

Saint Pius X, Intercessor of Opus Dei

21 August is the feast of St. Pius X, the intercessor to whom St. Josemaria entrusted the Work's relation with the Holy See. In this excerpt, Miguel De Salis Amaral writes about St. Josemaria's lifelong devotion to this Pope.

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Josemaría Escrivá a São Pio X e a sua nomeação como intercessor do Opus Dei") or in Spanish, as a chapter in a book about the intercessors of Opus Dei (*Los intercesores del Opus Dei*).

We have just reviewed the main elements of St. Pius X's reputation for sanctity in the life of the Church, which tell us of the context in which St. Josemaría Escrivá lived and provide us with a first frame for understanding his devotion to St. Pius X.

There are two events in his childhood worth mentioning, situated within the context mentioned above. The first has to do with a prize for good conduct that little Josemaría Escrivá received on October 4, 1908. The prize was from a contest held on the occasion of the

fiftieth anniversary of the priestly ordination of Pius X. St Josemaria was chosen as one of the best behaved children in the diocese of Barbastro, where he then resided with his parents. The Bishop Administrator Msgr. Isidro Badía Sarradell was present at the award ceremony and, afterwards, a telegram was sent to the Holy Father on behalf of the whole diocese expressing the filial love of all its members. They received a response, also by telegram, from the Cardinal Secretary of State Rafael Merry del Val.

Another important event of that time was the decree of 1910 by which the Pope permitted the First Communion to be given to children as young as seven years of age, which is why St. Josemaría was able to make his own shortly afterwards, on April 23, 1912. That date remained engraved forever in his memory and he referred to

this decree of Pius X with gratitude and veneration throughout his life.

In our research, we have not found any juridical document in which the founder of Opus Dei left a record of having named St. Pius X an intercessor of Opus Dei. In order to determine the date of the event, we consulted various sources, such as the testimonies gathered during the process of beatification and canonization of St. Josemaría Escrivá, diaries from his time in Rome, and, as much as possible, notes and references made by the founder himself. This investigation reveals that the decision to name St. Pius X an intercessor of the Work was not an isolated event. The data we have collected show that it is best explained in the context of St. Josemaría Escrivá's devotion to St. Pius X, which grew and spread over time, right up to the end of his life.

We will now present our findings in chronological order.

The first record we have of an expression showing his conviction of Pius X's sanctity is in his preaching from May 1937, while he was imprisoned in the Legation of Honduras during the Spanish Civil War. On that occasion, the founder of Opus Dei associated the motto of the pontificate, "*instaurare omnia in Christo*," with the mission of bringing the whole of creation back to Christ according to the light he had received on August 7, 1931: "*et ego si exaltatus fuero a terra omnia traham ad meipsum.*"

We have another reference to Pius X that same year, 1937, in a brief anecdote that occurred in Lourdes after the celebration of the Holy Mass in the sanctuary, that is, in one of the last stages of the crossing of the Pyrenees. We place the date,

therefore, as one of the first days of December that year. Upon leaving the Crypt of the Basilica of the Rosary, St. Josemaría found himself in front of a very beautiful statue of Pius X, where he renewed his love and fidelity to the Pope. "With what deep satisfaction I kissed his hand!" he wrote.

After the Spanish Civil War, we find an account from an eyewitness: "One day in that spring or summer of 1940, the Father [St. Josemaria] was speaking to us in the oratory of Jenner [an Opus Dei center], about the Holy Eucharist and, in passing, he referred to the decisive influence that Pius X had had in promoting frequent communion. In doing so, he said — in such a firm and confident manner that I had no doubt — that Pius X had been a very holy pope and that we would soon see him on the altars. This was quite a few years before he was canonized." Among

the writings preserved is a dedication that he wrote in the book *Pío X y su tiempo* by Ferruccio de Carli, given to a sister of D. Eliodoro Gil on January 6, 1944.

We can conclude that, before traveling to Rome or moving definitively to live in the Eternal City, the founder of Opus Dei already considered Pius X a saint and had a particular devotion to him, manifested in his prayer and the way he spoke about the pontiff to others. Among the aspects of Pius X's life and works most present in St. Josemaría's mind, the Eucharist has a prominent place, followed by love for the Church and a desire for the Kingdom of Christ to be established among all peoples. There are no records of allusions to modernism, the freedom of the Church, the reform of sacred music, or other matters. If we consider what was discussed earlier about devotion to St. Pius X in Spain,

we can conclude that St. Josemaría's devotion coincides with the data from source documents from Pius X's process of canonization in the country.

