



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The Roman Forum

Places in Rome (7)

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The Roman Forum

In the time of the Emperors, after a long period of peace and prosperity, the population of Rome had reached the impressive figure of one million people. A tiny minority of these lived in tranquil, spacious villas, while the most of the common people had to put up with living in apartment blocks known as *insulae* or “islands”. These were several stories high, built with low-quality materials, and crowded together, so that a map of the city consisted of a dense tangle of streets and alleyways.

Rome in those days benefited from considerable advances such as drainage, thermal baths, and aqueducts. But to get an idea of the conditions in which people lived, it has to be borne in mind that the apartments were extremely small, very often consisting of one room per family; there was no hot water, no central heating, and no glass in the windows; and the narrowness of the streets, among other things, very often meant that when fires broke out, whole districts were burned down.

The Romans mitigated the discomforts of their homes by spending as little time in them as they could. They would get up very early to make full use of the daylight. When dawn was breaking they would already be out and about, on their way to work. For many of them, this meant going to the forums, which were the nerve-centers of the city’s life.

Imperial splendor

The magnificence of the public buildings offered a striking contrast with the modest dwellings of the crowded residential blocks. They reflected the immense power of the Roman Empire, and were like a summary of the whole of Rome’s history.

At the beginning, in the sixth century B.C., the Roman Forum was simply a market-place, but religious buildings soon began to be built there. One of the first was the Temple of Vesta, where the sacred fire was kept burning perpetually in honor of the goddess of the hearth. Beside it was the Regia, the royal palace which, according to legend, had been built for Numa, the second king of Rome. When the monarchy fell, the Regia was used to house the archive of the Calendars and the Annals, which recorded the history of the City of Rome.

The coming of the Republic saw an increase in political activity, and the Forum filled up with government and administrative buildings. The Curia, where the Senate held its deliberations, is still in good condition today. Very little, however, remains of the *Comitium*, the circular space where the assemblies met to elect the magistrates. Likewise, little is to be seen of the platform called the Rostra, or ships' prows, from which orators addressed the people. All the crucial episodes in the history of the Roman Republic originated in this part of the Forum: the speeches of the Gracchi to improve the lot of the common people; the polemics between Marius and Sulla; Cicero's denunciations of Catiline; the debate in the Senate about ordering Julius Caesar to abandon his military command – an order that he disobeyed, crossing the Rubicon instead and taking the City; and the granting of the title Augustus to Octavius in 29A.D., which is reckoned as the beginning of the imperial era.

This new change of government was followed by extension and improvements to the forums, which became more and more spectacular. Together with the ancient Roman Forum, the Imperial Forums were built by Julius Caesar, Augustus, Trajan, Nerva and Vespasian. These great public spaces were imposing to see: the broad roads were paved with travertine marble, as were the squares, which were usually dominated by enormous statues; on the buildings, the glimmer of bronze alternated with the gray, white and ochre tones of marble. In religious and civic buildings alike, every detail was carefully designed to stand the test of time, and to impress the beholder.

Most imposing of the civic buildings were the majestic basilicas, used for legal trials and commercial transactions. The vast spaces inside these buildings were divided into long naves and aisles by lines of pillars. In the colonnades along the exterior of the basilicas were rows of booths selling every kind of ware. The remains of the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine give an idea of the enormous dimensions attained by some of these buildings.

The Forum was adorned with many monuments and statues, and especially by pillars such as that of Trajan, and the various triumphal arches in honor of Titus,

Septimius Severus, Constantine, and others. These were carved with depictions of each emperor's victorious military campaigns, to commemorate his moments of glory for future generations, following the triumphs when the victor was borne in procession along the Via Sacra to the applause and acclamation of the populace.

Obviously there was a risk that all the praise and adulation would go to the emperor's head, so that he would desire his subjects to forget that he was a mere mortal. This did in fact happen, in several cases, when an emperor assumed the status of a god, or accorded divine worship to his own ancestors and even some of his relatives. Augustus, for example, dedicated a temple to Divus Iulius; Antoninus Pius built another in honor of his wife Faustina; and Maxentius built a third in memory of his son Romulus.

