

## Introduction

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*What is a biography?* In the strict sense of the term it is the story of a particular life. And it falls within the academic field of history. But a life does not exist in isolation, like a small island lost in a vast ocean. It is born and grows to maturity in a community. The individual is tied to a place, participates in a particular culture, and has a homeland. And the events of whatever time and place the subject lives in have an effect on his or her life. Thus the biographical focus necessarily transcends those things that affect only the person in question. The researcher, as well as the reader, has to keep in mind many other cultural and social circumstances to completely understand events and set them in their historical context.

*Method of research.* The biographer usually adopts a chronological structure, first studying the historical roots, and then proceeding to follow the subject's life from cradle to grave. The author will probably begin by describing the subject's family, home atmosphere, early life, and schooling to show the sources of the subject's personality. But one must avoid fiction and fantasies, and must work according to the methodology of research and the rules for evaluating sources. Thus any biography intended to boast scholarly objectivity represents a serious challenge, since the biographer must first find the testimonies and other relevant documents and then subject them to critical evaluation. (No matter how credible the sources found, the researcher is never dispensed from the arduous task of choosing testimonies, evaluating their significance, and fitting them into the historical picture.)

*Abundance of sources.* When I felt I had completed the task of collecting testimonies and other historical records and tried to sketch out the structure of this book, I was surprised to see how much material I had collected. To reduce it to manageable proportions, I found I had to concentrate on the founder himself and not get sidetracked into secondary matters. Thus those aspects of Opus Dei that are intimately linked to his personal mission are dealt with fully; other subjects, important in themselves, such as the origins of the spirituality of Opus

Dei, the expansion of its message throughout the world, salient features of the cultural and social milieu in which the founder worked, and so forth, are only touched upon. All of that, undoubtedly, will be material for future studies. But here I have confined myself narrowly to biographical matters, to keep the narrative from straying from its subject. Meanwhile, as the notes demonstrate, I have subjected myself to the rigorous rules of documentation and the other critical requirements for historical credibility.

*An objective view of historical reality.* In this research effort, we can be particularly thankful for one quality of the founder and his writings. I refer to his objective view of events. Father Josemaría possessed in a high degree the intellectual gift of being able to evaluate historical realities objectively and clearly. He was always on the alert to see things and situations in the light of God's designs, setting aside his personal tastes and inclinations and detaching himself from personal interests. In relation to God, the track of his life runs straight, simple, and deep. One might summarize it by saying that he dedicated himself body and soul to fulfilling the plans of God with regard to Opus Dei. On October 2, 1928, after ten years of waiting, and of having premonitions of something that was going to come, he was led by the hand of God into the saga. The young priest received the mission of carrying out Opus Dei, and was granted the corresponding charism. From this date on, God and Josemaría—Josemaría led by the hand of God, that is—will have together one long and amazing adventure.

*The two themes of this biography.* Here, then, is one basic theme of this biography: to follow step by step the development of Opus Dei, to the point where the man chosen to carry out this great enterprise puts the final period to his work. Father Josemaría devoted his whole life to this effort. This is as much as to say that the charism he received worked, during all those years, within his soul, identifying his person with Opus Dei, making him—the man himself—Opus Dei. That is the other theme of this biography.

*Divine logic and human logic.* As a father with his child, God taught Josemaría a divine logic, at times very disconcerting, that is far different from any human logic. Human logic judges and operates according to earthly criteria. God's judgments, on the contrary, are lovingly grounded in the sense of divine filiation; in the cross, the joyful sign of Christ's victory; in the unlimited power of prayer; in the hidden

fruitfulness of setbacks . . . That objective view that the founder had of historical reality was something more than just clear-sighted discernment; it was the gift of being able to penetrate the essence of history, its wise governance by Divine Providence. He applied to religious realities and supernatural events the categories proper to divine logic, in accordance with his divine and universal mission within the Church.