The next group of documentary evidence refers to the first years of St. Josemaría Escrivá's life in Rome, before the canonization of Pius X, between June 1946 and May 1954. As we have seen, when he arrived in the Eternal City, the lower floor of St. Peter's Basilica was undergoing extensive remodeling due to discovery of the tomb of St. Peter and the Vatican Necropolis. However, the body of Pius X had already been provisionally transferred to a niche on the wall on the right side of the Chapel of the Presentation in the Basilica itself, and was therefore already accessible to all pilgrims. With the beatification, the urn with the mortal remains of the pope was placed on the altar of Christ the King

in the Crypt of the Popes. On February 17, 1952, it was transferred to the altar of the Chapel of the Presentation.

There is abundant documentation concerning St. Josemaría Escrivá's frequent visits to the Basilica and his custom of praying a Creed before the Altar of Confession. In the diaries of the centers of Rome in those early years, this devotion of "going to pray a Creed in St. Peter's" is clearly recorded, although in very generic and varied terms; the Creed could also be prayed in the Square (sometimes the texts indicate that they prayed it from the center of one of the ellipses of the Colonnade) or inside the Basilica. At the time it was usually possible to drive into the Square, and the texts report that St. Josemaría did not always get out of the car: he would take advantage of trips near St. Peter's to stop in the Square and pray a Creed without

getting out of the car. From October 1953 onwards, the same diaries report from time to time that the founder or a member of the Work would occasionally accompany other members of Opus Dei traveling to Rome to the Basilica, where they would enter and stay a few minutes to pray. At a later date, the route that St. Josemaría Escrivá recommended for entering St. Peter's became clearer: first, to visit the Blessed Sacrament; then, to pray a *Salve* at one of the images of our Lady; thirdly, to pray a Creed kneeling before the altar of Confession; and fourthly, to pray an Our Father at the tomb of St. Pius X, in the chapel of the Presentation, for the Pope, the Church, and some special intention connected with the Work's relations with the Holy See.

The diaries of the center of *Piazza della Città Leonina* and, later, of the Roman College of the Holy Cross,

relate that St. Josemaría made a point of going to celebrate Holy Mass in St. Peter's on one of the days following his arrivals in Rome and on one of the days preceding his departures from Rome. We do not have a record of the altars where he celebrated each of these Masses, but the diary says that on August 31, 1946, the date on which he returned to Spain, St. Josemaría went to St. Peter's with Blessed Álvaro del Portillo to pray in the morning. The same source tells us that Don Alvaro celebrated Mass "at the altar of Pius X" and that St. Josemaría returned and celebrated Mass at home. We also know, in general terms, that St. Josemaría celebrated in St. Peter's Basilica on other dates and that he went to pray several times at the tomb of Pius X before his canonization. It seems that around February 12, 1953, St. Josemaría went several times to the Basilica or to St. Peter's Square to pray. On

February 26 of that same year, the diary reports that St. Josemaría and Blessed Álvaro del Portillo went to the dentist and, in passing, to St. Peter's Basilica, where they entered, since the Founder "wanted to pray to St. Pius X [sic]". The text of the diary seems to make a mistake, since Pius X was only Blessed at the time. This error reappears on the following day, February 27:

"Our Father comes in the middle of the get together. He tells us that in 1934 or 1935 — I don't remember exactly — he placed the Work's relations with the bishops under the patronage of the holy Curé of Ars. And a few days ago, he entrusted to St. Pius X [sic] the relations with the Holy See. In this regard, he spoke to us about the particular devotion to the saints that pious men have; it is a characteristic that the Father wants for all his children in the Work."

Several weeks later, we find another eloquent text in the same diary: "In the morning our Father leaves with Don Alvaro and Don José María. They go first to St. Peter's so that Don José María could say farewell. They enter the Basilica and say a prayer to St. Pius X, our patron — *as a devotion of the Father* — in relations with the Holy See." The italics are a later addition to the writing of the diary, in a different hand and with a different pen.

From the analysis of the texts presented, we can deduce that the date on which St. Pius X became intercessor of Opus Dei in its relations with the Holy See was in February 1953. It was probably in the later half of the month, and certainly before the 27th. The decision was preceded by times of prayer of the founder of Opus Dei before the tomb of the then-Blessed Pius X, praying for matters related to the

relationship of the Work with the Holy See. Although there is only a record of one explicit account of that prayer at the tomb of St. Pius X and one generic testimony of Lourdes Toranzo (who knows that the founder of Opus Dei before the canonization often went to pray there), his devotion to St. Pius X is so solid and of such early origin that we are morally certain that he must have gone many times to pray there before February 27, 1953. He was named a "patron" (the term "intercessor" would only be applied to him later) of the Work's relations with the Holy See.

