

## Rome

### November 4, 2009

*On the 25th Anniversary of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. Address at the inauguration of the 2009–2010 academic year*

**A Roman university conceived by St. Josemaría Escrivá and made a reality by Bishop Álvaro del Portillo**

Permit me to recall, relying on personal memories as well, the fulfillment of an old wish of St. Josemaría's: to bring about the creation in Rome of a university center for ecclesiastical studies. The Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, which this year is celebrating its first quarter century of life, is a clear fruit of his love for the Church and the priesthood. It was, nevertheless, his successor, the Servant of God Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, who brought this project to completion.

*"Omnes cum Petro, ad Iesum per Mariam"*

Josemaría Escrivá was always vividly aware of the need for Catholics to be in communion with the Roman Pontiff. His apostolate was Christocentric, Marian and "Petrine." Three notes condensed in that paradigm prayer: *Omnes cum Petro, ad Iesum per Mariam*. This expression, frequently found in his ear-

liest writings,<sup>1</sup> reflects his ardent desire to bring souls to a true and heartfelt communion with the Roman Pontiff.

The Pope, for this holy priest, was not an "abstract" figure, so to speak. He saw in him not only the Vicar of Christ, but also a person of flesh and blood who lived, prayed and gave himself for the Church, in a very specific time and place. He loved and felt united as a priest to each of the Pontiffs of his time. Before moving to Italy, he used to "travel" to Rome spiritually in order to feel closer to the Pope. For many years he offered each day a part of the rosary, which he prayed walking along the street, for the Roman Pontiff and his intentions: "In my imagination I placed myself next to the Holy Father as he was celebrating Mass. (I didn't know, nor do I know now, what the Pope's chapel looks like.) And when I finished my rosary, I made a spiritual communion with the desire of receiving from his hands Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament."<sup>2</sup>

When still a young priest, he had already considered the possibility of moving to the Eternal City to obtain a doctorate in canon law. Thereby he would have fulfilled his ardent desire to see the Pope, to pray before the tomb of St. Peter and visit the places linked to the history of the early Christians, for whom he had a deep veneration. At the beginning of

1. This aspiration was frequently abbreviated using the initials "O.c.P.a.l.p.M." On the significance of this expression for St. Josemaría see the commentaries on points no. 11 and 33 of *The Way*, in Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Camino, critical-historical edition prepared by Pedro Rodríguez* (ed.), Third ed., Madrid, Rialp, 2004.

2. Letter of January 9, 1932, no. 20, cited by Andrés Vázquez de Prada, in *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá, vol. III, "The Divine Ways on Earth"*, New York, Scepter, 2005, p. 31.

1929, he confided this desire of his to a friend, a former companion in the Seminary of Logroño, who suggested that he enroll in the Angelicum, where classes were held only in the morning. Thus he would have been able to attend other classes in the afternoon at the Palacio of St. Apollinaris, which was the seat of a “very prestigious university” run by secular clergy, the present Lateran University.<sup>3</sup>

Very soon, however, he discovered that, at least for the moment, God’s plans were quite different. On October 2, 1928, our Lord revealed his will to him: the founding of Opus Dei. A second foundational light, received on February 14, 1930, made known to him that women too were included in these divine plans. The mission he had received from God demanded a complete and exclusive dedication, without secondary concerns. The ecclesiastical doctorate in Rome, therefore, would have to wait for a more opportune moment. St. Josemaría could not have imagined that the St. Apollinaris Palace itself would in time become the site of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

Throughout the pontificate of Pius XI (1922-1939), many Catholics went to the Eternal City, espe-

cially during the three jubilees convoked by the Pope (in 1925, 1929 and 1933). Veneration for the Roman Pontiff and his great moral prestige brought unheard of numbers of people to Rome. The greater ease in communications, especially after the “Reconciliation” or Concordat with the Italian State in 1929, contributed to fostering the pilgrimages.