*The stature of the founder.* To properly appreciate his greatness, one must go back in time and accompany him as he gradually acquires spiritual maturity. His path of interior growth is at the same time a stream of love and a Way of the Cross of suffering, through a progressive identification with Christ. There is, then, no need for hagiographic panegyrics, since his sanctity is obvious and rises so impressively before us.

Shortly after receiving his divine mission, Father Josemaría (in entry no. 244 of his journal, *Apuntes íntimos*) compared himself to a “poor little bird” which can only fly a short distance. An eagle snatches it up, “and in his powerful claws the little bird soars, soars very high, above the mountains of earth and the snow-capped peaks, above the white and blue and rosy clouds, and higher yet, until he is looking directly at the sun . . . And then the eagle, letting go of the bird, tells him, ‘Go on—fly!’” In the pages of this book we will also try to project a vision of the mystical path of a soul.

*The father of a large family.* God raised up a man, in this world of our time, to bring about a great good for the Church and for souls. This is a divine gift for which thanks are due, primarily to God, and also, in part, to Father Josemaría, for cooperatively taking it upon himself to carry out God’s plans. Far from turning his back on the world, he was interested in its development and progress. He put daring and optimism into his apostolic enthusiasms and ceaselessly proclaimed that sanctity is not just for the privileged few. With his message he in fact opened “the divine paths of the earth”—paths of sanctification for all those who in the midst of the world identify themselves with Christ, working for love of God and neighbor.

Within the mission of the founder was included the charism of paternity: he was father and shepherd of a portion of the People of God. Like the patriarchs of old, he already in his lifetime had many descendants—spiritual descendants. On May 17, 1992, the day on which the Church officially raised him to the altars, an immense

multitude of children of his spirit, people of all races and all conditions of life, packed St. Peter's Square in Rome.

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I wish to express my gratitude for the extremely valuable help I received from the late Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, former prelate of Opus Dei; from his successor, Bishop Javier Echevarría, its present prelate; and from all those who have been so kind as to check for accuracy some of the data included in this book.

Finally, I must confess that, led by a desire not to leave any loose ends in this story, no matter how small they might appear, I am continuing to revise my drafts of the two remaining volumes.

*1. Family background*

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer was born in the Spanish city of Barbastro on January 9, 1902, and died in Rome on June 26, 1975.

A few weeks before his death, trying to bring his life into sharp focus, he expressed a deep awareness of Divine Providence: "Our Lord has made me see how he has been leading me by the hand."<sup>1</sup> There was for him just one pivotal date between the years 1902 and 1975: October 2, 1928, the day Opus Dei was founded. This supernatural event marked his life so profoundly that almost every autobiographical reference reflects an indelible consciousness of a personal mission. Describing his arrival into the world, he says, "God our Lord was preparing things so that my life would be normal and everyday, nothing extraordinary. He had me born in a Christian home, as was typical in my country, of exemplary parents who practiced and lived their faith."<sup>2</sup>

Josemaría was born near the end of a winter's day, at about ten o'clock at night. For this reason he used to say, with a twinkle in his eye, that his first moments had been like the footsteps of "a sleep-walker," for he had begun life with a whole night ahead of him. But in saying this he probably also was making a veiled allusion to the long night of obscurity that for years enveloped his spiritual mission.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mons. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y El Opus Dei. *En el 50 Aniversario de su Fundación* (Pamplona: Eunsá, 1982), pp. 21–27 (under the heading "De la mano de Dios"). See also AGP, P01 1975, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> *Meditation* of 14 Feb 1964. For more on the influence of his parents' virtues on Josemaría's early formation, see Javier Echevarría, *Sum.* 1775 and 1798; Santiago Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, PM, folio 1297; and Martín Sambeat, *Sum.* 5678.

<sup>3</sup> This remark confirms what was noted a few lines above: that in nearly every autobiographical statement by the founder, one finds some reference, either overt or implied, to his calling of October 2, 1928. See Alvaro del Portillo, *Sum.* 3, and Javier Echevarría, *Sum.* 1760.

