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Locked in the Legation of Honduras

In March 1937, in the middle of the civil war, Saint Josemaría spent four and a half months locked up with some members of Opus Dei and a dozen families in the Legation of Honduras, a building located very close to the Plaza de Emilio Castelar in Madrid, as it had diplomatic immunity. Those months of isolation were also a period of spiritual growth for Saint Josemaría and those who accompanied him.

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It is often said that history is a teacher of life, and those of us who have dedicated ourselves to this subject have experienced that, when you go back to the documents, when you go back to that well-done, objective and properly marked history, you really learn a lot from history and you learn a lot about how to apply history to your own life.

It makes sense that, in these days when we are living in such a special situation with the coronavirus, we should look back at the history of the Church, at the history of Opus Dei, at the history of St. Josemaría, and draw lessons for our own life.

In that respect, there is a very concrete, very practical scene, which

could perhaps be the object of a moment's consideration on our part from the angle of history. It is the period that is usually called the Honduras Legation, the time when, in the middle of the Spanish Civil War, in the early months of 1937, the War Front was already stabilised. The military campaigns during those months were concentrated in Malaga, Santander and Bilbao. In other words, the south and north of the Peninsula. But war had not yet been decided upon, either diplomatically or militarily. In Madrid itself, in those months from March to September, there was a situation of greater public order in the streets. The government of the Republic controlled the streets and, therefore, there was more policing on the streets. These controls were carried out in an orderly and concerted manner in the month of March.

The difficult situation of the Honduran Legation

The embassies of the various countries in Madrid had coordinated to open their doors to people who wanted to seek refuge because they felt persecuted by the regime. As a result, the embassies in Madrid together had as many as 11,000 refugees.

One of them — in a rather special situation — was the Honduran Legation, the Consulate of Honduras. Why? Because the Honduran government had recognised the so-called national side. In other words, the government that was beginning to take command of the military operations against the Republic in Burgos. The Honduran Legation was therefore placed in a very difficult situation and was placed under the control of the Chilean Consulate. The Honduran Legation could only

guarantee the consul himself, his family and those who decided to take refuge there with the authorisation of the Council.

In March, Saint Josemaría and a group of up to five people (of whom we will now speak about each one of them) took refuge there. One of his siblings and other members of the Work will join them and they will have the good fortune to spend a few months as refugees there, in an environment of serenity and peace, but also in a climate of anxiety, as we will see below, because it will be many months before they leave. And there was still a lot of uncertainty about the future and about the news that was arriving.

The Honduran Consulate was located on Paseo de la Castellana at number 51, in a building that is still preserved today, very close to the Plaza de Emilio Castelar. The

Honduran consul lived in the left wing of the main building and a relative of his lived in the right wing, but they were already under the American flag. Therefore, the left wing was where the Honduran Legation was. It was a well-furnished, elegant house, with a large hall and five rooms, a large bathroom and a living room.

In normal conditions that could have housed a family or two. However, in that time five families lived there, and at the back, in a small living room with a bedroom and a window overlooking an inner courtyard — that's where Saint Josemaría and five people stayed. And that's also where, with mattresses, sometimes two more people had to fit in. Upstairs, in the annex that the consulate had rented, there were up to 30 people, sometimes even up to 60 at some point.

All of this was under the Honduran flag and in principle it was respected during the war. It is true that there were moments of alarm when one of the embassies, for example, the Mexican embassy, was attacked. But in general, respect for these delegations or embassies was maintained.

Daily life in the Honduran Legation

What was life like in the Honduran Legation? Well, it was obviously a difficult environment, first of all because you had to obtain daily supplies. The car in the Honduran Legation was able to move around, to look for food not only in the markets in Madrid, but also in nearby towns. And every day it went out in search of the food it needed. That food, insofar as they could get it, was quite scarce. But at least they could have something for lunch and something for dinner. And at least something

like coffee with milk for breakfast, or tea. This daily food was served in the big hall of the Legation, which had a very big table and where they served these daily meals, either in shifts or in a tightly packed way. The first problem, therefore, is the obvious problem of supply, especially as time went on during the war and, therefore, what was arriving in the Madrid markets became less and less and of poorer quality.

Secondly, there was the problem of the enclosed environment of a Legation where from 2 to 5 families to 30 or 60 people of all kinds and conditions lived together. It was an atmosphere that arose from people who are so different living together in a situation of uncertainty: the embassy, or the Legation in this case, could be attacked because of its diplomatic fragility, and also because there was uncertainty as to what the end of the conflict could be. The

radio they listened to was the radio of the Republic and, naturally, the messages transmitted were not entirely accurate and rather biased towards the interests of the Republican side. Consequently, any news becomes a commentary, a hoax, that was sometimes created by the people's own nervousness.