St. Josemaría would have been very happy if he had been able to go to Rome, but his incessant priestly activity and his difficult financial situation did not permit this. However, he alluded to this desire, years later, in a point of *The Way*: “Catholic, apostolic, Roman! I want you to be very Roman, ever anxious to make your ‘pilgrimage to Rome,’ *videre Petrum*—‘to see Peter.’”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Isidoro Zorzano, the first member of Opus Dei, did have the opportunity to go to Rome. He described, in a letter to the Founder at the end of September 1933, the deep impression that his visit to Christian Rome made on him.<sup>5</sup> Veneration for the Roman Pontiff was growing and becoming even stronger in the soul of the Founder of the Work, as he wrote in his *Apuntes íntimos* [Personal Notes]: “Thank you, my God, for the love

3. Cf. Francesc Castells i Puig, “*Gli studi di teologia di San Josemaría Escrivá,*” in *Studia et Documenta*, 2 (2008), pp. 105-144, p. 123. Later the University moved to the Lateran Palace, becoming the present Pontifical University of the Lateran. Cf. Carta de Vicente Saenz de Valluerca a San Josemaría, February 3, 1929, in AGP, series E-1, 0385-736-102.

4. *The Way*, no. 520.

5. He wrote at the end of his trip, on September 21, 1933: “After gaining the indulgence for the Holy Jubilee, we visited the catacombs of St. Calixtus. The visit was very emotional. I was deeply moved to relive episodes in the life of the early Christians right where they took place. One breathes their spirit and faith, and the soul is strengthened on recalling the lives of the martyrs buried there and their exemplary death as a pledge of their faith.” (Letter of Isidoro Zorzano to St. Josemaría, September 21, 1933, in AGP series A.2, 0035-03-01).

for the Pope that you have placed in my heart.”<sup>6</sup> This sentiment was inseparable from his love for Rome, the center of Christianity.

*St. Josemaría in Rome in 1946*

St. Josemaría always wanted to “romanize” the Work. In 1931, when he had around him only a very small group of people, he already wrote in his *Apuntes íntimos*: “I dream of setting up in Rome—when the W. of G. is well under way—a house that will be like the ‘head’ of the organization.”<sup>7</sup>

This project began to take shape when St. Josemaría arrived in Rome in 1946, to seek the pontifical approval of Opus Dei. After a voyage filled with fatigue and danger, not least because of the precarious state of his own health, he wanted to spend his first night in the Eternal City praying for the Pope. From the terrace of the apartment where he was living, on the plaza of Città Leonina, he could see the windows of the nearby Pontifical apartment quite clearly.

During the following days he had the joy of praying before the tomb of St. Peter and of being received in a private audience by Pope Pius XII. After one of these audiences, in December of 1946, he confided in a letter to the Nuncio of His Holiness in Spain, Archbishop Gaetano Cicognani: “The Holy Father received me in a private audience: it is incredible what affection he showed for our Opus Dei.”<sup>8</sup>

He arrived in Rome with the intention of seeking a house where he could put the “head” or—as he also liked to say—the “heart” of the Work. After much searching, in 1947 he found what is now Villa Tevere, destined to become the central headquarters of Opus Dei, despite the great sacrifices needed to overcome constant financial difficulties, thanks to the generosity of cooperators from all over the world.

He right away formulated the plan of having his sons, and later, his daughters, come to study in Rome, so that they could be formed with rigor in the ecclesiastical sciences; also so that they might be “romanized,” or “to learn Rome,” as John Paul II said, who also arrived in the capital of Catholicism in 1946, almost at the same time as Josemaría Escrivá.<sup>9</sup> His proximity to Rome’s treasures of faith and history made the Founder’s love for St. Peter’s successor and for the Church of Rome grow even stronger. On June 9, 1948, he wrote down the following ardent words: “Rome! I thank the Lord for the love for the Church that he has given me. Because of it I see myself as Roman. Rome, for me, is Peter. . . . It would not be easy for this poor priest to forget that grace of his love for the

6. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 1070, of October 31, 1933. This text later became part of *The Way* (no. 573).

7. *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 220, of August 10, 1931 (cited by Andres Vazquez de Prada, op. cit., vol. III, p. 73).

8. Letter of St. Josemaría to Archbishop Gaetano Cicognani, December 16, 1946

9. Cf. John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: on the Fiftieth Anniversary of my Priesthood*, New York, Doubleday, 1996, p. 51-52.

Church, for the Pope, for Rome. Rome!"<sup>10</sup>

Some weeks later, on June 29, 1948, the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, patrons of the Eternal City, he established the Roman College of the Holy Cross. It was to be an international center where, as the years went by, thousands of men of Opus Dei from many countries would come to receive a careful doctrinal, spiritual, ascetical and apostolic formation, and who would follow a demanding curriculum of ecclesiastical studies. In 1953 there would begin, in a different place, a similar center for women: the Roman College of Holy Mary. The Roman College of the Holy Cross began with only four students, but the numbers grew rapidly, and six years later had surpassed a hundred.

