

# **Villa Tevere, the Central Headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome**

Entry from the Dictionary of Saint Josemaría, (Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer) which explores the origins and history of Villa Tevere, the complex of buildings that form the central headquarters of Opus Dei in Rome.

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Villa Tevere, the headquarters of the Prelature of Opus Dei, is a building located in the Pinciano neighborhood of Rome, with its entrance at 73 Viale Bruno Buozzi. The name was chosen by Saint Josemaría in November 1946, when the house was still being sought, with the clear intention of highlighting its Roman identity: the Tevere (the Tiber River, in English) is the river that runs through Rome (cf. *AVP*, III, p. 100).

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## **1. The need for a central headquarters for Opus Dei in Rome**

Villa Tevere was purchased in April 1947, nearly a year after Escrivá de Balaguer's arrival in the Italian capital. During that first year, Saint Josemaría had lived with five other members of Opus Dei in a small rented apartment on Piazza della Città Leonina, just a few steps from St. Peter's Square.

Saint Josemaría, who had come to Rome to seek juridical approval for Opus Dei from the Holy See, had long been considering establishing its central headquarters in Rome (cf. *AVP*, II, p. 346). Accordingly, members of the Work who had preceded him to the Eternal City had already undertaken some initial searches. In 1946, officials in the

Vatican Secretariat of State offered him similar advice: the universal vocation of Opus Dei — as Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Paul VI), then Substitute of the Secretariat of State, and Domenico Tardini, Secretary of the Section for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs put it — required that its central headquarters be in Rome, near the Pope. Encouraged by this counsel, Saint Josemaría began to put this idea into action in 1946, intensifying efforts to find a suitable building.

The goal was to find a spacious, solid, and representative house, one that would endure over time and accommodate a large number of people, in anticipation of the future growth of Opus Dei. It was also essential that the house be welcoming, as a tangible reflection of the family spirit that characterizes the ethos of Opus Dei.

Soon, members of the Work established contact with Count Mario Gori Mazzoleni, who was interested in selling his residence in the Parioli hills. This stately home, with a garden suitable for construction, had been rented out to the Hungarian Embassy to the Holy See until the end of the war. The villa, as such houses are called in Italy, appealed to Saint Josemaría, who entrusted Alvaro del Portillo, his closest collaborator, with the task of negotiating its acquisition (cf. *AVP*, III, p. 103).

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## **2. The previous history of the house**

The house owned by Count Gori Mazzoleni had been built about twenty years earlier on land that had previously belonged to the Sacchetti

family (since the year 1850). The so-called *Vigna Sacchetti*, which had once covered an area of approximately fifty hectares, was divided and sold around 1920 under the pressure of urban development by municipal authorities and real estate companies. A half-hectare plot (within the triangle formed by the present-day streets of Bruno Buozzi, Villa Sacchetti, and Domenico Cirillo) eventually came into the possession of Count Mazzoleni.

His house, a three-story building, stood at the center of the triangle on a slightly elevated spot. At the current intersections of Bruno Buozzi with Domenico Cirillo and Domenico Cirillo with Villa Sacchetti, two plots bordering the count's property were developed with apartment buildings. At the third corner (Villa Sacchetti and Bruno Buozzi), Count Mazzoleni installed a large gate for vehicle entry, and

adjacent to it, on the Bruno Buozzi side, he constructed a two-story building.

As mentioned earlier, the house was used as the premises of the Hungarian Legation to the Holy See. It served this purpose from 1936 until 1944, when Hungary's regent, Miklós Horthy, was deposed, and the country came under temporary occupation; first by the Germans, and then by the Soviets. In November 1936, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the Vatican's Secretary of State (who would become Pope two years later under the name Pius XII) visited Villa Mazzoleni as a guest of Horthy, who was in Rome on an official trip.

