



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## 2012 Holds Multiple Anniversaries for Opus Dei

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By JIM GRAVES, published by  
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The beginning of each of the past three decades has brought about a significant event for Opus Dei, whose mission is to promote holiness among laypeople as they go about their daily work.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II approved changing the organization's status from a secular institute to a personal prelature. In 1992, Opus Dei's founder, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva, was beatified, and, in 2002, he was canonized. As the prelature celebrates the anniversaries of each of these major events, it continues to enjoy steady growth and have far-reaching influence as it goes about its mission.

Pope Benedict XVI has long supported the unique apostolate of Opus Dei. Upon St. Josemaria's canonization, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger expressed the belief that the saint's message helped correct an erroneous idea of sanctity — that holiness was reserved only for “the great.”

More recently, Pope Benedict told the head of Opus Dei, 79-year-old Bishop Javier Echevarria Rodriguez, “When you foster the eagerness for personal sanctity and the apostolic zeal of your priests and laypeople, not only do you see the flock that has been entrusted to you grow, but you provide an effective help to the Church in her urgent evangelization of present-day society.”

Opus Dei (which is Latin for “Work of God”) was founded by a young Father Escriva in 1928, and it was approved by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Today, it has 90,000 members in 60 countries, including 3,000 in the United States. Typical elements of its apostolate include evenings of recollection, retreats, spiritual direction and religious-education classes. Opus Dei members also oversee schools, including the respected IESE Business School, the graduate school of

management at the University of Navarra in Spain. IESE recently opened up a campus in New York. In Chicago, Opus Dei priests staff the historic St. Mary of the Angels Parish, the largest church in Illinois.

The “worker bees” of Opus Dei are its numeraries — men and women who have committed themselves to celibacy and typically live in Opus Dei centers. In the U.S., there are 900 numeraries who live and work in 20 American cities. Numeraries work in secular professions during the week and then return home to a family-like environment for prayer, apostolic work and community life on weekends. There are separate centers for men and women.

Most members are supernumeraries, who live in their own homes, generally are married or intend to marry but participate in the prayer life of Opus Dei and support the organization’s apostolic work.

Priests of Opus Dei (only 2% of the prelature) come from among the lay celibate members of Opus Dei (the numeraries or, sometimes, the associates). The numeraries, part-time over many years, take a course of studies which is equivalent to a bachelor’s degree in theology — what a diocesan priest typically receives in seminary prior to ordination. The study is pursued full-time once a person becomes a candidate for the priesthood.

The priests also will normally have a secular degree and will have worked in a secular profession. The priests of Opus Dei also normally obtain a doctorate in one of the ecclesiastical sciences.

The largest concentration of Opus Dei members is in Europe. Efforts are under way to establish Opus Dei communities in Eastern Europe, Russia, Indonesia and South Korea.

Membership begins with attending Opus Dei events and developing the Opus Dei habits of prayer and spirituality, which include daily Mass and prayer, weekly confession and yearly retreats. Many who do not join the organization are still positively influenced; for example, young people may be inspired to enter the seminary or join a religious community. Priests and bishops, such as Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., are members of Opus Dei’s Priestly Society of the Holy Cross and benefit from its spirituality.

### **Personal Prelature**

Being composed of priests, married and laypersons, Opus Dei is a unique organization within the Church and requires a unique canonical structure to govern it. (Although the villain in Dan Brown’s fictional *Da Vinci Code* was a

murderous albino Opus Dei monk, there are, in fact, no monks or other consecrated religious in Opus Dei.) The concept of a personal prelature emerged from the Second Vatican Council; essentially, it is an ecclesial organization whose bishop has jurisdiction over priests and laity worldwide, rather than a particular geographical area, and is committed to a particular pastoral work. Opus Dei's work, explained its communications director, Brian Finnerty, is to "promote the ideal of coming closer to God in one's work in everyday life. Everyone is called to sanctity."

To Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, vicar general of Opus Dei, sanctity means "becoming a friend of God, letting the Other act, the only One who can make this world good and joyful."

Since 1994, Opus Dei's prelate has been Bishop Echevarria, who was once the personal secretary to St. Josemaria. Each country in which Opus Dei operates has a vicar, who is a priest, and councils of laymen and women who form the next level of governance. At the local level, there is a director, who is a layperson, and a local council.

Opus Dei is currently the Church's only personal prelature. Although it has some similarities to a personal ordinariate, such as was created for former Anglicans or the military, the distinction lies in that it is carrying out a particular pastoral work, said Msgr. William Stetson, a former Opus Dei vicar and college professor, who was ordained for the organization 50 years ago.

While the establishment of the personal prelature helped with canonical issues of governance with Opus Dei, the beatification and canonization of its founder helped elevate its status in the eyes of the faithful.

Calling him "the saint of the ordinary," Pope John Paul II raised Josemaria Escriva to the altars 10 years ago. Forty-two cardinals and 470 bishops were among the 300,000 who attended the canonization. Bishop Echevarria told those gathered, "When you return home, bring back with you the teachings of the new saint and try to put them into practice. Ask St. Josemaria to teach you to convert the prose of each day — your most ordinary occupations — into poetry, into heroic verse: into desires and deeds of holiness and apostolate."

### **Memories of a Saint**

John Coverdale, a law professor at Seton Hall University in Newark, N.J., learned the teachings of Josemaria from the saint himself. A longtime Opus Dei member, Coverdale did public relations for the organization in Rome from 1960 to 68 and worked with St. Josemaria on a daily basis.

“He was a wonderful man, a warm, funny human being, who had an enormous love for God and others,” Coverdale said.

He noted that, despite the saint’s many duties, he took the time to know and express concern for all with whom he interacted. He recalled, for example, encountering the saint while walking down a corridor one day: “He said my name, ‘John’ — he had trouble pronouncing it with his accent — with such warmth and attention. I remember thinking, He really cares for me.”

One of his co-workers had an ill mother. He remembers St. Josemaria regularly asking the man about his mother and mentioning that he was praying for her. Coverdale observed, “Despite all he had to do, it really mattered to him. I can’t imagine a corporate CEO or government leader paying such attention to an individual in his organization.”

Coverdale first began attending Opus Dei events while living in Milwaukee in the 1950s. He was impressed by the way the priests spoke of Christ: “He wasn’t like someone they’d read about in a book, but someone they knew personally.”

He became a numerary and wrote *Uncommon Faith: The Early History of Opus Dei (1928-1943)* (Scepter, 2001).

Coverdale noted that St. Josemaria encountered many challenges throughout his life. Some thought his teaching on universal holiness was radical, even heretical. He suffered from significant health challenges, including severe diabetes. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), he was forced to go into hiding and flee the country to evade the martyrdom which came to 7,000 of Spain’s priests and religious.

Through it all, Coverdale said, St. Josemaria maintained good cheer and remained “a man who knew how to love.”

**Jim Graves writes from Newport Beach, California.**