



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Traveling to Rome

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Christ, Mary, and the Pope had always been the great loves of his life. And now at last he was there, very close to the Vicar of Christ, on the night of June 23-24, 1946.

Stepping out on the sixth floor balcony of an apartment on the Piazza della Città Leonina which some of his sons were renting, Father Josemaría realized how close it was to the Papal apartments. Only the street and the lower barracks of the Swiss guard separated him from them. Night was falling and through the windows of the rooms in the Apostolic Palace, where the lights were still on, he could almost glimpse the profile of Pius XII. Deeply moved, he ended up spending the entire night on the terrace keeping prayerful vigil for the Holy Father.

Interview with Pope Pius XII

What a flood of memories! In Madrid, in the time of Pius XI, he had made the rounds from one part of the city to another reciting the Rosary, at the end of which he imagined himself receiving Communion from the hands of the Pope. The Pope had become one of his three great loves, together with Christ and Mary. And now... he was here. It was the night spanning June 23-24, 1946. The gentle Roman dawn found him still on the terrace, physically exhausted, but with an ineffable spiritual joy.

Worn out, indeed, because he had arrived in Rome that afternoon after an event-filled journey.

Canonical formula for a new pastoral phenomenon

The Work, now beyond its infancy, needed Papal approval to guarantee the secularity of its faithful, and the unity and universality of its apostolates in all the dioceses of the world. Diocesan approval was not enough. But what structure under canon law would take its place? The canon law then in force did not provide

a formula suited to this new pastoral phenomenon — ordinary Christians who seek holiness in the middle of the world through their professional work. Álvaro del Portillo, representing the founder, had traveled to Rome twice and had made some headway, but he found the doors closed. The Work, they told him, had come one hundred years too soon. The situation called for the presence of the founder...

But Father Josemaría was gravely ill. Since 1944 he had been suffering from an acute form of diabetes. “The doctors felt,” he said at the time, “that I could die at any moment. When I went to bed, I did not know if I would get up again. And when I got up in the morning I didn’t know if I would last until the evening.” The doctor in charge, a noted specialist, declared “I cannot answer for your life,” if the trip to Rome was made. But he needed to make it, and he did.

He went to Barcelona to embark there for Genoa. In the Catalonian capital he got together with his sons and preached a meditation to them. It was not his health that worried him, but the canonical future of the Work. “Lord, could you have allowed me to deceive so many souls in good faith, when I’ve done it all for your glory, knowing it was your will? Is it possible that the Holy See will say that we’ve arrived a century too soon? Behold we have left all things and followed you! I never wanted to deceive anybody. I never wanted to do anything other than serve you. Is there any possibility that I could be a fraud?” The Barcelona contingent listened with emotion. Hounded by slander, they had already learned from the founder to put their trust completely in God’s providence.

Together with a young student of legal history, José Orlandis, he embarked on the steamship J. J. Sister. In the Gulf of Lyons, a furious storm hammered the boat for 20 hours. In addition to a real possibility of shipwreck, practically everyone aboard from the captain to the last passenger became seasick. And Father Josemaría was already gravely ill. Not entirely joking, he commented to his companion: “It appears that the devil does not want us to get to Rome!”

But finally they reached Genoa, where Father Álvaro was waiting to take them to Rome by car, amidst the discomforts of a country only beginning to recover from World War II. And there in Rome he discovered how close he was to the Pope’s home... Shortly afterwards he told a churchman about that night in prayer, and in no time found that word of it had spread around, and that some were laughing at him behind his back. “At first this murmuring hurt me, but it made a love for the Roman Pontiff that was less ‘Spanish,’ i.e. less emotional, arise in my heart — born of more solid, more theological reflection, and therefore more profound. Since then I’ve always said that ‘in Rome I lost my innocence,’ and this event has

been most useful for my soul.”

Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI

Father Álvaro was right: the presence of the founder hastened the complicated process of approvals. The first warm words of encouragement were from Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, who always showed Josemaría Escrivá friendship and kindness. Pius XII received him in audience after a few weeks. He had spoken with other members of Opus Dei already, but was impressed by the founder. Later on he confided to Cardinal Gilroy:

“He is a true saint, a man sent by God for our times.” And in fact it was Pius XII who gave Opus Dei the pontifical approvals toward which it had been working, the first in 1947 and then more definitively in 1950. These approvals created a legal framework under Church law, which though admittedly imperfect, were necessary for minimal stability.

Many cardinals, bishops, and prelates visited the tiny apartment of Cittá Leonina. His theologically-rooted love for the Pope would last and grow throughout his entire life. And in response, the warmth and esteem of the Popes toward Opus Dei grew. John XXIII had already been introduced to the spirit of Opus Dei when he visited a university residence in 1950 in Santiago de Compostela and stayed briefly in a center in Saragossa. Saint Josemaría's first audience with the new Pope was on March 5, 1960.

The following Pope, Paul VI dealt with him with fatherly affection. “We look with paternal satisfaction,” said the Pope in 1964, “on how much Opus Dei has done and continues to do for the Kingdom of God, the desire for the good that guides it, the fervent love of the Church and her visible head which distinguishes it, the ardent zeal for souls which impels it along arduous and difficult paths of apostolate of presence and witness in all sectors of contemporary life.” The Pope had the opportunity to meet the founder on numerous occasions and to express his conviction that he was a saint.

“When you are old,” the Father told members of Opus Dei, “and I have already rendered my account to God, you will tell your brothers and sisters how the Father loved the Pope with all his soul, with all his strength.”