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The Founder of Opus Dei's Final Hours

The historian José Luis González Gullón recounts some previously unpublished details of 26 June 1975, the day Saint Josemaría passed away.

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The founder of Opus Dei's *dies natalis*

In the final years of his life, Saint Josemaría Escrivá would normally celebrate Mass at midday – but not on 26 June 1975. That day, he moved

the celebration forward because he planned to travel from his home (Villa Tevere, the central headquarters of Opus Dei) to Villa delle Rose in Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome. There, at the residence of the Roman College of Holy Mary, some of his spiritual daughters were receiving formation in philosophy, theology, and the spirit of Opus Dei. He wished to bid farewell to them and to those in charge of the running of the house, before the summer break.

That Thursday in June, the Founder spent some time in meditation after rising. Shortly before 8 a.m., he celebrated a votive Mass of our Lady in the oratory of the Most Holy Trinity, the place where he usually prayed and celebrated Mass in the afternoons. He was assisted by Don Javier Echevarría, who, in addition to serving as vice-secretary of the work of St. Raphael within the General

Council, was also his personal secretary.

He then had breakfast with Don Álvaro del Portillo, who was both Secretary General of the Work and the priest who accompanied him in spiritual matters, and with Don Javier Echevarría. At 9.30 a.m., the three made their way to the garage. The car was to be driven by Javier Cotelo, an architect. Fr. Javier was carrying a cut-glass ornament and a packet of sweets; gifts from the founder for the women at Villa delle Rose.

As they set off, they prayed the joyful mysteries of the Rosary. By the time they had finished, they were already on the *Raccordo Anulare*, the ring road encircling the Eternal City, travelling clockwise and heading south. To keep the conversation going, Javier Cotelo remarked that he had been at Cavabianca the day

before (the headquarters of the Roman College of the Holy Cross, where male numeraries from all over the world lived and studied during their formation in Rome). At the time, the final touches were being made to the oratory of Our Lady of the Angels, which was being designed to accommodate all the students. Cotello was overseeing the work of the painters decorating it. He then went on to speak about members of his family.

Shortly before leaving the *Raccordo Anulare*, they encountered a traffic jam due to roadworks. Once past the congestion, they continued along the *Via Appia Nuova*, which connects to the road to Castel Gandolfo. The landscape was hazy, and the sun was intense. Since leaving home, they had kept the car's air conditioning on its lowest setting.

They arrived at Villa delle Rose at 10.25 a.m. Two of his daughters greeted him at the garage entrance. The founder greeted them warmly and made his way to the oratory of the house with Don Álvaro and Don Javier. He remained kneeling in prayer for a few moments. When he tried to rise and genuflect, he asked Don Javier for assistance; his health had been fragile for several months, and he needed support to steady himself. Upon leaving the oratory, he kissed a wooden cross that hung on the wall. Those accompanying him told him there were women present from five continents, including some assistant numeraries from Kenya and the first to arrive from the Philippines.

Get together with his daughters

When he entered the sitting room (called the “fan room,” due to its décor) the founder took a seat on a

chair and offered the armchair prepared for him to Don Álvaro. As he settled in, his daughters welcomed him cheerfully, and he remarked with good humour, “What lovely voices you have.” By way of introduction, he said that before leaving for Spain for the summer, he had wanted to visit them:

“Daughters, I very much wanted to come here. We’ve got to use our last hours of being in Rome to take care of some unfinished business, so as far as everybody else is concerned, I’m already gone: I’m just here for you.”

He then reminded them that the day before had been the anniversary of the ordination of the first three priests of the Work, and he asked for prayers for his sons who would be ordained that year: ““Fifty-four—that seems like a lot, an almost unbelievable number for these days, if you think about what’s going on

around us. Yet really they are very few; they disappear so soon. As I'm forever telling you, this water of God which is the priesthood always gets quickly absorbed by the soil of the Work. These drops of water, our priests, they disappear at once." He added: "You, my daughters, have priestly souls. You know I tell you this every time I come here. And your brothers who are laymen have priestly souls also. Each of you can and should help, with that priestly soul of yours; and in this way, with the grace of God and with the ministerial priesthood of us, the priests of the Work, together we will do something marvelous."

