



CHAPTER SIX



Fr. Joseph Múzquiz: *Engineer and Priest*

Frater Joseph Múzquiz¹ was a civil engineer who joined the Work in 1940, shortly after the end of the Spanish Civil War. He was one of the first three priests of Opus Dei and played a major role in bringing the apostolic activities of Opus Dei to the United States, Canada, and Japan.

Youth

José Luis Múzquiz was born in 1912 in southern Spain. He entered the School of Civil Engineering in 1930, after attaining the second-highest score among nine hundred applicants on the national entrance exam. Although the idea of living celibacy in the world struck him as “something odd and strange that could not succeed,” José Luis accepted a friend’s invitation to meet Opus Dei’s founder in late 1934 or early 1935. He was very impressed when, in their first conversation, Escrivá said, “There is no greater love than Love,” and he decided to attend the weekly classes on practical Christian life which Escrivá called “Circles.”

While waiting for a job to open up after graduation, José Luis traveled to Germany to improve his German language and visit civil engineering projects. He was there when the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, but he immediately returned to Spain and joined the Nationalist Army. He was convinced that Escrivá must have been killed by the violently anti-Catholic mobs that dominated Madrid during the early months of the civil war. When he learned that Escrivá had not only survived but had escaped from Madrid

1. Before coming to the United States, he was called José Luis. Later he was usually called Fr. Joseph. This article reflects that change.

and crossed into the Nationalist zone, he concluded that Opus Dei must be something “supernatural and desired by God.”

José Luis joined Opus Dei in January 1940. From then on, his life was shaped by the conviction that he and the other members of the fledgling Work were, as Escrivá had written, “not just men who have joined other men to do a good thing. That is much, but it is little. [They were] fulfilling an imperative command of Christ.” His overriding goal was to incorporate Opus Dei’s spirit into his own life and contribute to spreading it as the specific way in which God wanted him to serve the Church. Escrivá’s prediction was fulfilled in him: “The conviction of the supernatural character of the Work will make you happy sacrificing yourself for its accomplishment.”

Almost immediately, Escrivá asked him to take over one of the classes of practical spiritual formation he had been giving to college students. Múzquiz’s professional competence, calm, poise, good humor, and piety were an inspiration both to other young members of Opus Dei and to students who were discerning their possible call to Opus Dei. Laureano López Rodó, a law student who would become the Commissioner of Economic Development and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was struck by Múzquiz’s smiling good humor when they met in Barcelona in 1940. During a conversation with Escrivá in Madrid a short time later, López Rodó began to think about dedicating himself fully to God in the world as a member of Opus Dei. At first, he was enthusiastic, but as the hours wore on, he began to think that such a vocation was “marvelous but impossible.” But seeing Múzquiz “so serene and smiling,” he recalls, “I immediately concluded: the life of total dedication is possible since José Luis Múzquiz lives it.”

A Priest of Opus Dei

In late 1941 or early 1942, Escrivá asked Múzquiz if he would be willing to be ordained a priest. Although he was aware that Escrivá still had not found any way in which Opus Dei could have priests ordained, he had complete faith that a way would be found. He began studying for the priesthood as if there were no obstacles. Preparing for ordination involved a formidable amount of work. In addition to the philosophical and theological studies the Church required of all priests, Escrivá wanted the priests of Opus Dei to

have a civil doctorate. At the time, no university in Spain offered a doctorate in engineering, so Múzquiz earned a doctorate in history. Escrivá founded in 1943 the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. This made it possible for Múzquiz and two other members of Opus Dei to be ordained in June 1944. José Luis immediately began to travel extensively to offer pastoral care for Opus Dei's incipient activities in southern Spain and Portugal.

Starting Opus Dei in the United States

In 1948, Escrivá asked Múzquiz to lead an effort to bring Opus Dei to the United States. On February 17, 1949, he arrived in New York with another member of the Work, Sal Ferigle, a young physicist. From the plane, he wrote to Escrivá:

We have been flying for five hours over a small part of America. A few minutes ago, we passed over Boston. We picked out Harvard University . . . and prayed to the guardian angel of the university and the guardian angels of each of the inhabitants. I think we will keep them busy. They must be sort of unemployed. The country is very big . . . and very small. And all of it has to be filled with tabernacles. . . . We are very happy and have great desires to work. From the plane, you see immense horizons. What a great harvest!²

From New York, Múzquiz, Ferigle, and José María González Barredo, who had been working professionally in the US for some time, traveled to Chicago, where they would open Opus Dei's first American center. They were soon joined by two other lay members of the Work. During their early months in Chicago, they faced formidable challenges. They had no money, had few friends, spoke little English, and were unfamiliar with the way of doing things in the United States.

Faced with these challenges, Múzquiz's first recourse was to prayer. He wrote to Escrivá at the end of March: "Every day I see more clearly what you have told us so often about the need for personal sanctity. I feel small and unworthy, but I see that our Lord loves me a great deal, and I want to love him a great deal."

2. Because Jesus present in the Eucharist is the heart of every Opus Dei center, Escrivá often spoke about a new tabernacle rather than a new center. Múzquiz's phrase about filling the United States with tabernacles expressed his hope that Opus Dei would have many centers in the country.

For Opus Dei to carry out its mission of serving the Church in the United States, it was essential to find young men and women who would dedicate their lives to God in Opus Dei, try to put its spirit into practice, and spread it to others. For that, a vital first step was to get to know young people whom God might be calling to this path of service to the Church. One place to do that was Calvert House, the Catholic Club at the University of Chicago. Múzquiz also contacted some Catholic high schools, and in many cases found the priests and brothers who taught there anxious to help him meet students who might be interested in Opus Dei's message.

The First Opus Dei Center in the US

In Spain and other countries, Opus Dei had opened student residences near major universities. They offered a homelike environment, an atmosphere of serious study, and an opportunity to receive the sacraments and Christian formation. They had greatly facilitated Opus Dei's apostolate with students. From the beginning, Múzquiz and the other members of the Work planned to open a similar student residence in Chicago.

The only suitable building for sale near the University of Chicago was a fifteen-room brick house just a few blocks from the campus. When the real estate agent asked Fr. Joseph if he could make a down payment of \$25,000, Múzquiz thought he was asking if they could pay a total price of \$25,000. Although they only had \$2,000 at the time, he said yes. Later he clarified that the most they could put down would be \$10,000. Sometime later he dropped that to \$7,000, and eventually he confessed that they could only come up with \$5,000 as a down payment. The agent was so impressed with Fr. Joseph's sincerity, innocence, and acceptance of God's will, that he offered to donate his entire commission to help them put together the down payment. The seller, convinced that the credit of a Catholic priest was good, offered to give them a first mortgage for two-thirds of the price. In August 1949, they took possession of the house they would call Woodlawn Residence. As Múzquiz wrote, they were essentially "broke," and there was no money to buy furniture. Nonetheless, they moved in immediately.

They were pleased to find inside a few old beds, a large dining room table, and a smaller table that Fr. Joseph used as a portable altar to celebrate Mass.