

# St Peter's Square: Embracing all mankind

The majestic façade of St Peter's Basilica was completed in 1614, when the thirteen statues of the risen Christ, St John the Baptist, and eleven Apostles were placed on the balustrade surmounting the edifice. The square in front of it, however, did not yet have its final form. The buildings around the Basilica were of many different kinds, and the space in front was not laid out so as to provide a fitting welcome for people who came to venerate the tomb of St Peter.

In addition, there was no protection from either the sun or the rain, so that for solemn ceremonies covered passageways had to be erected from the apostolic palace to the Basilica. For all of these reasons, Pope Alexander VII resolved from the start of his pontificate to create a more suitable and functional approach to St Peter's Basilica.

The project of designing the square was entrusted to Bernini, who worked hard on it from 1656 to 1657. The result is the marvel that is to be seen today. Bernini himself explained that the two semi-ovals formed by the two hundred and eighty-four pillars were intended to symbolize the arms of Mother Church embracing all mankind.

Possibly Bernini never imagined that one day St Peter's Square would prove too small to hold the huge number of faithful who gather to pray, or to attend a liturgical celebration, the proclamation of a dogma, or the canonization of a saint, in union with the Pope. The unforgettable images of the crowds that came for the beatification and canonization of St Josemaría, the last moments of the life of Pope John Paul II with hundreds of thousands of people saying the Rosary for the Pope, and the massive show of unity around





the election of Pope Benedict XVI, have made St Peter's Square into a living illustration of St Josemaría's words: "**All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! By seeing ourselves as part of the Church and united to our brothers in the faith, we understand more deeply that we are brothers of all mankind, for the Church has been sent to all the peoples of the earth.**"<sup>1</sup>

### A life of service to the Church

June 25, 1946, was the day St Josemaría first set foot in St Peter's Square. He walked through it deep in prayer, savoring in God's presence the moments leading up to the fulfillment of a lifelong dream: to pray at the tomb of St Peter.

From that day onwards, during the twenty-nine years he lived in Rome, the Founder of Opus Dei often went to pray in front of the Vatican Basilica and the papal apartments. When he was going somewhere in

1. St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 139.

Rome, he tried whenever possible to go past St Peter's, and from the edge of the square, without getting out of the car, he would pray a Creed for the Church and the Pope. Don Alvaro del Portillo once said that St Josemaría used to add in a few words. When he got to the part **I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church**, he would say three times over, **I believe in my Mother the Roman Church**, and then add, **in spite of everything**. He once confided this custom of his to Msgr. Tardini, who worked for many years as Cardinal Secretary of State at the Vatican. Tardini asked him what the expression meant. "I mean in spite of my failings and yours," replied St Josemaría.<sup>2</sup>

Don Alvaro explained, in talking of this episode, that St Josemaría wished to emphasize *the need for those who assist the Pope to be very holy and filled with the Holy Spirit, in order that there can be more holiness throughout the Church*.<sup>3</sup> He was motivated by his love for the Church, a love that he passed on to his children throughout his life and that was endorsed for all to hear on October 6, 2002. *All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! To take all souls to Jesus through the mediation of our Blessed Lady, in union with the Successor of Peter and Head of the Church on earth, and with all the Bishops in the world: this was the deepest aspiration of St Josemaría Escriva, whom the Holy Father John Paul II has solemnly added to the list of canonized saints*.<sup>4</sup> The packed congregations at the Masses celebrated on October 6 and 7 that year were like a graphic answer to St Josemaría's wish. St Peter's Square became the perfect setting that visually symbolized the aspiration "All with Peter to Jesus through Mary!"

2. Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, quoted in Cesare Cavalleri, *Immersed in God*, London-New York: Scepter, 1996, pp. 3-4.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Msgr. Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, Decreto 6-X-2002, published in *Romana*, Rome, July-December 2002, Year XVIII, no. 35, p. 289.

