Biography of Ernesto Cofiño: A Life of Service

Ernesto Cofiño (1899-1991), Guatemalan, studied medicine in Paris. He is considered the father of pediatrics in Guatemala. He married Clemencia Samayoa in 1933 and they had five children. He worked in favor of the neediest people, trained thousands of university students and was recognized for his scientific contributions. He sought to live close to God, praying daily and offering Him his work. He discovered his vocation to Opus

Dei in 1956. His process of canonization began in 2000.

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Ernesto Cofiño Ubico was born on 5 June 1899 in Guatemala City, where he also pursued his early studies. In 1919, he commenced his studies at the Faculty of Medicine at the Sorbonne in France. His doctoral thesis was supervised by Dr. Robert Debré, considered one of the founders of modern pediatrics.

In 1933, he married Clemencia Samayoa, and they had five children: Ernesto, Clotilde Clemencia, Sofía, Roberto, and José Luis.

He dedicated himself to the practice of pediatrics wholeheartedly and with a spirit of service that extended beyond the physical health of his

patients to take the children and their families' problems on himself.

A pioneer of pediatric research in Guatemala, Cofiño fought against malnutrition and childhood diseases. He held the Chair of Pediatrics at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of San Carlos (USAC).

Driven by his faith and a profound sense of solidarity, he encouraged and supported initiatives to defend life and personally engaged in projects benefiting expectant mothers, orphans, and street children. He offered practical solutions to various social issues, collaborating in the founding of asylums and care centers. From 1951 to 1955, he was the director of the Educational Assistance Center (the *Centro Educativo Asistencial*, formerly the *Hospicio Nacional*); he also directed the Society for the Protection of Children (1940-1946)

and the National Fight against Tuberculosis (1945-1946). During his time leading Caritas in Guatemala, he organized the distribution of food in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In 1956, he discovered his vocation to Opus Dei, an institution of the Catholic Church founded by St. Josemaría Escrivá on 2 October 1928, which aims to encourage people in every sector of society to seek holiness in the middle of the world through ordinary work. From that moment on, he intensified his relationship with God through daily Mass and communion, frequent confession, prayer, sacrifices in ordinary life, and other Christian practices. He had a great devotion to the Mother of God and prayed the Rosary daily. He dedicated time to studying and improving his religious formation. He intensified his personal commitment to his friends

and acquaintances, sharing his joy and faith with many people. He encouraged his friends and colleagues to collaborate generously with initiatives for human and Christian development, with their time, prayer, and material resources, putting the social doctrine of the Church into practice.

Cofiño actively collaborated with organizations for the education, professional training, and personal development of farmers, women, workers, people with very limited resources, and in the formation of university students. He continued this service to his neighbors until the age of 92.

He endeavored to balance his family life and professional work. As he once said, “profession and life are inseparable: alongside those medical-professional and social activities is my home life.” Clemencia, his wife,

was a teacher. Dr. Cofiño described her as follows: “She was the relief and support in times of difficulty, encouragement in moments of failure, and joy in the home that five children came to fill.” Clemencia passed away in 1963. From that moment on, Ernesto dedicated himself to his children more intensely, without neglecting his profession and the care of the sick and needy.

Ernesto died on 17 October 1991, in Guatemala City. He sought God’s company and consolation throughout his illness (a cancer detected in 1981, which recurred in 1991).

The reputation of holiness that Ernesto enjoyed during his lifetime has continued to grow after his death, extending beyond Guatemala’s borders. Testimonies from Australia, Austria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica,

El Salvador, Spain, the United States, France, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico, Panama, Peru, the Netherlands, Poland, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay have been submitted to the postulation, written by people who sought his intercession before God and attribute favors and healings to him.

Some educational and social initiatives

Below, some educational and social initiatives Dr. Cofiño promoted or collaborated with are listed.

- He directed the Children's Medicine Service at the San Juan de Dios Hospital in Guatemala from 1932.

- From 1936, he held the Chair of Pediatrics at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of San Carlos.

Thousands of professionals were educated in his classroom.

- From 1940 to 1946, he directed the Society for the Protection of Children in Guatemala.

- In 1942, he initiated the Children's Colony of San Juan Sacatepéquez (an anti-tuberculosis children's sanatorium), serving as its director and chief medical officer until 1956.

- From 1945 to 1946, he directed the National Fight against Tuberculosis in Guatemala.

- In 1945, he encouraged the foundation of the Pediatric Association of Guatemala, of which he was president at various times.

- In 1949, he brought the BCG anti-tuberculosis vaccine to Guatemala from the Institute of Paris, saving thousands of lives.

- From 1951 to 1955, he was the director of the Educational Assistance Center (formerly the *Hospicio Nacional*) in Guatemala. He advanced other services from there, including the “El Nido” Nursery (for children up to 2 years old, with the collaboration of Mrs. Renée de Ayau); the “Los Gorriones” Children's Garden (for children aged 2 to 7 on the Vista Hermosa estate, acquired by the Educational Assistance Center); and the “Las Golondrinas” Vacation Colony for convalescents and delicate children in San Juan Sacatepéquez. In the central building, he created and organized departments for young people about to graduate, preparing them for life outside the center: the “El Llavín” center for adolescents, the “Las Camelias” dormitory, and a home economics school with cooking, laundry, and floristry departments, among others. He also launched a

scout and girl guide section in this period.

- He participated in the reorganization of the anti-tuberculosis Hospital of San Vicente, increasing its capacity from 50 to 150 patients.

- In 1954, he was appointed intervener in the Association of Infant Daycares for Social Welfare. From there, contributed to the organization of medical-social services, a network of daycares in markets, and other initiatives for children with fewer resources.

- During his tenure at Caritas in Guatemala, he organized, among other things, the distribution of food in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

- In 1959, together with Dr. Carlos Cossich Márquez, he created the Maternal-Child Nutrition Centers in

collaboration with the Association of Infant Daycares for Social Welfare.

- In 1965, he was involved in the construction of the new buildings of Junkabal, a center for the women's advancement, located in what was then the neediest part of the capital.

- In the 1970s and 1980s, he promoted educational initiatives like as the Ciudad Vieja University Center and the schools of the Association for Educational Development (APDE).

- In 1983, the Department of Pediatrics at the San Juan de Dios General Hospital was named "Dr. Ernesto Cofiño" and a plaque with his name was unveiled in recognition of his work for children and his direct and indirect assistance to many healthcare centers in the country.

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