At the beginning the students attended classes in the Roman Pontifical Athenaeums. Hand-written notes of the Founder contain the following remark regarding the program of studies for the 1949-1950 academic year: "Coordinate studies with the Angelicum. Until the time comes to organize the great university level teaching center in Rome." And he added: "It would be good to form *laureati* in the ecclesiastical schools, bringing young lay people to the Roman College; later, professors, juridical advisors, etc."<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile it was necessary to find a place for the Roman College apart from Villa Tevere, which was destined to lodge the offices of the central headquarters of Opus Dei. One of the possible solutions considered was a building next to the Oratory of Gonfalone, between the Lungotevere and Via Giulia, in a district which back then was almost abandoned, and which the municipal government of Rome wanted to rehabilitate.<sup>12</sup> There was also the possibility of obtaining a piece of land next to the church of the *Quatuor Coronati* [Four Crowned Martyrs]. However these prospects ran into obstacles and the Founder had to be satisfied with Villa Tevere as the provisional seat of the Roman College, while awaiting a definitive solution, which did not come until 1974. Thus, for a number of years, the classes of the institutional cycle of ecclesiastical studies were also given in that center.

*The ecclesiastical schools of the University of Navarra.*

In 1952, under the spiritual impulse of St. Josemaría, an academic institution was founded in Pamplona, Spain, named the *Estudio General de Navarra* [Navarra General Institute of Studies], which over the passage of time would be a great help for creating an ecclesiastical athenaeum in Rome. In 1960 the School of Canon Law was erected by

10.. Narrative, June 9, 1948, in AGP, series A.5, 0228-01-04 (published in Vázquez de Prada, op. cit., p. 74.)

11. .AGP, series A.3, 0176-02-10.

12. Cf. AGP, series A.2, 0049-03-04.

the Holy See. After years of preparatory work, and after some detours that lasted almost a decade, on November 1, 1969, the competent Vatican office—in accord with the Spanish Bishops Conference—also erected the School of Theology at the University of Navarra.

Meanwhile, in Rome, the Founder of Opus Dei followed closely the activities of a center for the formation for priests, called the CRIS (*Centro Romano di Incontri Sacerdotali*), which some of his sons had begun in the Eternal City. He encouraged them strongly in this initiative, which, besides having a clear pastoral purpose of service and spiritual assistance to priests, promoted reflection and cultural activities in the areas of theology and canon law. The CRIS organized seminars and gatherings with professors from various ecclesiastical schools, as well as conferences for specialists. I very especially recall a conference given in 1974 by the then Cardinal Karol Wojtyła.

Towards the middle of the decade of the 70's, the ecclesiastical schools of the University of Navarra and the Roman College of the Holy Cross were already well established. Both had a qualified academic staff and had acquired abundant teaching and research experience. However, St. Josemaria did not live to see the birth in Rome of the university institution he had so greatly desired, because God called him into his presence on June 26, 1975.

*The beginning of university work in Rome*

When Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo assumed the direction of Opus Dei, there began what he himself defined as “the stage of continuity in fidelity.” Msgr. del Portillo dedicated himself with all his strength to keeping alive St. Josemaría’s foundational spirit and to carrying out some important initiatives he had left to his successors; especially the canonical transformation of Opus Dei into a personal prelature.

In 1982, Msgr. del Portillo told us that the moment had arrived to put into operation in Rome something similar to the University of Navarra’s ecclesiastical schools. He was convinced that the time had come to begin that initiative in the Eternal City. And he reminded us explicitly that this was a desire our Founder had harbored in his heart for many years.

Almost seventy years old at the time, Don Álvaro said he was ready to give his life to make such a wide-reaching undertaking a reality, which demanded faith, daring and a strong desire to serve the Church and souls. He was relying certainly on God’s grace and the blessing of Pope John Paul II, who followed the project with interest, and also on the availability of well-prepared professors. I have always been edified by the humility of my predecessor, who didn’t attribute any merits to himself. He insisted that everything was possible thanks to the prayer and sacrifices

that St. Josemaria had offered for this intention.

