



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Places in Rome (11)

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Little shrines to Our Lady

When St Josemaría arrived in Rome in 1946 he was delighted to see how many pictures and statues of Our Lady are to be found in the streets there. He often used to ask other people in Opus Dei whether they had seen them, and encouraged them to discover more, and to say a few loving words to Our Lady whenever they saw one of these little shrines.

This was a habit he had acquired in his youth, as he wrote in his “personal notes”. “This morning I backtracked just like a little boy, to greet our Lady before her statue on Atocha Street, at the top of the house the Congregation of Saint Philip has there. I had forgotten to greet her. What little boy misses a chance to tell his mother he loves her? My Lady, may I never become an ex-child.” (A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I p. 257).

In the historic center of Rome there are around five hundred *edicole* or little shrines to Our Lady. In the mid-nineteenth century there were almost three thousand, but many of them disappeared after the city-center restructuring carried out from 1870 onwards. The word *edicola* designates the little construction like a miniature dome or a pane of glass, that shelters the picture or statue from the weather.

It is not certain when these representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary began to be set on the walls of buildings, but many authors suggest that the spread of this custom was connected with one of the best-loved paintings of Our Lady in Rome, venerated in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major under the title *Salus Populi Romani* – Salvation of the People Rome. According to an old tradition, the icon received this name because of a miracle that occurred in the year 590. Rome was suffering from the plague, and the inhabitants of the city carried the icon in procession from Saint Mary Major to Saint Peter’s to implore an end to the epidemic. When the

procession reached the fortress called Hadrian's Mausoleum, an angel appeared, re-sheathing his sword, as a sign that the sickness had been ended through Our Lady's intercession. From then on, the fortress was known as Castel Sant'Angelo – the castle of the holy Angel – and reproductions of the icon *Salus Populi Romani* were placed on the house-fronts past which the procession had gone, in thanksgiving.

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the custom of placing pictures or statues of Our Lady on the outer walls of buildings became still more widespread, and accounts of miracles are linked to the memory of some of these representations. Until well into the nineteenth century, the only street-lighting in Rome was that afforded by the lamps or candles set by the faithful before these little shrines to Our Lady. As one student of sacred art expressed it at the end of the nineteenth century, "The ever-burning lamps placed by the faithful before the images of Mary are at the same time a sign of devotion and a light to guide the wayfarer; who, glimpsing the face of the Blessed Virgin by their light, is saved from getting lost either along the paths of life or along those of the city."

On the front of n. 36 Via di Villa Sacchetti is a representation of Our Lady of Loreto, which was set there at the request of Saint Josemaría, following the old Roman tradition of enriching the house-fronts in this way. In 1957, when this part of the building was being finished, the founder of Opus Dei asked for a Roman-style *Madonella* to be set there, with a shelf underneath where flowers and candles could be placed. In that way everyone who went past could pray for Our Lady's protection. In Rome's Piazza delle Cinque Lune, there is an *edicola* with a little door for people to have access to it from inside the building. Saint Josemaría thought that this method was very practical, since it enables the picture to be cleaned and looked after when necessary, and the idea was copied. The representation was done in mosaic, which is hard-wearing and withstands the weather. It is framed in light-colored travertine stone from Tivoli, contrasting with the reddish plaster of the surrounding walls in a way often seen on Roman buildings.

Saint Josemaría's love for the Blessed Virgin Mary was expressed in this and many other representations of her. As he explained, her children feel this devotion as a real need. He said, "If we look at the world, at the People of God, during this month of May, we will see devotion to our Lady taking the form of many old and new customs practiced with great love. It makes me very happy to see that this devotion is always alive, awakening in Christians a supernatural desire to act as 'members of God's household'." (*Christ is Passing By*, 139)

Pictures and statues of Our Lady in the streets

An elegant oval medallion representing the Virgin and Child is to be found on a corner of the **Palazzo Chigi**, in Piazza Colonna in the center of Rome. Mary and her Son are sculpted in ivory-white glazed terracotta on a blue background. The large oval, in the style of the Florentine ceramics by Della Robbia, dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century. It has a gilded cornice, adorned with intertwining ribbons and leaves and cherubs' heads, and is supported below by a simple stone bracket carved with acanthus leaves.

Opposite the **Trevi Fountain** is a simple image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, probably dating from the 1700s. It is a bust carved in stone and set within an oval stucco niche, situated between the Via delle Muratte and the Vicolo del Forno. The folds of the tunic and cloak are reminiscent of classical Roman sculpture. The original oil-lamp which, as was customary, illuminated the statue, has been replaced by an electric lamp whose glass cover seeks to imitate tongues of flame.

Piazza della Rotonda, where the Pantheon is situated, is overlooked by a regal picture of Our Lady set in a commanding position. The fresco is a large one, measuring 1.5 meters by 1 meter, appearing still larger because of the elaborately sculpted frame, which all together takes up almost two floors of the building, from the ground floor to the top of the first floor. The sponsor's name is unknown, but according to the Gregorian land registry (1816-1859), the house was the dwelling of Benigno and Alessandro Giorgi and Vicennio Michele di Rosi. Iconographical studies, and the existence of an engraving of the picture by Vasi dating from 1775, indicate that the fresco was created in the mid-eighteenth century. The subject-matter is the Immaculate Conception, reinforced by the quotation from the Song of Songs inscribed below the picture: *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te* ("You are all fair, my love, there is no flaw in you"). The picture follows traditional representations of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception: dressed in a blue robe, her hands folded on her breast, she stands on the globe of the world, with the moon and a serpent beneath her feet. Devotion to the Immaculate Conception of Mary was widespread in Rome long before 1854 when Pope Pius IX proclaimed it as a dogma of the Faith.