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An encounter with St Josemaria on the Camino

As we celebrate St Josemaria's feast day in 2021, his worldwide impact is evident. Tens of thousands of members, apostolic initiatives aplenty, beatified members... the list goes on. But at the heart of these numbers is what is most important – a personal encounter with God. And for many, this involves a personal encounter with St Josemaria.

12/07/2021

Building houses in Vietnam, working with Mother Teresa's nuns in India, and walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain: these were the travels of a man on a mission. Savio Gracias-Flor wanted to find his calling in life.

Savio grew up with Opus Dei, having attended Redfield College in Sydney (whose chaplaincy is looked after by the Work). But as he finished school and moved into university life, he took a 'hiatus' from his faith.

"At the end of high school I was kind of looking for that peace and serenity ...I was like, okay, let's try and find these aspects of my life in different areas... I kind of just suppressed my faith," said the 24-year-old exercise physiologist and rehabilitation consultant.

“My exercise physiology course was very social and very mainstream... So going out every weekend, going to the gym first thing in the morning, going to class, and then having a drink at the bar every afternoon... It was during that time that I really found myself in some really low place. It just hit me that I needed to make a change.”

Savio decided to go on a work-camp to Vietnam, run by the university residence at which he had formerly lived. “It was that work-camp that really reinvigorated my need to want to practice my faith,” he said.

Spending a month with other volunteers, helping out the less fortunate, and attending daily Mass were things that he really valued, but things that also didn't fit with his lifestyle back in Sydney. “For me it was like a perfect month – I could kind of dissociate myself from

certain groups. Not that they were bad people but... I wasn't strong enough to stand around those guys or girls at the time.”

The year that followed was a hard one for Savio, because he could see that many things in his life had to change: something easier said than done. However he started going regularly to spiritual direction, which he felt was very helpful for his faith journey.

A year after Vietnam, Savio found himself in Calcutta, at times literally picking up the sick and dying from the streets. He came away from this feeling very much in love with Our Lord but still unsure as to what his vocation might be. He prayed about a potential calling to the priesthood but slowly felt more called to Opus Dei, and planned a trip to Spain to do the Camino de Santiago with a friend.

In the past, Savio had felt so certain of things that hadn't turned out for the best, so he wanted to take his time in seeing what God wanted from him. "I was so unsure ... so I thought that if I am being called to the Work, let's try and live it." So while walking the Camino, Savio tried to live a daily plan of life— Mass, times of prayer, the rosary, and so on.

The other thing on Savio's mind before leaving for the Camino was his job. The year before, he had quit a job that he felt was not right for him, even though he had enjoyed it. A week before leaving for Spain, he was interviewed for a better job that he was very keen to get. "I did the interview that Tuesday, and I think I left for the Camino on the Saturday, so I was like... 'Let's pray to St Josemaria on this trip. Maybe I can get this job when I come back. Maybe

I can find my vocation through all this.’”

At the same time, Savio didn't want to ask for a sign, since that wasn't really St Josemaria's style. But as they walked through the Pyrenees from France to Spain, he happened to be reading about St Josemaria's journey through the Pyrenees (to escape the Spanish Civil War). “And it hit me that he did ask for something supernatural on that journey: he was so unsure whether he should leave Spain... or whether he should return to Spain. I believe he asked Our Lady for a sign... And so for me, I thought ‘I'm missing 20 percent of certainty for this vocation, so I'm going to pray for something supernatural or extraordinary to happen on this trip.’”

If he got the job on top of that – Savio thought that would be God's work for sure. Just when things were making

more and more sense for him, he received an email saying that he wasn't successful for the job. He was disappointed but still felt God's call.

It was 25 June – the eve of the feast of St Josemaria. “It was one of the worst days in the trip,” said Savio. With no place to stay, they ended up walking 30 to 35 kilometres (instead of the usual 20 to 25) in search of accommodation. Absolutely wrecked, they finally arrived at a beautiful cottage away from other pilgrims.

“And on that evening I remember really praying to St Josemaria very intensely. I woke up the next morning and I checked my emails... and there was one from the clinic manager of the company that interviewed me! He said, ‘Someone has just left. We would like to offer you the position that you initially interviewed for’ – and this is on the 26th morning, and I was like, whoa,

this is crazy. This is awesome! I just remember being so happy that day.”

It wasn't until Savio told his parents the good news that he found out something similar had happened roughly 15 years earlier.

“Mum told me that when they migrated to Australia... they were really struggling money-wise and dad didn't have a job for about 11 months... I think we were relying on friends and family to drop off meals... They were really praying that he would get a job, so that they could continue sending my sister and I to Redfield and Tangara [schools run by Pared Foundation]... Mum and dad gave our Lord a bit of a cut-off time of 30 June, which would be 12 months without a job, and then dad was going to pursue work overseas.”

“Anyway, dad interviewed for a job that was not actually a position at the

time, it was just something that the factory company had opened up ... And sure enough, on the 26th, he got the job!”

For Savio, the most amazing detail is that Savio’s dad received this good news while getting ready to attend the annual Mass in honour of St Josemaria – and when Savio sent his own good news from Spain in the morning, it also happened to be evening for the Aussies, who were once again getting ready for the Mass.

“I'd never heard that story before, and I thought, wow, this is amazing, this is crazy... there's no one else who could have done this besides St Josemaria... All right, I don't need any more certainty!”

Savio is now a supernumerary member of Opus Dei, and loves the freedom and naturalness he finds in his vocation. “Reading about our

Father's charism and how much he expressed freedom...That was the aspect of the Work that really reached out to me.”

“And we're very normal people... We are just as relatable as the person who sits next to us every morning on the train... I appreciate that aspect of having an interior life while still being present to the people around us.”

Tamara El-Rahi

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josemaria-on-the-camino/](https://opusdei.org/en-au/article/an-encounter-with-st-josemaria-on-the-camino/) (14/01/2026)