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Crossing the Pyrenees: All of Them or None of Them

At the end of 1937 Saint Josemaría and some of the first members of Opus Dei and friends crossed the Pyrenees to the so-called national zone, where it was easier for Saint Josemaría to continue his priestly work. During this crossing, there were some particularly risky and difficult moments. The historian José Carlos Martín de la Hoz recounts one of them.

10/15/2021

Among the episodes of the Spanish Civil War and its relationship with the history of Opus Dei, there is an event that is usually called the crossing of the Pyrenees or the passage of the Pyrenees, which consists of the move of the founder of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaría and a group of his sons to the national zone, specifically in the final days of the month of November to 2-3 December 1937.

This general episode of the move to the other zone from the Republican zone had a single objective, which was to recover freedom of movement so that Saint Josemaría, as a priest, as the founder of Opus Dei, could carry out his pastoral work freely.

It is fascinating that there are many little micro-stories that could be told, supernatural events and human events that intertwine within this general history of the Civil War, or within the general history of Opus Dei, because Opus Dei is both divine and human.

I would now like to refer to a very specific event that takes place within this story of the crossing of the Pyrenees, and that is the time spent by Juan Jiménez Vargas, a doctor, the right-hand man of the founder of Opus Dei because of his human and supernatural maturity. He, as a doctor and specialist in physiology, directed the preparation of the group so that they could make the crossing.

This event — the physical and mental preparation of the founder and the group of young people who surrounded him — will help us understand why so much time was

spent on this preparation in the course of the story we are about to tell. That group of expedition members arrived in Barcelona at the end of September 1937 and it was not until half past six in the evening on 27 November that they began the five-day journey that would take them through the Pyrenees mountains to Andorra, and from there, to the other area into which Spain had been divided during the Civil War.

Preparing to Cross the Pyrenees

It is interesting to study the reason for those weeks of waiting. Juan Jiménez Vargas was a specialist in physiology (in fact he was already working on his doctoral thesis on this subject) and in 1942, shortly after the end of the Civil War, he obtained the chair of physiology at the University of Barcelona. This is precisely what he focused on, on the human being's

capacity to take risks, to face adventures of effort.

Juan would lead the group through the streets of Barcelona, avoiding the checkpoints that the militiamen subjected the passers-by to, so that through these walks they could prepare themselves. Saint Josemaría had to make this journey from the Legation in Honduras, where he had been a refugee from March to September 1937, in very precarious conditions, both in terms of food and ventilation, because he had been locked up in a room with another small group, miraculously saving his life, but in any case, locked up. Time was required, therefore, to walk, to learn, to recover, to climb hills, to make efforts, to overcome obstacles, to regain his balance, and also to eat. This is because the food that both Saint Josemaría and the others had been eating in the previous period was not the most adequate. It was

obviously lacking in vitamins and many of the elements that we have in our daily lives, precisely because of the precarious situation of the war.

At times you also wonder how long it took to contact the guides who were going to carry out the expedition and how long it took for them to make the decision to undertake the journey.

When you watch the videos that have been made about the crossing of the Pyrenees, when you look at the maps, the changes in elevation, the changes in altitude, the ups and downs of the zig-zagging route that they followed, you begin to realise why it took Juan so long to give the go-ahead to start the crossing, and why those guides took so long to give the go-ahead for those expedition members to start the crossing. In other words, on both sides, there was a real and well-founded doubt about

the capability of carrying out such an adventure.

It must be borne in mind that the entire border area was heavily guarded, and therefore, in any case, the situation was not easy, nor were relationships ordinary and straightforward. Everything was done through third parties.

The journey to freedom begins

Let's focus on the moment of the crossing. It is the 27th of November, half past six in the afternoon and the guide finally appears in the Rialp mountains. After a few days of being settled in. We are in pre-winter weather. In fact, during the five days of the trek there will be one day when there will be a small snowfall. And in any case, we know that a heavy snowfall fell in Andorra on the 3rd and they were stuck there for almost ten days. So the weather is pre-winter.

When the guide appeared that afternoon and gave the instructions to the group that was going to make the crossing, Saint Josemaría, the group of university students around him, the professionals and other groups that had been gathering because the expedition was quite large, there were almost 40 people. The instructions given by the guide are three very precise ones. First, they will walk for ten, twelve hours a day, at night; they will rest during the day in places prefixed by a guide they trust. Secondly, they will walk in single file. And thirdly, if someone falls ill, he must be abandoned on the road. Why? Because it could jeopardise the success of the rest of the trekkers.

The conditions are extremely tough and the expedition begins. The first to succumb is Tomás Alvira, on the first of the hikes, in fact, it becomes clear that the training, the ability to

eat, to recover from the food had been incorrect and he falls on the path, completely spent.

The guide gives a strong instruction, and St Josemaría intervenes with the moral authority of being the person, being a priest and the oldest person on the expedition. And he said, "No! Tomás is coming with us." In the face of that assurance and that strength, everyone pulls Tomás up and, almost carried, they get him to finish the day's journey.

On the second day, the one who succumbs is Professor Albareda, José María Albareda, who is a professor of Soil Science and, therefore, theoretically the best prepared of them all, since he was a man who was dedicated to the study of soil and was a specialist in long walks in the mountains, in steep areas of soil preparation, etc. But undoubtedly, so many months of war, of conflict, of

lack of food, meant that on the second day he was as if he was dazed, as if he had gone. Finally, all together, they managed to lift him up and carry him.

Opus Dei, a little yeast

In the early hours of the morning of 2 December, that is, we are already on the fifth day, the last day — a few hours later they will reach Andorra and reach freedom — the one who succumbs is Saint Josemaría, in one of those stops they have made along the way, almost at dawn, when they sit down, Saint Josemaría trembles like a leaf. His whole body trembles. He has fallen into what is called hypothermia. A situation in which the temperature has dropped so low, the exhaustion is so total that he is in a state of pre-death.

Juan Jiménez Vargas made a blunt decision: everyone on top of him. When they all crowded around him

and managed to give him the warmth he needed, and managed to recover him, they were showing in a very graphic way that Opus Dei at that moment was truly a small leaven that, thanks to the warmth of fraternity, the warmth of Christian charity, had managed to bring the founder around. And that little seed will bear fruit in Opus Dei over the years, over the centuries, until the end of history.

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