Divine worship of the emperor was on the increase when Christianity arrived in Rome. For the Romans this was perfectly compatible with their polytheism, as shown by the fact that the deified emperors also built larger and larger temples to Mars, Venus, Apollo, Cybele, and other gods and goddesses. What was not permitted, however, was for one religion to claim to be the only true one, with the logical consequence that the rest were false. The authorities were tolerant of any novelty provided that it fitted in with the pervading relativism. The Christian faith did not.

The salt of the earth

"How glorious must the heavenly Jerusalem be, if earthly Rome shines thus!" ¹

These words of St Fulgentius, recorded by one of his disciples, reflect the great admiration aroused by the sight of Rome in those who traveled from the provinces of the Empire and saw the city for the first time. By his time, in the early sixth century, Rome had been evangelized, the ancient pagan temples had been closed for over a century, and some Christian churches had been built in the Roman Forum itself. In his *Hymn to St Lawrence*, Prudentius exults at the victory of the faith in the heart of the Empire: the Quirites, or native Roman citizens, now fill the churches; the leaders of the Senate, who formerly held it a great honor to ride in pagan religious processions down the Via Sacra, now kiss the thresholds of the martyrs' shrines; the noble families delight to see their sons and daughters dedicating their lives to the service of the Church; the fire that burned in the Temple of Vesta has been extinguished, and the leader of the Vestal Virgins who guarded it, Claudia, was even converted to Christianity; the Cross, in short, is raised over the ancient pagan symbols. ²

How was this change possible? As well as the action of God, one of the factors that explain it is that the first Christians never considered themselves as

separated from their city or their job by the fact of embracing the faith. Many of them worked in the Forum, often directly in the service of the Empire; even in the times of Sts Peter and Paul, some were patricians and were among the three hundred Senators who met in the Curia; others were lawyers, attorneys or judges; in the Epistle to the Philipians, written during his captivity in Rome, St Paul sends greetings from the “saints” who were of Caesar’s household; ³ and in the Epistle to the Romans he cites the names of Aristobulus and Narcisus, who had worked with the Emperor Claudius. ⁴

Almost certainly some members of the Emperor’s family embraced the faith as early as the end of the first century A.D. Titus Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, for instance, were a married couple related to the Emperor Domitian. They had seven children, of whom the eldest two had been selected as candidates for the Imperial throne and educated accordingly by the famous teacher of rhetoric, Quintillian. However, in A.D. 95 Flavius Clemens was suddenly put on trial on a charge of atheism, which was only used against Christians. Domitilla, who was banished to the island of Pandataria, is also known as the owner of the land which included the catacombs that bear her name. Their children never attained the throne, since in A.D. 96 Domitian himself was assassinated, and the Flavian dynasty ended.

Persecution and martyrdom were an ever-present danger for the first Christian faithful. But even in times of tranquility, ordinary life was not free from obstacles. In Roman society, daily life was filled with acts of adoration of the gods and goddesses. People requesting a loan had to take an oath in the name of the gods; those taking up public office had first to offer sacrifice; if someone walked past a temple or the statue of one of the gods, it was common practice to take off his hat, and so on. There was a long list of accepted modes of behavior whose omission was considered a mark of impoliteness and a betrayal of the traditions of their ancestors. This was one of the most damaging accusations made by Celsus against the Christians: “If they refuse to render due service to the gods, and to respect those who are set over this service, let them not come to manhood, or marry wives, or have children, or indeed take any share in the affairs of life; but let them depart hence with all speed, and leave no posterity behind them.” ⁵

Public opinion generally, in those times, shared in the same intolerance towards the followers of Christ. At the very least, Christians were thought to be “odd” people. Given that they helped their neighbor, were faithful to their spouses, paid their taxes, and scrupulously avoided any dishonesty in business, the reason for this was their fanatical devotion to their strange religion, and to prove themselves

superior to others. Such twisted interpretation was aggravated by slander and insults, such as that suffered by a young man called Alexamenos in the *Paedagogium*, the training school for the Emperor's page-boys. This school was situated on the Palatine, close to the Forum, and archaeologists discovered a graffito depicting a man praying before a crucified figure with the head of an ass. Beside it a scratched inscription says: "Alexamenos adores his god". Nearby, an inscription in different handwriting reads: "Alexamenos the faithful." This may well have been the retort of young Alexamenos himself to his companions' taunts.