That enclosed atmosphere, the atmosphere of tension, of being on permanent alert, contrasted sharply with the atmosphere in that back room where every day Saint Josemaría and the group of young people around him established a timetable — they tried to dedicate time to prayer, to their studies, to languages too, and some of them even prepared a conference or a subject of their speciality and gave presentations on it.

There were also moments for laughs, because of course, in close quarters,

situations arise that make the atmosphere in which one lives more friendly, more relaxed. For example, José María González Barredo, who is one of the people there, a professor at the Institute of Physics and Chemistry, who would later go to work in the United States, was always a very absent-minded man. His absent-mindedness manifested itself in the fact that everything he saw he kept in his pocket, so much so that Saint Josemaría, when someone asked if he had seen one object or another, would say: look in Jose María's pockets or in his suitcase, which was his wardrobe. And indeed, many times anything from a shirt to an umbrella would come out.

A daily meditation commenting on the Gospel

There was also something funny that was remembered by Eduardo Alastrue, who in this case is the key

man for the knowledge of what was going on inside. Every day Saint Josemaría preached a meditation. He would spend a long time commenting on the Gospel of the day in the form of a personal prayer aloud, about half an hour or so.

Eduardo was Professor of External Dynamics at the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Seville and later Professor of External Geodynamics at the Faculty of Geology at the Complutense University. He was a man with great memory and could practically write the meditation from memory, with the help of Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, who would later become Saint Josemaría's successor: a civil engineer, Doctor of History and Doctor of Canon Law.

He notes down many comments made by Saint Josemaría in his meditations on the environment; there are many funny incidents that

happened there. As St Josemaría's own brother, Santiago Escrivá, was 18, a young man in the full vitality of life, he couldn't go to sleep without doing a set of exercises. Naturally, he ended up doing the exercises on the mattress when everyone was asleep. The things that happen in life. When many people get together in the same place for a long time, there are also those little quirks or shenanigans that come up in the course of living together.

The impressions of Consuelo Mateu

The testimony written by Consuelo Mateu, the daughter of the Honduran consul, is a document that allows us to understand and get to know what was going on there. She, who was very young, had that natural curiosity and noticed that there was something special in that room, in that group of people.

She knew that Don Josemaría was a priest because in the first period of his consular life they had allowed him to celebrate mass. Afterwards, out of fear of reprisals, because there were guards (the Republic placed guards at the doors of the consulates), so that no one could denounce them, Saint Josemaría began to celebrate Mass indoors, that is, in the very room he was occupying.

She, who knew that Saint Josemaría was a priest and saw that group of young people around him, always thought: there is something more here than a priest and a group of young people. There is something special here, that way of treating each other, of looking after each other. That elegance of manner, that inner peace, that togetherness, that fraternity. There is something else, she thought.

And it is very interesting because in her memories she wrote down that, when months later, in 1939, at the end of the war, she got her hands on the first copy of *The Way*, which is the work that Saint Josemaría wrote, in which he wrote down points of meditation, some of them coming precisely from the Honduran Legation, when she read that book it was then that she realised that what happened was that that group of young people and Saint Josemaría were living what was written in that book. Not only were they striving to be saints in the midst of the world, but they were actually, with God's grace, putting it into practice.

Opus Dei, a very young institution

Opus Dei had only been in existence for a very short time, it had not yet developed very much:

There were members of the Work in Valencia, there was that small group

in Madrid, the student residence in Ferraz Street, the DYA residence.

They were there in July 1936 with projects, but there were really very few of them and some of them, at the beginning of the Civil War, were imprisoned, others were lucky enough to spend a few months with the founder, others like Isidoro Zorzano, an industrial engineer, one of the first members of Opus Dei, was on the street and was like the link between everyone, because he was an Argentine citizen and had freedom of movement. He was born in Argentina, although he had later studied for his baccalaureate in Logroño, Spain.

Isidoro had met Saint Josemaría when they were both young students in Logroño and later finished his engineering studies in Madrid. He had worked in Malaga and then came to Madrid to be the director of

the student residence in Ferraz Street. The new residence was to be opened in July — a project that was cut short precisely because of the outbreak of war.

That is why the comment by Juan Jiménez Vargas, another one of those refugees, a doctor and professor of Physiology at the University of Barcelona and later at the University of Navarra, is very important. He was a man of great human stature, although he may have been rather short in appearance, but he was a man of great human and spiritual stature. And Juan managed to leave the Honduran Legation for a moment to take a walk, it was already dark, and the lights were switched off in the Plaza de Castelar to reduce expenses. He looked back over the day, when it seemed as if nothing had been done, and thought to himself: "Just one more day, but here we are, moving the family forward."

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