



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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St John Lateran

Places in Rome (12)

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St John Lateran

During the first centuries, because of persecutions, celebration of the Eucharist and instruction in the faith took place in private houses, which some Christian families – usual those who were better off and whose houses were therefore larger – placed at the disposal of the Church. These were the early house churches, which in Rome are also called *tituli* – “titles”.

The *titulus* or title was a wooden tablet that hung at the entrance to Roman villas, bearing the name of the owner; the household was also called after the *gens* or family to which the owner belonged.

With the passage of time, many *domus ecclesiae* (house churches of this kind) ended up being donated to the Church. When freedom of worship was finally granted, Christian churches were built on those venerated sites, whose history went back to apostolic times in some cases, and to famous Roman martyrs in others. From the fourth century onwards, each of these early house churches was dedicated to a saint. In many cases, this was the first owner of the house, who had given not just the house but his or her own life for the faith.

By mapping the “tituli” that are mentioned in some ancient documents, it is possible to see where Christians were living in 3rd-century Rome. The oldest are the “Titulus Clementis” (the church of San Clemente today), the “Titulus Anastasiae” (Santa Anastasia), the “Titulus Byzantis” (Santi Giovanni e Paolo, on the Celian Hill) the “Titulus Equitii” (Santi Silvestro e Martino ai Monti, on the Esquiline Hill), the “Titulus Chrysogoni” (San Crisogono, in Trastevere), the “Titulus Sabiniae” (Santa Sabina, on the Aventine Hill), the “Titulus Gaii” (Santa Susanna), the “Titulus Crescentianae” (San Sisto Vecchio), and the “Titulus Pudentis” (Santa Pudenziana). These nine “Tituli” go back to the origins of Christianity in Rome, and there are another three that date from the end of the

third century: the “Titulus Callisti” (the church of Santa Maria in Trastevere), the “Titulus Caeciliae” (Santa Cecilia), and the “Titulus Marcelli” (San Marcello al Corso).

It has been calculated that before the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 there were more than twenty “Tituli” or house churches in Rome. By that time about one-third of the city’s population had been converted to Christianity, but this fact had as yet left no mark on the architecture of Rome, since the Church was not a legal entity. The Emperor Constantine, as well as publicly authorizing Christian worship, sponsored the building of the first Christian basilicas, both in Rome and in Jerusalem.

A noble race of people

The first Christian church to be built in Rome was the Basilica of St John Lateran, on a site that had previously been occupied by the barracks of the Imperial Guards. From then until the fourteenth-century exile in Avignon, this Basilica was the residence of the Popes and the Cathedral of Rome. Accordingly, it was given the title “*Omnium Urbis et Orbis Ecclesiarum Mater et Caput*” – “Mother and Head of all the churches in the City and in the world”, as the inscription at the entrance says.

Originally this church was called the Basilica of the Saviour, but in the Middle Ages it was also dedicated to St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. It was consecrated by Pope Sylvester in 318 AD, although the construction was not completed until several decades later. Since then it has been rebuilt several times after sacking, earthquakes and fires. The present structure dates from the mid-seventeenth century and was designed by Borromini, though the façade and apse underwent later transformations.

A little apart from the Basilica, in the right-hand corner of the great Piazza San Giovanni, stands an ancient octagonal building, plain but elegant in design. This is the Baptistery, which was built in the fifth century during the pontificate of Sixtus III, on the site of an earlier one built by the Emperor Constantine.

On the interior walls, five frescos represent scenes from Constantine’s life, including the apparition of the Holy Cross with the promise “*in hoc signo vinces*” (in this sign you will conquer), which tradition tells us occurred while the Emperor was encamped with his army in the area of Saxa Rubra, on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in which Constantine defeated Maxentius.

In the middle of the Baptistery is the circular pool in which Christian catechumens were baptized by immersion, surrounded by eight porphyry pillars with Ionic and

Corinthian capitals.

These pillars support an architrave inscribed with some Latin verses attributed to Pope St Sixtus III (432-440), which admirably summarize Christian teaching on Baptism. They sound so magnificent that it is worth reading them in the original Latin. A translation follows the Latin text.