In many respects, morality in the Roman Empire was in a deplorable state. Celebrations were marked by indecent plays in the theatres, human beings were made to kill one another for the entertainment of circus crowds, and art portrayed lasciviousness. Divorce was allowed, and the birthrate was very low because of widespread recourse to abortion and infanticide among other reasons. It is true that not all Romans lived in this way, and morality went into really steep decline only towards the end of the imperial period. But it was always the case that widely accepted pagan customs contradicted the human dignity that Christianity had come to restore.

Faced with all this – degraded customs, persecution, slander, insults, and the very real threat of martyrdom – the first Christians could simply have turned their backs on the world and retreated into a ghetto, as Celsus maliciously urged them to. This, however, never occurred to them. They had found the faith, their Christian vocation, their calling to holiness, in the middle of their work: in the Forum, in studios and workshops, in the army, in the merchants' wagons, etc. They felt no less Roman than their fellow-citizens: they loved their splendid City, and considered the Empire to be not just good but providential, since in the political and cultural unity it had brought about, the faith could spread more easily. All that they rejected were the false gods and the brutal customs. These last they aimed to purify, conscious as they were of being "the salt of the earth".⁶

Ordinary people

Among the ruins of the Roman Forum it is easy to recall the phrase St Josemaría often used to sum up Opus Dei: "The easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians."⁷ During the first months he spent in Rome he would often repeat phrases like the following, which he wrote years later, to impress upon people's minds Opus Dei's secular character: "The early Christians lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world... just like

any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith.”

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The Second Vatican Council proclaimed strongly that all the faithful are called to holiness, and that it is the responsibility of the laity to bring earthly realities to Christ. In the nineteen-forties, many people identified Christian perfection with the religious life, and it was hard for people to grasp fully how anyone could aspire to Christian perfection in the middle of the world, working at any and every honest job.

St Josemaría never tired of repeating that the faithful of Opus Dei are “ordinary people”, like the first Christians. And he often said, too, that Christians today have the same means as they did to conquer in interior battles for holiness. “Think about what the Holy Spirit says, and let yourself be filled with awe and gratitude: *Elegit nos ante mundi constitutionem* – he chose us before the foundation of the world, *ut essemus sancti in conspectu eius!* – that we might be holy in his presence. To be holy isn’t easy, but it isn’t difficult either. To be holy is to be a good Christian, to resemble Christ. The more closely a person resembles Christ, the more Christian he is, the more he belongs to Christ, the holier he is. And what means do we have? The same means the early faithful had, when they saw Jesus directly or caught a glimpse of him in the accounts the Apostles and Evangelists gave of him.”⁹

Using these means, the Christians of the first centuries after Christ became saints, in the midst of a society that was pagan, partly corrupt, and that persecuted them to the death. And with those means, they did apostolate wherever they found themselves, until they transformed a civilization that was hostile to the faith, working from within it. “To follow in Christ’s footsteps, today’s apostle does not need to reform anything, but even less has he to take no part in the contemporary affairs going on around him. He has only to act as the first Christians did, and give life to his environment.”¹⁰

Notes

1. *Life of St Fulgentius of Ruspe*, III, 27
2. Cf. Prudentius, *Peristephanon* II, 513-529
3. Cf. *Phil* 4:22
4. Cf. *Rom* 16:10-11
5. Quoted by Origen, *Contra Celso*, VIII, 55
6. *Mt* 5:13

7. St Josemaría, *Conversations*, 24
8. *Ibid.*
9. St Josemaría, *ibid.*
10. *The Forge*, 10