After this, women from several countries (Austria, Mexico, Chile, Japan, and Kenya) took turns sharing stories about their families and apostolic activities in various centres of the Work. When a Chilean woman mentioned the warm reception given

to a catechetical initiative, the Founder made a point of clarifying that the fruitfulness of such efforts “comes from the Lord’s Passion, from the Lord’s suffering; from the labours and sorrows borne with such love by the Mother of God; from the prayers of all your brothers; and from the holiness of the Church.”

At one point, the Father looked at his daughters and spoke about the importance of the Roman College, which helped them to develop a universal heart: “I imagine you’re making good use of your time. Also getting a bit of rest, right? And doing a bit of sport or going on some outings. But above all, you’re living the norms^[1] well, and making everything an opportunity to speak with God and with his blessed Mother — our Mother — and with St. Joseph, our father and lord, and with our guardian angels. And to help our holy Mother the Church, which is in

such need and suffering greatly in the world today. We must love the Church and the Pope, whoever he may be. Ask the Lord that our service to the Church and the Holy Father may be fruitful.”

He was touched by the story of a Japanese woman who expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to delve deeper into the liturgy and learn liturgical music. He recalled members of the Work who were preparing to open a school in Nagasaki and encouraged her to pray for her country: “A great people! Pray that they may come to know and love Jesus Christ.” To a Kenyan woman, he said: “You will do a great deal of apostolate across Africa... And even in Europe. Take heart, take heart. I always say the same: there is much work ahead of you.” Then, light-heartedly, he added to enliven the conversation: “You’re all so quiet

today!” One of them responded with a joke that made everyone laugh.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the get together began. Another woman had just started to share an anecdote when she abruptly fell silent: the founder had taken ill, feeling nauseous and vomiting, and motioned for people to leave the room. Don Álvaro – perhaps to downplay the situation – remarked that it was very hot. A few women stayed behind to assist, bringing towels. Fr. Echevarría requested some medicine, which they didn’t have on hand, so someone was sent to the pharmacy. In the meantime, the founder, who had recovered slightly, reassured them, saying they needn’t worry, that nothing like this had ever happened to him before, and that it was probably due to the heat. After a few minutes, he went down to the first floor of the house.

He paused briefly in a sitting room, and then moved to the room reserved for the priest who oversaw the house's formational activities. There, they offered him the medicine they'd brought from the pharmacy and a glass of water. Once again, he apologised for the inconvenience and expressed sorrow at not having visited Villa delle Rose more often that year. After making a genuflection before the tabernacle in the oratory, he went to the garage, where Javier Cotelo was already waiting for him. He put on a pair of sunglasses. Meanwhile, Fr. Javier Echevarría placed a basin and a towel in the car, which they had been given in case of further need. It was 11.15 a.m.

The moment of death

As the car engine started, the fuel warning light came on. Though it was inconvenient, Javier Cotelo

estimated there was enough petrol to reach Villa Tevere. Don Álvaro asked him to take the quickest route back, and after briefly consulting with Don Javier, Cotelo decided to retrace the same route they had taken earlier.

There was little conversation during the journey. Cotelo drove quickly, but calmly. Now and then, he glanced in the rear-view mirror at the founder's face: "He looked a little pale, with a tired expression, as if he were longing for more air." He later recalled that, even though they distracted him somewhat with conversation, "his face continued to show deep fatigue."

They arrived at the garage of Villa Tevere at 11:55 a.m. The founder changed his glasses and got out of the car with some agility. However, he ascended the stairs to the ground floor of the Villa Vecchia (the building within Villa Tevere where

he lived and worked) very slowly, pausing on each step. From the ground floor, Don Javier called for Fr. José Luis Soria, a priest and physician. The founder and Don Javier entered his study, while Don Álvaro remained outside to explain to José Luis what had occurred.

At that moment, there was a loud noise and Fr. Echevarría called out in alarm. The founder had collapsed, hitting his head and losing consciousness. They immediately sat him upright against the wall of the room. According to Fr Javier, “a few minutes later (he still seemed to be breathing) we laid him down fully, resting his head on a folded towel,” and Don Álvaro “began artificial respiration and cardiac massage.” They then placed his head on a pillow from Don Álvaro’s bed. Don Javier brought in an oxygen cylinder and mask and placed it over his face. The doctor administered a Coramine

injection in the founder's left arm to stimulate heart and lung function. Don Álvaro gave him sacramental absolution.