### “The sweet Christ on earth”

In our times, any visitor to Rome who wishes to see the Pope goes to St Peter's Square. The Sunday Angelus - a custom instituted by Pope John Paul II - , the Wednesday audiences, and the many liturgical celebrations, draw more and more people who come *videre Petrum* - to see Peter (*Galatians* 1:18).

**The Catholic Church is Roman. I savor that word, Roman! I feel completely Roman, since Roman means universal, catholic. And it leads me to have a tender love for the Pope, *il dolce Cristo in terra* - the sweet Christ on earth, as Saint Catherine of Siena, whom I count as a most beloved friend, liked to repeat.**<sup>5</sup> It is easy for everyone who comes to the square to see the Pope at some moment: standing at the balcony of the papal apartments, in the sanctuary of the Basilica, or being driven round by car to greet those present. And while the crowds are ever-changing, there is one witness that, although dumb, has held a privileged position in the square for centuries: the enormous obelisk standing in the center of the square, which for almost two thousand years has watched some of the most important events in the history of the Church unfold, beginning with the martyrdom of St Peter.

The obelisk dates from the twentieth century BC, and was set up in the ancient Egyptian city of Heliopolis in honor of the sun, in the time of the Pharaoh Amenemhet II. It was brought to Rome on the orders of the Emperor Caligula in the year 40 AD, and the story is told that in order to transport the obelisk without damaging it, it was carried in a ship packed with lentils. It was placed in the center of the Circus of Caligula, which afterwards became the Circus of Nero, a few meters to the left of the walls of the present Vatican Basilica. It was there that St Peter was martyred, and his holy body was buried close by. In 1586, Pope Sixtus V had the obelisk moved to the cen-

<sup>5</sup> St Josemaría, Homily "Loyalty to the Church", June 4, 1972, published in *In Love with the Church*, London-New York: Scepter, 1989.



tral point in St Peter's Square. Preparations for moving it took six months, and the actual task involved nine hundred and seven men and seventy-five horses. At the top of the obelisk a cross was placed, whose base contains a fragment of wood from the True Cross.

### *Mater Ecclesiae*

St Peter's Square was completed gradually, through several centuries. In 1613, Pope Paul V commissioned Maderno to construct



The mosaic of our Lady that was placed in St Peter's Square is a replica of a painting inside St Peter's Basilica.

a fountain to one side of the obelisk. In 1670, Carlo Fontana made an exactly similar one on the other side, restoring symmetry. As well as the statues of Christ and the Apostles above the main front of St Peter's Basilica, one hundred and forty statues of saints were set above the two colonnades between 1662 and 1703. In 1847 the two statues of St Peter and St Paul were placed on either side of the flight of steps leading up to the main entrance. No other notable changes were made until December 8, 1981, when Pope John Paul II blessed the mosaic of *Mater Ecclesiae*, Our Lady Mother of

the Church. (This picture is also known as "Our Lady of the Column", because it is a copy of a painting inside the Basilica, on one of the columns of the old Constantine basilica.) Ever since that date it has overlooked the Square from an angle of the Apostolic Palace, to the right of the square.

Just before blessing the mosaic, the Holy Father spoke the following words: "Now I will bless the picture of Our Lady "Mother of the Church", with the desire that all those who come to St Peter's Square may raise their eyes to her, and address their own greetings and their own prayer to her in a spirit of filial trust. From then on, following this indication, Don Alvaro always said a Hail Holy Queen to our Lady, as well as saying the Creed, whenever he came to St Peter's Square. This was yet another way of putting into practice St Josemaría's advice: **Mother! Call her again and again. She is listening, she sees you in danger perhaps, and with her Son's grace she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. Call her, and you will find yourself with added strength for the new struggle.**<sup>6</sup>

Mosaic of Our Lady Mater Ecclesiae (Mother of the Church), placed on a corner of one of the buildings overlooking St Peter's Square



6. St Josemaría, *The Way*, 516.