies would allow him to be more available to do God’s will”. In that sense, maybe he thought that the law degree was a component of these inklings (later on, the legal training that he would receive helped him find ways by which Opus Dei could find a place

within the Church's canonical structure).

On 14 June 1924 José María was ordained a deacon. Five months later, his father died suddenly in Logroño leaving José María as head of the family, so he decided that his family should move to Saragossa. This move provoked a strong disagreement with his uncle. Years earlier, Carlos had not understood the decisions José Escrivá had taken when his business went bust, and now he did not want his sister and her children to go and live in Saragossa because, frankly, they were poor. He thought it would be a better idea for José María to be ordained a priest and to settle in the diocese; later he would be able to meet up with his family again. But as the nephew did not follow his uncle's advice, there was a falling out.

On 20 December 1924, Miguel de los Santos Díaz Gómara, auxiliary bishop of Saragossa, ordained José María as a deacon; and on 28 March 1925 as a priest. Two days later, José María offered his First Mass in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Pillar for his father. His mother and siblings were present, as were some cousins, the family of a teacher friend, and a few others who had been invited.

However, none of his three priest uncles were there. After finishing the Mass, the young priest took himself off to the sacristy and cried inconsolably.

Then he spent a month and a half in a small town called Perdiguera. There he had his first pastoral experience, administering the sacraments and giving spiritual direction to the faithful. When he returned to Saragossa, the diocesan curia did not appoint him to any ordinary pastoral role, for example

helping out in a parish. José María was given a position as chaplain in the church of St Pedro Nolasco, which was managed by the Jesuits. This post involved celebrating Mass and spending time in the confessional. He would spend the rest of the day going to classes and studying Law.

He found his contact with the academic world enriching. Escrivá displayed a lay mentality unusual at that time among the clergy. For example, in the breaks between lectures he would not only meet up with other priests or seminarians, but also seek out conversation with lay students; he did not look for special treatment for his exams or attending classes; neither would he 'give sermons' when talking to others. Because of this, some of his colleagues took a special liking to him and they would confide in him

personal matters or they would walk with him through the streets.

In his ministry he had contact with university students from the Marian Congregations, directed by the Jesuits. In addition, on Sundays, together with a number of young people, he gave Christian doctrine classes to children from poor families from the Casablanca neighbourhood, on the outskirts of Saragossa. This contact with the needy increased his desire to serve others through his priesthood.

From some time back, and especially since his father's death, he had the idea of doing a doctorate in Law and obtaining a professorship at a university. He wanted to take Christian doctrine to the academic world since he saw his faculty colleagues as "a little bit like sheep without a shepherd". Nevertheless, a priest friend, Professor José Pou de

Foxá, advised him to start that work outside Saragossa, as there he had “no fertile ground” due to the problems with his uncle.

5. The fullness of the calling

Around September 1926, José María made a trip to Madrid to find out how to go about doing the doctorate. When he got back to Saragossa, he gave classes of Roman Law, Canon Law, History of Law and Natural Law at the *Instituto Amado*, as a way of earning money.

In January 1927 he graduated in Law. Two months later, he requested a transfer of his studies to Madrid so that he could do his doctorate at the Central University. Then, after a brief stint covering for a priest in Fombuena, a municipality of Saragossa province, he moved to Madrid.

José María Escrivá arrived in Madrid on 20 April. He registered for the doctoral courses in the Faculty of Law and lodged in a house for priests from outside the diocese. The Apostolic Ladies of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a new religious congregation, managed this residence. A month later, its foundress offered him the post of Chaplain of the church of the *Patronato de Enfermos* (Foundation for the Sick), their headquarters and a centre for various charitable activities.

On 1 June, Fr. José María began his pastoral work in the Foundation for the Sick. This consisted of celebrating Mass, Eucharistic exposition, hearing confessions, and rosary and benediction in the afternoons. In addition, at weekends he was available to hear confessions of the children who attended the schools that were subsidised by the Apostolic

Ladies. Also, although it did not form part of his duties as chaplain, on many afternoons he would visit the sick and poor in their homes, to take them Communion or hear their confessions.

Five months later, José María rented a flat so that his mother and siblings could live together with him. During that academic year, he obtained a position as a teacher of Roman Law and Canon Law in the *Cicuéndez* Academy, a private centre that prepared people for entry into the Faculty of Law and gave support classes in some subjects. The priest taught in the academy on two afternoons a week for more than four years to help his family financially.

On 30 September 1928, José María Escrivá went to a house of the Vincentians in the north of Madrid to do his spiritual exercises. Six priests

had put their names down for this activity. On Tuesday, 2 October, after celebrating Mass, he went to his bedroom to read some notes that he had jotted down earlier, about ideas and events, that he thought had been inspired by God and that formed part of his inklings. Suddenly, “*he realised the beautiful and heavy burden that the Lord, in his inexplicable goodness, had placed on his shoulders,*” and he put together “the loose notes I had been taking, giving them some unity”. In that moment of great intensity he “had just seen the will of God clearly!”, something that he had been praying about for so many years.

What had happened? The young priest received a supernatural light that put him at the heart of the Christian mystery. He had “an illumination on *the whole Work*”, a “clear, general idea of my mission” that opened up an “immense

apostolic panorama”. Moved because he “saw how Jesus had begun to give *specific shape* to his Work”, he knelt down and gave thanks to God. Opus Dei had just been born. Then he heard the sound of the bells of the parish church of Our Lady of the Angels announcing Mass to the faithful; later on he would consider this as a sign of the intercession of Our Lady of the Angels in that foundational moment.

In this way, the divine call that José María Escrivá had felt in Logroño towards the end of 1917 or the beginning of 1918, came to the end of its gestation in October 1928. For that young priest, all that had happened in his life until then, and all that would happen in the future, would acquire a full vocational meaning. Escrivá was on earth to embody and spread the message of Christian holiness in the middle of the world, and to found an institution that

would live and put into practice that ideal. As he would later note, God called him to be “a saint and a father, a teacher and a guide of saints”.

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