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### **3. The *Pensionato***

Álvaro del Portillo's negotiations with Count Gori Mazzoleni were

successful, and despite difficulties, the house was purchased. The count accepted a symbolic initial payment and the commitment that the remaining amount would be paid using funds from a mortgage (cf. Urbano, 1995, pg. 41).

The main building, however, was still occupied unlawfully by Hungarian officials, even though the former legation no longer existed due to the interruption of diplomatic relations between Hungary and the Holy See (which would not be reestablished until 1990). This meant that only the residence adjacent to the gate was available. It was in this two-story building, named the *Pensionato*, that Saint Josemaría initially settled in July 1947. He and those who had been living with him at Città Leonina occupied the first floor, while the women responsible for domestic management, led by Encarnación Ortega, occupied the second floor.

Soon after, however, a separate building became available for them on the portion of the property that faced Via di Villa Sacchetti.

In a way, Opus Dei's work in Italy began in the *Pensionato*. In fact, some of the young men who came into contact with Saint Josemaría's small group during that period became the first Italian members of Opus Dei: Francesco Angelicchio, Luigi Tirelli, Renato Mariani, Mario Lantini, Umberto Farri, and others. In 1950, a center of Opus Dei would open on Via Orsini, on the other side of the Tiber, and they would move there.

It was also in the *Pensionato* that the Roman College of the Holy Cross was born. This center for theological and spiritual formation for members of Opus Dei from around the world began in 1948 (cf. *AVP*, III, pg. 133). By 1949, it had 14 students; in 1950,

20; and by 1952, 40 (cf. Herranz, 2011, pg. 57). Today's Cardinal Julián Herranz arrived at the Roman College from Spain in 1953 as a 23-year-old physician. His memories of his first night in the *Pensionato*, after a long train journey, vividly capture the cramped living conditions: "On the ground floor, beyond the entrance hall, there is a reception room and a hallway with several doors: the director's office, the study room, the oratory, and the living room. From the hallway, a short staircase leads to the first floor. I go up. Here are the dining room and five bedrooms. I'm shown to mine, I go in and discover five triple bunk beds (...). I'm too tired—after nearly forty hours of travel—to dwell on it. I thank God for having arrived, climb up to my bed, and, at last, fall asleep" (Herranz, 2011, pg. 44–45).

In that same year, 1953, the Roman College welcomed over a hundred

students and moved to a new area of Villa Tevere, the so-called *Casa del Vicolo*. Although not yet fully completed, it was partially available (cf. Herranz, 2011, pg. 25). At the same time, plans were being made for a permanent headquarters in a dedicated building, a project that would take several years to materialize (cf. *AVP*, III, pg. 276).

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#### **4. The buildings and their evolution**

The Hungarian officials vacated the villa in February 1949, and four months later, after obtaining the necessary permits, renovation work began on the building (cf. *AVP*, III, pg. 117), with plans to add two additional floors. This building, which currently houses the Prelate and the General Council members of

Opus Dei, would henceforth be known as the *Villa Vecchia*. The name *Villa Tevere* was reserved for the entire estate, on which, over time, new buildings emerged, facing either Viale Bruno Buozzi or Via di Villa Sacchetti.

One of the first constructions was the *Casa del Vicolo*, already mentioned. It was built on Viale Bruno Buozzi, between the *Pensionato* and the apartment building on the corner with Via Domenico Cirillo, and, as noted, it housed the students of the Roman College. The name of the house derives from a narrow internal alley, or *vicolo*, that runs along the boundary with the neighboring building on the corner with Via Domenico Cirillo. The construction of the new house required sacrificing part of the original garden, and it was deemed appropriate to leave a small open space on that side as well.

Another building, *Uffici*, houses some of the offices (*uffici* in Italian) of the prelature's central administration. It was built on the site of the former *Pensionato*, which was demolished in 1955. As such, it is located on Viale Bruno Buozzi, specifically at number 75.