Everything had happened so quickly that no one thought to call an ambulance; they had a doctor present and had begun using the available medical resources. But now, they faced the hard truth that the body was not responding to treatment. At 12:35 p.m., they called two more members of the General Council, Fernando Valenciano and Fr. Daniel Cummings, to assist in rotating the task of administering artificial respiration. Meanwhile, Don Álvaro telephoned the Central Secretary, Carmen Ramos, asking that the women in the house gather in the oratory to pray with great intensity for at least ten minutes for a very urgent intention. He then asked for the holy oils and

administered the anointing of the sick.

At 1:05 p.m., Dr. Juan Manuel Verdaguer and Umberto Farri (vice-secretary of St. Gabriel) arrived with an electrocardiogram machine they had fetched from a doctor's office. The result was negative. According to Don Javier's notes, Dr. José Luis Soria "attempted to give another Coramine injection, but was unable to access a vein and administered it intramuscularly instead. Then, he told us, he gave an intracardiac injection of adrenaline, and afterwards another one. He said there was no detectable pulse, the pupils did not react to light, and no heartbeat could be heard through the stethoscope." Exhausted, Dr. Soria "closed his eyes, which had remained slightly open." He told them that "the only pulse still detectable was the occasional movement produced by the cardiac massage, and it was

inconsistent.” He added that, unless a miracle occurred, the Father had died, as there was no ocular reflex.

The rest of the General Council was informed, and Don Álvaro led a prayer for the dead aloud. They then removed the oxygen mask.

Meanwhile, Don Álvaro called Carmen Ramos again to convey the sad news to the women of the Work. It was 1:30 p.m.

Del Portillo, Echevarría, and Soria prepared the founder’s body. Then, with the help of other members of the General Council, they carried him down to the oratory of Our Lady of Peace, to keep vigil and begin preparations for the funeral and burial.

Saint Josemaría’s legacy

When he was just 26 years old, Josemaría Escrivá received from God the mission of proclaiming that

everyone in the Church is called to holiness; to union with Jesus Christ. He sought to live that spirit personally; he looked for men and women who felt called to live it out in the midst of their ordinary surroundings, and he gave life to an institution, Opus Dei, that spread this message across the globe.

In the final years of his life, Saint Josemaría repeatedly affirmed that when he died, his children could not go astray, because the spirit of Opus Dei was “engraved.” After his death, those words took on deeper meaning. The spirit of the Work was carved into the founder’s own life. His daily example of self-giving inspired the faithful of the Work, as well as cooperators and friends, to desire holiness.

He also communicated the spirit of the Work through his teachings. When he spoke, he moved hearts and

looked each listener in the eye. He felt a compelling need to share a message he had received from God. He did so through preaching and in family-style gatherings, in one-on-one conversations and before large audiences.

Among these teachings, he transmitted the spirit of Opus Dei through his writings. The book *The Way*, with millions of copies in numerous languages, stirred many souls to seek personal friendship with Jesus Christ. He wrote six *Instructions* and 42 lengthy *Letters*, explaining the spirit of the Work to his sons and daughters. In addition, he carried on an extensive correspondence with friends and acquaintances. Those letters reflect the passion of a man of God.

From 2 October 1928 onwards, Saint Josemaría dedicated his entire life to building Opus Dei with faithful

adherence to the light he had received from God. At the age of 73, he passed the torch to the next generation.

[1] Saint Josemaría used the phrase “norms of the plan of life” to refer to the set of practices of piety and Christian customs that mark the day with moments dedicated exclusively to time with God and constant references to the Lord. The expression, found in the spiritual literature of his time, may have been taken from the book *Plan de Vida*, published in 1909 by Saint Pedro Poveda, a close friend of the founder of Opus Dei. Wherever it came from, Saint Josemaría made the term his own and used it frequently (*Diccionario de san Josemaría*, entry: *Plan de vida*).

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