

Articles, Addresses, and Interviews

“A New Damascus,” an article published in *Alfa y Omega*, Madrid (July 28, 2011)

Saul of Tarsus, full of zeal for the law of Moses, and bringing letters from the highest authorities in the Jewish capital to the synagogues of Damascus, intended to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem everyone he could find—men and women who were followers of the “Way of Jesus.” But our Lord intervened. As Saul approached Damascus, a blinding light caused him to fall to the ground and he heard a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The young man replied: “Who are you, Lord?” And the voice told him: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

It had all happened so quickly on the way into Damascus. Ever since, that name—Damascus—has been a synonym for conversion, an opening to God’s grace. From that moment, Saul the persecutor—aided by a devout Christian in Damascus, Ananias—became the Apostle Paul. Freely responding “Yes” to the Lord, he was to be a faithful disciple and evangelizer of Jesus with a generous, cheerful struggle until death.

In a way, one could say that for many young men and women every World Youth Day is an opportunity to re-live the Damascus episode. The Lord Jesus, through the words of his Vicar on earth, Benedict XVI, will speak to those who are ready to hear and provoke in them a new conversion, possibly a deep change in their lives.

From the Pope’s words, heard with faith, could come thousands of decisions to seek Jesus without changing one’s state in life (whether in marriage or apostolic celibacy), and vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

The Lord calls many—everyone, in fact—to the fullness of the Christian life by diverse paths. But it is necessary, as in St. Paul’s case, to have a heart open to God and to others that is acquired and deepened with the help of catechesis and of other persons (like Ananias) who can make sure that the Pope’s words take root in the soul.

Every saint (canonized or not) has had his Damascus, his moment of real conversion to God. Perhaps it was not as dramatic as St. Paul’s, but it was just as effective. It may have simply been a matter of replacing indifference with the gift of self, moving from a life of receiving to a life of giving. But however it happens, it is always accompanied by true happiness, so different from what material satisfactions can give.

I had the good fortune of living for many years close to a saint who said with conviction: “Madrid has been my Damascus. For that is where the scales fell from the eyes of my soul and I saw my mission.” I refer to St. Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei.

Although born and raised in a different part of Spain (Aragón), it was in Madrid that God made known to him his mission to show all Christians that ordinary life—woven of hours of work well done, surrounded by family and friends, for the common good of society—can and ought to be a true path to sanctity.

Sensing that God wanted something from him but not knowing what it was, the young Josemaría had prayed for years, *Domine, ut videam*, “Lord, let me see,” the words of the blind man at Jericho in the Gospel. His soul received that sight on October 2, 1928, precisely in the city of Madrid.

It was through his generous service to the sick in the public hospitals of Madrid and those living in the poorest neighborhoods that his vocation first began to mature. Quite soon he was accompanied by a group of young people who “caught” his human and supernatural enthusiasm, and he began teaching them to sanctify their study, work, and all aspects of their daily life.

Many people have experienced their Damascus in Madrid, a city of saints and martyrs, and lay people who sought to imitate Jesus in their

ordinary lives. For a few days, this is the city that will become the world capital of youth.

Above all, it will be the papal city. Benedict XVI guides us and leads us towards the Model of all the saints—Jesus Christ. Let’s give him the warmest of welcomes, praying for the fruitfulness of his pastoral visit and asking especially that many young women and men will sense that he is speaking directly to them and that they experience their Damascus during these days: a direct personal encounter with Jesus that changes their lives for the better.

At the beginning of his pontificate the Pope said: “Whoever lets Christ enter his life loses nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great. Nothing at all! Only with this friendship do the gates of life open wide to the greatest potential of the human condition. Only with this friendship do we experience what is beautiful and what makes us free.”

We must be fully convinced that Christ takes from us nothing that makes life beautiful and great. Rather, He brings it to perfection for the glory of God, the happiness of men, and the salvation of the world.

Have recourse to the intercession of St. Josemaría, who is so closely linked with this city, and of Blessed John Paul II, who inspired the World Youth Days. May they draw down upon us from our Lord, through the intercession of our Lady of Almudena (Patroness of Madrid), showers of grace during these days.

May the Madrid World Youth Day be the Damascus for many young people who are ready to open their lives to Christ and to others, to serve as credible and vibrant witnesses of the Gospel—ever old and ever new. The world so urgently needs this witness.

Article “Faithfulness and Happiness,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Rome (August 18, 2011)

Madrid 2011, a New Starting Point

Ever since Blessed John Paul II, with great intuition, initiated the first World Youth Day in Rome, 26 years ago, we could say that each of these gatherings has been a “starting point” in the life of thousands of young people. They have come to know Jesus Christ better and have decided to give a new direction to their life, orienting it in a conscientious and mature way towards God and others, with the optimistic Christian vision proper to those who know themselves to be sons and daughters of God. For some of them, over time, that initial enthusiasm encountered the ordinary obstacles of our earthly path. But with God’s grace, many have attained the happiness that comes from being faithful: the “*felicidad de la fidelidad*,” two words that rhyme in Spanish, as St. Josemaría Escrivá used to say. Faithfulness is nothing other than the maturity of love over time. Indeed, many of the participants in the first

world youth days were among the millions of people who came to Rome to say a last good-bye to John Paul II, a “good-bye” that was also a “thank you” and a plea: “continue helping us.”

The years have gone by and, now with Benedict XVI, the world youth days have continued their extraordinary ability to draw young people. This magnetism is not something artificial since, with the successor of Peter, it is Christ himself who is passing by. Christ’s look is directed at many, but, above all, at each individual, and that look is a flame that purifies and a love that calls. Many decisions of true dedication will come about, I am certain, to seek the high goal of Christian holiness in all circumstances: in married life, in apostolic celibacy, without changing one’s state in life, or in embracing the priesthood or the religious life. The “thank you,” “continue helping us,” reaches heaven, through Peter, to be converted into deeds: “here I am!” “you can count on me!” This is the Christian response to Paul’s exhortation to the Colossians: As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him (*Col 2:6*).

In St. Paul’s defense of the faith, in the passage from his letter that has been chosen as the motto for this World Youth Day, the Apostle speaks of vain philosophies and fallacies (*Col 2:8*). In this world of ours so torn by wars and rebellions linked to the uncertainties and injustices of life (a world we also have to love since it is the place where God in his infinite love has placed us), the