Inscription on the Architrave of the Lateran Basilica:

*Gens sacrandae polis hic semine nascitur almo
Quam fecundatis Spiritus edit aquis.
Virgineo fetu genitrix Ecclesia natos
Quas spirante Deo concipit amne parit.
Caelorum regnum sperate hoc fonte renati:
Non recipit felix vita semel genitos.
Fons hic est vitae qui totum diluit orbem,
Sumens de Christi vulnere principium.
Mergere peccator sacro purgande fluente,
Quem veterem accipiet, proferet unda novum.
Insons esse volens isto mundare lavacro,
Seu patrio premeris crimine seu proprio.
Nulla renascentum est distantia quos facit unum
Unus fons, unus spiritus, una fides.
Nec numerus quemquam scelerum nec forma suorum
Terreat hoc natus flumine sanctus erit.*

Here is born a people of noble race, destined for Heaven, whom the Spirit brings forth in the waters he has made fruitful.

Mother Church conceives her offspring by the breath of God, and bears them virginally in this water.

Hope for the Kingdom of Heaven, you who are reborn in this font.

Eternal life does not await those who are only born once.

This is the spring of life that waters the whole world, Taking its origin from the Wounds of Christ.

Sinner, to be purified, go down into the holy water. It receives the unregenerate and brings him forth a new man.

If you wish to be made innocent, be cleansed in this pool, whether you are weighed down by original sin or your own.

There is no barrier between those who are reborn and made one by the one font, the one Spirit, and the one faith.

Let neither the number nor the kind of their sins terrify anyone; Once reborn in this

water, they will be holy.

Apostles of apostles

By Baptism, all Christians are called to holiness and apostolate. The inscription on the Lateran Baptistery shows a keen awareness of this fact in the early Christians. This is why St Josemaría explained the spirit of Opus Dei by comparing it to **the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by the simple and sublime fact of their Baptism.**¹¹

In the first centuries of Christianity, those being received into the Church were baptized by triple immersion, in honor of the Blessed Trinity, in the pool in the Baptistery, and for the whole of the following week they wore a white garment, to signify that, now that their soul had been purified in the baptismal waters, they did not wish to stain it again with sin. If they had the misfortune to fall, they went contritely to the Sacrament of Penance. But how great their desire for holiness, and how far they were from a merely negative struggle! They were happy to have found the Truth and Good – the Love of God – , and they also desired, very naturally, to go to God in the company of many other people: relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. They announced the Gospel joyfully and the Lord made their labors fruitful; but, as we know, spreading the message of salvation often meant risking their lives or enduring serious persecution. Despite all this, the early Christians were not stopped by the obstacles. When St Peter and St John had been warned by the authorities to keep quiet, they had replied, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard!”²² These words seem to ring out again and again, in the attitudes and deeds of the early Christians.

Today, like then, the baptized have the task of working to bring the message of salvation to all people, throughout the whole world.³³ Accordingly, as Christians, we should not only try to do apostolate ourselves, but should also encourage our friends to become apostles in their turn, and commit their lives to the marvelous task of bringing souls to Christ.

“Each of you must try to be an apostle of apostles”,⁴⁴ wrote St Josemaría in *The Way*. God is counting on every single Christian to work for “all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁵⁵ And it is vital for all the baptized to become fully aware of their calling to holiness and apostolate. When they do, they can bring true happiness to many people, and they themselves are very happy, because they fill every human reality with Christian meaning and hope. As St Josemaría said, “Through Baptism we are made bearers of the word of Christ, a word which soothes, enkindles and reassures the wounded conscience. For Our

Lord to act in us and for us, we must tell him that we are ready to struggle each day, even though we realize we are feeble and useless, and the heavy burden of our personal shortcomings and weakness weighs down upon us. We must tell him again and again that we trust in him and in his help: if necessary, like Abraham, hoping 'against all hope'. Thus we will go about our work with renewed vigor, and we will teach others how to live free from worry, hatred, suspicion, ignorance, misunderstandings and pessimism, because God can do everything.”⁶⁶

Notes

1. St Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations*, 24.
2. Acts 4:20.
3. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3.
4. St Josemaría, *The Way*, 920.
5. 1 Tim 2:4.
6. St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 210.