

How God's will brought true fulfilment and happiness to a young couple's lives

By Leire Zalba

MY name is Leire. I am 33 and married to Robert. Our plan in life was to build "a bright and cheerful home", an expression I learnt from St Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei.

We've been married for nine years and have four children, including two daughters with Down's Syndrome. With them around, our home is indeed bright and cheerful.

Here, I'd like to share with you my observations on my own upbringing, my faith and the experience of raising my own children.

I was born in Durango, in the Spanish part of the Basque Country, on October 26, 1975, and I am the youngest of six sisters.

Our parents always taught us to practise our faith and emphasised how important it is to love one another in the family and those around us as well. I think this why, now that we are grown up, we remain very closely united.

I had a very normal childhood. When I finished school I went to Bilbao to study Technical Training at the Arangoya Centre, which is run by people of Opus Dei. What a wonderful five years I had! It was there that God had arranged for me to take a new course. Till then my idea had been "live your life, it only lasts a couple of days" – of course that's true, but the secret is living it well.

At Arangoya, I came to understand Opus Dei and asked to join it as a supernumerary member. What helped me to do so? Spiritual guidance, prayer, plus another important factor: the cheerfulness of the people around me.

That same year I began to go out with Robert, who is now my husband. So, for me it was a really special year. When I finished at Arangoya my great idea was to be a nurse, but my marks weren't good enough and instead I chose to study special needs education in San Sebastian.

My first year wasn't exactly brilliant. We had nine subjects and I only passed one in the initial exams. It seemed hopeless. Fortunately my parents encouraged me, telling me, "Finish the year and then you can decide." Well I did manage and completed the three-year course and felt great.

In my final year, Robert and I decided to get married. I finished in June and we were married on October 2, 1999. It was a wonderful day and we did our best to prepare well for it. I say prepare, because both of us tried to live our engage-

ment according to Christian values.

We used to pray together and that helped, because when you struggle and respect the person you care for, you love them even more. What we wanted to do was to build "a bright and cheerful home" so we set about doing it.

A year later, Ander was born, and then we had Asier; after that, Nerea and Uribarri. We can't complain. God has blessed us with four jewels, each one more beautiful than the last and I say this because the two youngest ones have Down's Syndrome.

What at first seemed a tragedy turned out to be a present from God, because when you accept God's will, everything turns out that way, as a present from God.

We looked for support from family and friends, and they encouraged us a lot and they continue to do so.

St Josemaría used to say that God sends children like this to families whom he loves a lot. That's why Robert and I think we are very fortunate to have these children who keep us even more united. Besides, this has helped us to not close in on ourselves and to open ourselves to other families in a similar situation.

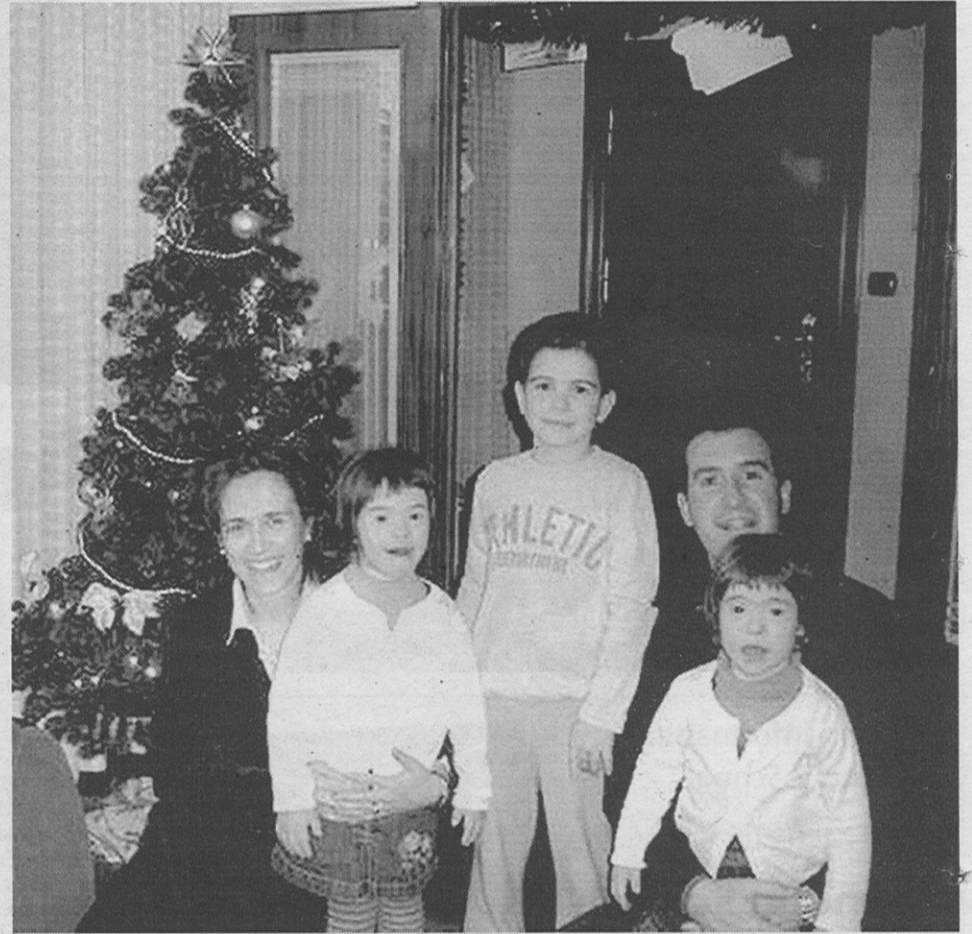
Prayer

In Durango, a lot of people admire us, and many others think we are crazy and pity us for having so many children and, on top of that, two of them with Down's. But we don't care too much about that, because we know that the foundation of our marriage is to please God, something we try to do every day.

We sense that our daughters are going to be something great in our lives. They are helping to change many hearts, in our family and in the people of Durango.

The fact is that however much you plan things in life, God brings you surprises like this one and changes everything at the drop of a hat. We also like to think, from the bottom of our hearts that, if these two daughters had to be born in any family and be welcomed and loved without condition, ours was that family.

That was the first thing we said after they were born when we were told their condition and we kissed immediately. We know that God's hand is behind all this and that, with the light of His grace, He will help us to face all future challenges.



Happy family: Above; Leire and Robert with Uribarri and Nerea, with eldest son Ander stood behind Bottom left; Asier, Uribarri, Ander and Nerea having fun Below; Ander and Asier are all smiles, and sisters Neria and Uribarri pictured together in their matching sweaters

