



Saint Josemaría Escrivá

Founder of Opus Dei

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I shall never forget that Mass

Pedro Casciaro

During the Spanish Civil War, when Saint Josemaría could not minister as a priest and was in constant danger of death because of the violent religious persecution, he had no option but to escape from Spain over the Pyrenees and go through Andorra to re-enter Spain in the free zone. During the arduous and highly dangerous journey – if they had been caught they would probably have been shot – he told his group that he was a priest, and celebrated holy Mass as often as he could. One of his companions was Pedro Casciaro, who tells here what he remembers of the Mass celebrated by Saint Josemaría on 28 November 1937, after an interminable march.

We came to a deep ravine in the Ribalera gorge, at the bottom of a mountain of reddish-coloured rocks. There, before we rested, the Father said he wanted to celebrate Mass. The place chosen was not in the hollows itself, but nearby, in the open, a little below a baby waterfall formed by water seeping through the rocks.

During the previous night's march we had heard some blasphemies as there were all kinds of people in the group. In addition to twenty or so Catalan men there were also some professional smugglers. Even so the Father wanted everyone to know he was a priest, and he got ready to say Mass. The group was still not all that large, but at least twenty people attended who would surely not have heard Mass since the beginning of the war. Everyone behaved very respectfully.

I will never forget that Mass. There was no rock high enough to serve as an altar. But there was a lower one which was flat enough. So the Father had to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice kneeling the whole time. In spite of fatigue and the untoward circumstances, he celebrated Mass with such fervour that we were suffused with his piety and devotion. Two of us had to kneel down as well, on either side of him, to hold down the corporal so that no hosts would blow away. Our guide, half-hidden among the trees, observed it all from a respectful distance.

I especially noticed one particular Catalan lad who heard the Mass with real

devotion. He looked like a university student. His name was Antonio Dalmasses, and later we became friends. He wrote in his diary: "A priest who is with us celebrated Mass on a rock kneeling, almost lying, on the ground. He did not say it as priests do in churches. His clear, devout way of saying it went right to the heart. I have never heard Mass said as it was today. I am not sure if it was because of the circumstances or because the priest is a saint.

"Holy Communion was particularly moving. It was difficult to distribute because we could hardly move, even though we were all grouped round the altar. We were all dressed in tatters, exhausted, dishevelled, and with several days' growth of beard. One person had ripped his trousers and the whole length of his leg was exposed. Our hands were bloodstained from scratches. Our eyes were tearful. But more than anything else, God was there with us."

Pedro Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, Scepter, 1997, pp. 165-7.