



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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The Via Appia

Places in Rome (9)

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The Via Appia

In the year 312 B.C. the Senator Appius Claudius was appointed Censor of the Republic of Rome. During his term of office he undertook many major reforms and public works, but history remembers him principally for the construction of the road that bears his name, the Via Appia or Appian Way.

The aim of the new road was to improve communication between Rome and Capua, so that the Roman legions could march more swiftly along the 195 kilometers that separate the two cities. As the years went by the road was extended several times, and by the second century B.C. it reached as far as Brindisi, the main port for the eastern provinces, more than five hundred kilometers from Rome. Four centuries later the Emperor Trajan improved it for the use of carriage traffic, and the Via Appia became one of the main economic arteries of the Empire. It was popularly known as *Regina viarum*, the Queen of roads, both because of its great length and its remarkable beauty: on each side of the roadway houses, temples and mausoleums were built, adding a touch of splendor to the enchanting simplicity of the Roman countryside. It made a good prelude for the traveler who was about to encounter the majesty of the Eternal City.

The Appian Way has been the scene of several events prized by Christians. The Acts of the Apostles tells how St Paul entered Rome by this road. "And so we came to Rome. And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage."¹

St Paul was to appear before the Emperor's tribunal. A group of Christians came out to meet him at Tres Tabernae or Three Taverns, a resting-place for travelers about fifty kilometers from the city; and some of them came another twelve

kilometers further still, to Forum Appii or the Forum of Appius, the end of the navigable canal from Terracina. It is easy to imagine how moved St Paul was, and it is also a graphic illustration of how the first Christians loved each other and the veneration in which the Apostles were held.

The Via Appia is also where the Catacombs of St Sebastian and of St Callixtus are situated, where from the second century onwards thousands of Christians, including many martyrs, were buried. Some, like Pope Sixtus II and a group of priests and deacons who were with him as he celebrated Mass, gave their lives for love of God on that very spot.

Later, during the Middle Ages, the Appian Way became one of the roads most traveled by pilgrims on pilgrimage to the Eternal City to pray at the tomb of St Peter.

Finally, a pious tradition links St Peter, the Prince of the Apostles himself, to this road. Less than a kilometer from the Gate of St Sebastian, the legend is commemorated by the Church of Quo Vadis. According to tradition, when the persecution of 64 A.D. broke out the Christians of Rome persuaded St Peter to flee to another place for safety. Peter prepared for the journey and left the city early in the morning one day in the summer. Shortly after crossing the Porta Appia he saw Jesus coming towards him. Peter asked him, "Where are you going, Lord?"

"I am going to Rome to be crucified."

"Lord," said St Peter, "will you be crucified again?"

"Yes, Peter, again."

At this, Jesus disappeared and Peter understood everything. In the rays of the rising sun he turned round and returned to Rome, where shortly afterwards he embraced martyrdom.

July 3, 1946

On July 3, 1946, at half past eight in the evening, St Josemaría took a walk on the Appian Way for a few moments of rest.

He had arrived in Rome on June 23, and the following day celebrated Mass in the apartment in Piazza Città Leonina. That same morning he went to the Vatican to discuss the canonical solution for Opus Dei. As well as this, he requested permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. The next day he received the news that the Holy See granted him permission to set up a Tabernacle.

José Orlandis, who had come to Rome with him and stayed there for some days,

recalled years later, “The Father suffered a lot those first days because he was exhausted by the journey and the terrible heat that was increasing in Rome at that time, all of which was made worse by his poor state of health. ‘Here’s the bundle of rags!’ he said. ‘You’ve got your way!’

But the news that the Holy See had granted permission for us to have an oratory in the house with the Blessed Sacrament reserved, was a welcome message that galvanized his energies and launched him into preparing a worthy welcome for our Lord, with all his strength. As was his custom – a custom he taught his children, so that it will always be kept up in Opus Dei centers – the best room in that little apartment was made into the oratory.

And the Father began to search through antique shops and bric-a-brac shops, which are so plentiful in Rome, in search of the things that were needed to set up the oratory properly. We soon found, among other things, a marble Crucifix, two big candlesticks, and four antique paintings, all fairly cheap. At home he worked so hard on preparing the oratory that we younger men followed panting in his wake, and felt totally exhausted by the evening. ‘Father,’ we said to him jokingly, ‘you said you’d come like a bundle of rags! You’ll end up being one at this rate!’ On Wednesday July 3, when St Josemaría celebrated Mass, he reserved the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle. That was the first Tabernacle in an Opus Dei center in Rome.”²

St Josemaría’s joy may well be imagined. Years before, he had written: “As you make your way through the familiar streets of the city, have you never had the joy of discovering... another Tabernacle?”³ Now that dream had come true in Rome!

After those days of intense work, they took a well-deserved break that evening. At eight-thirty, as the sun was setting, they went out to the Appian Way. Anyone who has been there can easily picture the scene: the memory of the early Christians, the austerity of the Roman road, the remains of grandiose buildings of earlier centuries, the cypresses and pine-trees that delineate the roadway, the silence and solitude of evening... all bathed in the gentle light of dusk. The landscape around the Appian Way outside Rome is very flat. On each side the country can be seen stretching for miles until it melts into the horizon. The sunset, with its intense golden tones, is an extraordinary spectacle to contemplate. St Josemaría’s loving soul, already deeply moved by what had happened that day, and by the beauty he could see on all sides, may well have taken flight, to dream of Opus Dei projected down through time, and of his children bringing many souls to God in the middle of the world, through **our apostolate, so similar to that of the first Christians.**⁴

Notes

1. Acts 28:14-15
2. José Orlandis, *Mis recuerdos: primeros tiempos del Opus Dei en Roma*, Rialp, Madrid, 1995, p. 146
3. St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 270
4. St Josemaría, circular letter, January 9, 1938; cf. A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Volume II: *God and Daring*, Scepter, New York, 2003, p.182