The documents consulted do not show any clear motive for the decision to turn to this intercessor at that particular moment in the history of Opus Dei. There is, however, evidence from other sources about some important difficulties in those years that could have compromised

relations between Opus Dei and the Holy See, caused by unfounded slander. A first group of accusations of this type led St. Josemaría to consecrate Opus Dei to the Holy Family of Nazareth on May 14, 1951 (shortly before the beatification of Pius X). A second type of slander led him to consecrate the Work to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on August 15, 1951 (after the pope's beatification). Regarding the obstacles that led to this last consecration, documents already published show St. Josemaría's suffering and the steps taken from the date of the consecration onwards, until the meeting of Cardinal Federico Tedeschini with Pius XII on March 18, 1952, at which time the question was resolved. In October of that same year, on the feast of Christ the King, the founder of Opus Dei once again consecrated the Work and its apostolates, this time to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Finally, we know that

at the end of that year, St. Josemaría asked all the members of Opus Dei to prepare themselves well for the Work's silver jubilee, which was to be celebrated on October 2, 1953.

Finally, there is also no doubt that at that time, in February 1953, Pius X was only Blessed, and the approval of the miracles for canonization, as we have already seen, is dated January 17, 1954, almost a year later. The diary of the Roman College calls him "saint" several times, so it seems impossible that this is an error. Probably the diary reflects an oral tone of conversation with which reference is made to a saint, without the intention of specifying his specific status (blessed or saint).

The next event that interests us is the canonization of Pius X, opportunely recorded in the diary, because on that day, which was a Saturday, the schedule of the house was changed to

make it possible to attend the ceremony. *L'Osservatore Romano* and the diary of the Roman College report the large number of people that filled St. Peter's Square.

L'Osservatore Romano reports that Pius XII celebrated the canonization in the Square because of the large number of pilgrims and gives the full text of his homily. The diary of the Roman College recounts the adventures of various members of the Work trying to get as close as possible to the Pope during the ceremony, reports that several well-known people came from Spain for the celebration, and notes that St. Josemaría was able to watch the canonization on television from Villa Tevere. The day before the canonization, the founder told those who lived with him that Pius X was the Work's intercessor for relations with the Holy See.

As for St. Josemaría Escrivá's devotion to this pope, our sources show the route he advised pilgrims to follow in St. Peter's Basilica becoming more and more explicit.

We also found some allusions to the way the founder of Opus Dei praised Pius X when he spoke about him to the members of the Work in the late 1950s and, finally, explicit testimony of a visit St. Josemaría Escrivá made to St. Pius X's tomb in 1962, to pray for some intention. The members of the Work were asked to pray that same prayer to St. Pius X on multiple occasions before the Second Vatican Council began, and it is recorded in the sources we consulted. The founder of Opus Dei's desire for a relic of this pope, for a reliquary in the Oratory of the Blessed Trinity in Villa Tevere, also dates from that time; records show that he had obtained one by the summer of 1958.

In addition, there are three architectural or artistic references, all from the second half of the 1950s, which make St. Pius X's presence among the intercessors of Opus Dei clear. The first is the tabernacle of the oratory of Pentecost, located in the central headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome, which contains four small statues of the intercessors. We know that the founder of Opus Dei dedicated the altar of that oratory on March 11, 1957, a Monday evening. There is a reference to this tabernacle in the diary of the Villa Tevere construction site which tells us that a "*coprifilo*" was commissioned for the steps of the Tabernacle of that oratory on January 12 of that year. It is a kind of medallion that covers the joints of the rings ornamenting the three steps of the circular base of the tabernacle. The main biography of St. Josemaría states that the tabernacle of the oratory of Pentecost

arrived in Rome on September 29, 1956, and we know that it had been commissioned from "*Talleres de Arte Granda*" of Spain two years earlier.

The second is the set of five reliquaries that is currently in the oratory of the Blessed Trinity, which is also in the buildings that make up the headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome. In the diary of the Villa Tevere construction site in 1957, we find St. Josemaría Escrivá's first reference to the reliquaries: "the Father told Jesús A. G. [Jesús Álvarez Gazapo] that on the altar of the Father's oratory [the oratory of the Blessed Trinity, used by the Prelate] we will do some tests in order to place some chests between the candelabras, which will contain relics of the patrons [sic]: the Curé of Ars, St. Thomas More, Pius X, etc. They could be made of gilded silver or of gilded *ottone* [brass]." The date of this annotation is January 22 of that year.

The third is the altarpiece of the oratory of the *Aula*, also located in the headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome, which has reliefs of the four intercessors existing at that time. The date of dedication of that oratory is 1959.

We can conclude that St. Josemaría Escrivá had great devotion to St. Pius X even before his canonization. He prayed to him, visited his tomb frequently, spread devotion to him, and even entrusted the Work's relations with the Holy See to his intercession while he was still Blessed, in late February 1953. The founder of Opus Dei and his children lived Pius X's canonization with great joy. St. Josemaría Escrivá remembered this pope principally for his Eucharistic teaching, as well as for his virtues and other work. His intercession is closely linked to the Work's relations with the Holy See in the period from 1946 to 1965: that is,

over the years in which various pontifical approvals were obtained and various attempts were made to achieve a more adequate juridical solution. As is well known, this was postponed until after the Second Vatican Council.

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