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The First Years of Opus Dei

1928, 1929, 1930... St Josemaria had to fulfil God's will, but had no trained assistants, no money, and no patrons.

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The task was huge and the young priest had no financial resources, helpers, or patrons. He had neither the support of tradition nor Church approval, for although the basic vision was simple in itself, the institution he was founding would not be easily understood. Certainly

he did not lack optimism or confidence that the Work was something from God, but the difficulties were numerous indeed.

As confirmation that the project was His own, God made his presence felt time and again to lay a solid foundation both for the spiritual structure and the people who would work within it.

In a streetcar

In mid-October, 1931, while in a streetcar he received the gift of an exalted form of prayer. “I felt the action of God, bringing forth in my heart and on my lips, with the force of something imperatively necessary, this tender invocation: *Abba! Pater!* (‘Abba! Father!’). Probably I made that prayer out loud. And I walked the streets of Madrid for maybe an hour, maybe two, I can’t say; time passed without my being aware of it. People must have thought I was

crazy. I was contemplating, with lights that were not mine, that amazing truth. It was like a lighted coal burning in my soul, never to be extinguished.”

His spiritual life already characterized by a childlike trust, now saw the mystery of his adoptive sonship in Jesus Christ with extraordinary depth.

“I understood that divine filiation had to be a basic characteristic of our spirituality: *Abba, Pater!* And that by living their divine filiation, my children would be filled with joy and peace, protected by an impregnable wall. And they would be apostles of joy, communicating their peace, even in the face of their own or another’s suffering. Because we are convinced that God is our Father.”

He continued his service to the sick and poor, seeking, in their prayer and suffering offered to God, courage

to guide the divine endeavor. Father José María Somoano, one of the priests who accompanied him in assisting the terminally ill, committed himself to Opus Dei. So did Maria Ignacia Garcia Escobar, a young woman with tuberculosis, who died a short time after offering her life for the Work.

Three, three hundred, three hundred thousand...

Already by 1933 he had gathered around him a group of college students. He met them wherever he could, encouraging them to develop a passionate love of Jesus. He would go out for walks with them and often stop in a café called *El Sotanillo* ('little basement'), where over cups of hot chocolate he would reveal his dreams of apostolate in the world. He advised them to read and meditate on books on the life and the

passion of Our Lord, writing as a dedication in one of those books:

“ + Madrid, May 29, 1933 ...May you seek Christ ...May you find Christ ...May you love Christ.”

He invited the students to join him on visits to the needy and the sick, lending a hand with small acts of service. He organized catechism classes in the slum neighborhoods on the outskirts of the capital as a way of getting them to help the poor.

Finally the moment arrived to start courses of formation to transmit the spirit of the Work in a more systematic way. Many were invited to the first meeting at a shelter run by nuns. Only three made it. Content nonetheless, he brought them to the chapel afterwards for Eucharistic Benediction. “When I blessed those three . . . I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three billion. . . . white, black, yellow,

of all the colors, all the combinations that human love can produce. And I fell short because our Lord has been generous beyond my wildest dreams.”

God and Daring

In 1930, Isidoro Zorzano, a young engineer, a former schoolmate of Father Josemaría's in Logroño, asked to be admitted to Opus Dei. Others followed suit. The founder felt the urgent need for a place for formation to provide unity and visibility. The apostolic instrument he had in mind would be a civil entity permeated with a Christian spirit. And so the DYA Academy was begun in 1933. Here supplementary classes in law and architecture were given in an apartment with a plaque on the door with these three letters on it, DYA, the Spanish initials for *Derecho y Arquitectura* (Law and Architecture). But for Father Josemaría and the

students, the acronym also held a deeper significance: *Dios y audacia* (“God and daring”). And the daring was not lacking, since it ran on a shoe-string budget.

In reality it was more than an educational initiative. It was a place for the Christian formation of college students, who could also receive spiritual direction, a formation entirely aimed at personal identification with Christ. In the reception room, a black wooden cross (without our Lord) hung on the wall. If someone wondered what it meant, his explanation was “It is waiting for the crucified figure that it lacks, and that . . . has to be you.”

The first Students’ Residence

For the following academic year, Father Josemaría wanted to take another step forward: moving to a bigger place that would provide housing for some students. Humanly

speaking the financial outlook was dismal. He got everyone to pray and entrusted the matter to God. And by the beginning of the semester they were already working away at the new DYA Academy Residence on Ferraz Street. Without miracles, with a lot of suffering, with a lot of prayer and a lot of faith. *Deo omnis gloria!* he prayed, “to God be all the glory.”

In December, 1934 he was named rector of the Royal Foundation of Saint Elizabeth, which included a convent founded by Saint Alonso de Orozco, of whose Augustinian nuns he was already chaplain.

In these years he began to draw up foundational documents: instructions and lengthy letters delineating the spirit and way of doing apostolate proper to Opus Dei for the generations to come. An example: “*The Work of God comes to fulfill the will of God.* Be convinced

that Heaven is committed to seeing it accomplished. . . . When our Lord God plans some work for the benefit of human beings, he first thinks of those he will use as his instruments . . . and *gives them the necessary graces*. This supernatural conviction of the divine nature of the enterprise will eventually give you such an intense enthusiasm and love for the Work that you will feel *delighted to sacrifice yourselves to bring it to fulfillment.*”

St Josemaria’s first book

The year 1934 also saw the publication of thoughts for meditation entitled *Spiritual Considerations*, which years later, with some additions and editing, would become *The Way*. These points aimed at renewing the Christian life of young people, students and workers, guiding them to a truly contemplative life.

In July, 1935, Álvaro del Portillo, a highly gifted engineering student, asked for admission to Opus Dei. He would become Escrivá's closest collaborator and after the founder's death would be elected to lead Opus Dei.

Meanwhile Spain suffered a series of crises of various sorts. Religious persecution by extremist groups became ever more bold and violent, with the burning of Churches and convents and the murder of priests and religious.