On the next day, January 10, he was entered into the city register of births. These facts were recorded there:

That said boy was born at 10:00 P.M. yesterday in the home of his parents, at 26 Calle Mayor.

That he is the legitimate son of Don José Escrivá, merchant, 33 years old, and of Doña Dolores Albás, 23 years old, of Fonz and Barbastro respectively.

That he is the grandson, on his father's side, of Don José Escrivá, deceased, and of Doña Constanacia Cezán [*sic*], natives of Peralta de la Sal and Fonz respectively.

And on his mother's side, of Don Pascual Albás, deceased, and of Doña Florencia Blanc, natives of Barbastro.

And that said boy has been registered with the names of José María, Julián, and Mariano.<sup>4</sup>

A few days later, on January 13, the Octave of the Epiphany and the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, he was baptized in the cathedral of Barbastro with the names that were already inscribed in the city register: José, for his father and grandfather; María, out of devotion to the Blessed Virgin; Julián, for the saint on whose feast day he was born; and Mariano, in honor of his godfather.<sup>5</sup>

Through the years, Josemaría showed deep gratitude toward the priest who had conferred this sacrament on him. His name was Angel Malo [bad angel]—a name not easily forgotten! Father Josemaría remembered him every day in the Memento of the Masses he celebrated over the course of half a century.<sup>6</sup> He showed the same kind of gratitude to his godparents.

The baptismal font of the cathedral of Barbastro was an elegant and beautiful piece, one of the works of art described in the cathedral chapter's *Liber de Gestis* for the year 1635.<sup>7</sup> But its antiquity and beauty did not afford it much protection. In 1936, when iconoclastic fury raged through the city, it was broken into pieces and thrown

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 6.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 7.

<sup>6</sup> See Javier Echevarría, *Sum.* 1763, and Joaquín Alonso, PR, p. 1649. Concerning his gratitude toward his godparents, see Alvaro del Portillo, PR, p. 19, and Angel Camo, AGP, RHF, T-02846, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> See the cathedral chapter's *Liber de Gestis*, year 1635, fol. 38v.

into the river.\* Thousands of Christians had received their baptism in this font—including Josemaría's mother. As a boy he had seen his little sisters baptized in it. Its remnants were worthy of respectful treatment. So, when in 1957 the bishop and the cathedral chapter presented him with the fragments salvaged from the wreckage, he decided to have them sent to Rome to be reassembled and set up in a place of honor. In 1959 he wrote:

The fragments of the baptismal font of Barbastro's cathedral, which Your Excellency and the Most Excellent Cathedral Chapter have been so good as to donate to Opus Dei, have arrived in Rome. I cannot fail to express my thanks to Your Excellency—and I will also directly thank the Chapter—for this generosity, which has so moved me.

Those venerable stones of our holy cathedral church, once well restored here in Italy by these sons of mine, will occupy a place of honor in our central headquarters.

Thank you once again, Your Excellency, for this act of kindness. We will forever remember it with profound appreciation.<sup>8</sup>

The baptismal font was not the only casualty of that Marxist barbarism. The city register of Barbastro suffered even greater harm. Documents and entire archives were reduced to ashes. The birth certificate now in Barbastro is not, then, the original of 1902, but, rather, a certified copy made in 1912.<sup>9</sup> One might note that this copy has a few slight errors with regard to names and places. This would have meant little to Josemaría's father were it not for the fact that a particular spelling mistake was injurious to him and his family.

The fact is that in some documents the name "Escrivá" shows up

\* During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) many churches were sacked. The cathedral of Barbastro was among them.