The facade of the *Casa del Vicolo* (Bruno Buozzi, 73) is made of travertine, a light-colored stone commonly used in Rome, while that of *Uffici* is made of brick. In keeping with the prevailing architectural style on Viale Bruno Buozzi, a street that was solidifying its profile of buildings in the 1950s, the exteriors of *Uffici* and *Casa del Vicolo* feature five floors, in addition to the ground floor: a mezzanine, three regular stories, and an attic.

On Via di Villa Sacchetti, where the architectural styles are less uniform, the buildings constructed have

varied heights and configurations. The houses on this side of the estate, from south to north, are the *Ridotto*, the *Montagnola*, the *Casetta*, the *Manica Lunga* (also known, by antonomasia, as *Villa Sacchetti*), and the *Fabbricato Piccolo* (cf. Urbano, 1995, pg. 54). Together, they form the women's section of Villa Tevere, collectively referred to as *Villa Sacchetti*. This area houses the Central Advisory, the governing body for the women of Opus Dei.

With the experience of the Roman College of the Holy Cross, Saint Josemaría established its female counterpart, the Roman College of Holy Mary, in 1953. During its early years, the college was housed in *Villa Sacchetti*. Even before that date, the apostolic work carried out in this house had led to the first Italian women joining Opus Dei, such as Gabriella Filippone, Carla

Bernasconi, and Gioconda Lantini (cf. Sastre, 1989, pg. 406).

In 1963, the Roman College of Holy Mary moved to Castel Gandolfo, outside of Rome. In the 1970s, the Roman College of the Holy Cross also left *Casa del Vicolo* and *Uffici*, relocating to Via di Grottarossa, in a suburban area. Since then, Villa Tevere's function has been almost exclusively as the headquarters of the central governance offices of Opus Dei, along with their supporting teams.

Nearly all the constructions of Villa Tevere date back to the 1950s (excluding, of course, later extensions and adaptations, many of which occurred after the Founder's death). A decisive role in the construction efforts was played, starting in 1955, by the Castelli construction company. For the strained finances of Saint Josemaría

and his collaborators, the company provided a guarantee of continuity: up until then, the challenges of paying workers weekly and meeting loan repayments on time had raised fears of indefinite interruptions to the work (cf. *AVP*, III, pg. 236). The main architect of Villa Tevere was Jesús Álvarez Gazapo (1929–2006), who later became a priest.

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## **5. The prelatic church: Our Lady of Peace**

In the area of Villa Tevere where Viale Bruno Buozzi meets Via di Villa Sacchetti, Saint Josemaría oversaw the construction of a large oratory, dedicated to Our Lady of Peace. Its design is inspired by the forms of ancient Roman basilicas. It was inaugurated by Saint Josemaría with

a solemn Mass on the night of December 31, 1959.

In 1982, at the same time as the establishment of the Personal Prelature of Opus Dei, John Paul II designated this oratory as the prelatic church of the new prelature. Here, the Prelate has his seat, just as a diocesan bishop has his cathedra (or seat) in the cathedral of a diocese.

Since 1992, when Saint Josemaría was beatified by John Paul II, his remains — originally interred in a crypt beneath the church in 1975 — rest in an urn placed within the altar of Our Lady of Peace. The crypt also holds the remains, in chronological order, of Carmen Escrivá de Balaguer (1899–1957), the founder's sister, who generously contributed to the work of Opus Dei and passed away in Rome; Álvaro del Portillo (1914–1994), whose remains now lie in the same burial place that once housed

those of Saint Josemaría; and Dora del Hoyo (1914–2004), an assistant numerary and one of the first women to move to Rome (in December 1946), who worked in the domestic administration of Villa Tevere. Since December 14, 2016, Bishop Javier Echevarría, who served as the Prelate of Opus Dei for 22 years, has also been interred in the crypt of Our Lady of Peace.

On 23 March 1994, just hours after the passing of Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, John Paul II came to pray before his body, which lay in state in Our Lady of Peace.

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