At times, circumstances led us to think that the project was destined for a more or less distant future. Don Álvaro, on the other hand, set aside any doubts and asked us to prepare the necessary documentation as soon as possible. Msgr. del Portillo directed the project with prudence and perseverance. He pursued the goal with surprising determination and tenacity, in spite of the inevitable difficulties—which were quite normal—that arose in the course of carrying it out. He himself, for example, suggested a formula for attaining the objective, one that was both innovative and daring: rather than trying to found a completely new university-level institution, it would be enough to establish some Roman departments connected with the ecclesiastical schools at Navarra.

A lot of preparation was required: setting up a teaching staff, finding suitable buildings and financial resources, etc. None of these challenges was a cause of concern for Don Álvaro. When confronting difficulties, he liked to insist, we should also remember the help that God will provide.

Finally, only a year after the first steps were taken, in October 1984, the Roman Academic Center of the Holy Cross opened its doors, with two schools (theology and canon law) and with some forty students. The Academic Center was formally erected on January 9, 1985. On the suggestion of Cardinal Palazzini, who made it possible through his

generosity and vision of the future, the site of the Center was to be some buildings ceded by the Foundation of San Girolamo della Carità.

Msgr. del Portillo wanted the Center to be characterized by its full adhesion to the Church's Magisterium, by a fruitful dialogue with contemporary culture, by the careful intellectual formation of the students, and by the best spiritual assistance possible. He knew that the bishops had great confidence in the help the priests and seminarians from their dioceses would receive, and precisely for this reason he insisted that we couldn't disappoint them. But above all Msgr. del Portillo realized how important it was to serve the Church by contributing to the formation of well-prepared priests and laity ready to extend Christ's kingdom. In addition to making agreements with various institutions to offer lodging to the students of the Center, an effort was made to create some residences for priests, with the generous financial help of many people. Also, at the suggestion of John Paul II, the international *Sedes Sapientiae* seminary was established for seminarians coming from dioceses all over the world.

Soon the site at San Girolamo della Carità proved to be too small. I recall quite well how difficult it was to obtain the use of the St. Apollinaris "Palacio." Msgr. del Portillo followed the negotiations closely, and in fact it has turned out that the classrooms at St. Apollinaris have proven to be very well suited for the service our University seeks to provide to the Church.



I retain a vivid memory of the mobilization Don Álvaro set in motion to obtain the financial assistance necessary for an undertaking of this magnitude, asking for donations from private individuals as well as from institutions and foundations. The response was very generous. The Servant of God Álvaro del Portillo frequently emphasized that thus a great good would be accomplished, first of all to those who were asked to help out, because it gave them the possibility of collaborating in an enterprise at the service of the Church and of priests. And since many students would come from dioceses with very limited financial resources, right from the beginning he wanted a scholarship fund set up for the students.

On January 9, 1990, the anniversary of St. Josemaría's birth, the Congregation for Catholic Education, considering the notable growth of the Academic Center, erected it as an Athenaeum, with Schools of Theology and Philosophy and, shortly thereafter, of Canon Law, and named Msgr. del Portillo as its first Grand Chancellor. On March 23, 1994, the first successor of St. Josemaría surrendered his soul to God in a holy way, upon returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, thus concluding a life spent entirely in the service of the Church, of Opus Dei, of priests, of religious, and of the Christian people. By his fidelity to the divine will and to the spirit of the Founder of Opus Dei, he had turned into a reality that dream of St. Josemaría which today is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

I have had the joy of being present for the opening of the School of Social Institutional Communications, and also for the granting of the status as a university by Pope John Paul II, on July 15, 1998. This opened a new stage, one that we are still in: that of following faithfully the examples of love and service to the Church that is the precious heritage of St. Josemaría Escrivá and the Servant of God Álvaro del Portillo.

With these recollections and these desires, I hereby inaugurate the 2009-2010 academic year.

## Córdoba, Spain November 20, 2009

### *Address to the Clergy of Córdoba*

#### SAINTS IN ORDER TO SANCTIFY

We are now in the Year for Priests convoked by Pope Benedict XVI for the entire Church. In the letter that he wrote for this occasion, the Holy Father expressed his hope to “deepen the commitment of all priests to interior renewal for the sake of a stronger and more incisive witness to the Gospel in today’s world.”<sup>1</sup>

A desire to help foster this initiative of the Roman Pontiff has moved

<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Letter to Priests*, June 16, 2009.