<sup>8</sup> C 2828 (21 Apr 1959). The remnants of the baptismal font arrived in Rome in 1959. The founder, after the necessary reconstruction, had it placed as a holy water font at the entrance of the oratory of Our Lady of Peace (now the prelatric church of Opus Dei), together with a commemorative plaque inscribed with the following text:

HVNC SACRVM BAPTISMATIS FONTEM SANCTAE ECCLESIAE CATHEDRALIS BARBASTRENSIS + IN QVO CONDITOR NOSTER EIVSQVE MATER ET SOROR AQVAS REGENERATIONIS ACCEPERVNT + HISPANICO BELLO FLAGRANTE ANNO MCMXXXVI IN ODIUM RELIGIONIS DIRVPTVM + OPERI DEI AB EPISCOPO ET CAPITVLO ANNO MCMLVII DONO DATVM + CONSILIVM ATQVE ASSESORATVS CENTRALIS AD PRISTINAM FORMAM ANNO MCMLX RESTITVERE FECERVNT.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 6.

misspelled as “Escribá.”<sup>10</sup> This spelling error is really quite innocent and not at all surprising, given the fact that in Spanish there is no phonetic difference between the letters *b* and *v*. The trouble is, though, that if the name is pronounced without the accent being put on the final syllable, it immediately suggests something very different: the Gospel’s pairing, not at all complimentary, of “scribes and Pharisees.”

When his classmates flippantly joked about the “*escribas* and Phari-sees,” these little taunts made Josemaría blush.<sup>11</sup> Nor did his sister Carmen escape these digs. The situation continued until one day their indignant father rose in defense of the family name and insisted that Josemaría never put up with such an affront. This advice became so deeply engraved in the mind of the son that he waged war on the offending *b*. In May or June of 1935, in a note about his interior life, he said regarding the special care he took with his signature, “Around 1928 I began to exaggerate the *v* in my family name just so that nobody would write ‘Escrivá’ with a *b*.” And a few years later, in a note written in October 1939, he said, “It was my father (who is now in heaven) who ordered me not to tolerate having that *b* put in my family name. He said something to me about our heritage . . .”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This particular error in transcribing his family name occurred often enough that it was bound to be upsetting to Don José. In fact, on his own birth certificate, in Fonze, he himself appears as the “legitimate son of José Escribá y Zaydin” (see Appendix 2). Later the error was repeated and multiplied at the baptisms of one of his sons and three of his daughters. Of the eldest daughter it is recorded that “María del Carmen Constancia Florencia Escribá” is the daughter of “Don José Escribá”; of “María Asunción Escribá,” that her father is “Don José Escribá” and her godfather is “Don Teodoro Escribá”; and of “María Dolores Escribá,” that her father and grandfather are named “José Escribá.” And on the death certificate for this last girl, the name “Escribá” reappears. It is by way of exception that the baptismal and death certificates of María del Rosario Escrivá do not contain any errors. See the archive of the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption in Barbastro: Books of Baptism no. 43 (fol. 22) and no. 44 (fols. 35 and 64v), and Book of the Dead no. 45 (fol. 14v).

Regarding Josemaría, we find his name written as “Escribá” in several places: for example, in the 20 Feb 1925 document of papal dispensation from the age requirement for ordination as a priest, which begins, “Most Blessed Father, Diac. Joseph M. Escribá . . .” (Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments, Prot. N. 871/25; AGP, RHF, D-03263); in the 19 Dec 1925 letter from the archbishop of Saragossa to Antonio Lasiera, president of the city council (AGP, RHF, D-05188); in the 12 Dec 1937 safe-conduct pass from the military headquarters of Fuenterrabía (AGP, RHF, D-15073); and on the envelope of the 8 Oct 1952 letter from Julio M. Cortés Zuazo (AGP, RHF, D-15282).

<sup>11</sup> See Alvaro del Portillo, *Sum*. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Apuntes*, no. 1273. Rereading in 1939 what he had written in 1935 about his campaign to defend the *v* in “Escrivá,” his thoughts went back to his childhood years, when his father, with the honorable pride of a person of noble birth, in order to show his son that this concern about one letter was neither capricious nor fanatic, but appropriate because the name had been forged through many generations of history, spoke to