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“I Took Up My Camera One Last Time and Focused On His Hands...”

It was June 1975. “I took up my camera one last time and focused on his hands, which were so expressive. That was the last photo of him that I took.”

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Helena Serrano is from Cordoba, Spain. She lived and worked in Rome for over twenty years, very close to St

Josemaría. During that time, with his encouragement, she developed a special aptitude for photography, and recorded part of the history of Opus Dei with her photographs.

How did you start to work as a photographer?

I arrived in Rome in 1954, for the start of several years of study, while at the same time helping in some of the many tasks that had to be done in the Opus Dei headquarters in Rome. There I met people in Opus Dei who came from all sorts of different countries and backgrounds, so it was rich in diversity. Saint Josemaría was looking to the future, because he knew that the project he was engaged on was going to have to last for as long as there are men and women on earth to be reminded about the universal call to holiness. So he realized that the people who joined Opus Dei in future centuries

would like to know what the very first members were like and how they lived.

A real treasure

I also took lots of photos of St Josemaría himself, although he didn't like being photographed. Quite often, he said to me in his characteristic tone, loving but firm, "My daughter, don't take any more of me – pray for me!" Or else he'd say, "Come on, Helena, be kind...! Take photos of the others, and leave me in peace." But Don Alvaro del Portillo would encourage him to face up to it, telling him to do so out of fairness to his daughters and sons, who needed to know him really well. And so we have very many snapshots of him. And all those photos, together with the hours of film taken during the gatherings with Saint Josemaría on his catechetical trips through Spain, Portugal, and several countries in

Latin America, make up a real treasure. In an image-focused culture like ours people are helped to understand the spirit God gave him by seeing how naturally he preached what he practiced.

“Now we’ll have to say cheese!”

Most of these photos were taken in different everyday situations. There are very few of what you could call set-pieces. The photos show the look of affection on his face, or how attentively he listened to someone who was talking to him... and always that smile of his. Saint Josemaría was joyful all his life because he knew he was a son of God, and he passed on his infectious cheerfulness to the people around him. You could see it in his face, and the photos also show how he passed it on to other people. There’s one that I call ‘Bursting out laughing’. He was there with several of his daughters, and when I

appeared with my camera he said, “Now we’ll have to say cheese!” in such a funny way that everyone burst out laughing.

“And do you want me to play the hypocrite?”

There are also lots of photos of Saint Josemaría praying – at Mass, or before a picture or statue of our Lady, or kissing a crucifix, or kneeling in front of the Tabernacle, with his rosary in his hands... I can say for a fact that I never saw him get distracted on any of these occasions, and the camera quite simply recorded the way he attended exclusively to God or our Lady.

On January 6, 1972, I decided to photograph the moment when, as he always did on coming to that part of the house, he stopped to kiss a little statue of Our Lady of Loreto. When he saw me with my camera at the ready, he asked me, “Helena, what

are you doing here?” I replied that I wanted to take a photo of him kissing the statue. He said, “And do you want me to play the hypocrite... to put on a show of kissing the statue so that you can take a photograph?” He hesitated a moment, but then said, “I won’t be a hypocrite, because I’m going to give it a real kiss – a true kiss!”

There are other photos that show Saint Josemaría’s devotion very clearly, for example when he tenderly kissed the figure of the newborn Baby Jesus at Christmas, or took it into his arms and rocked it and said loving things to it.

You took the last photographs of Saint Josemaría in June 1975...

I’ll never forget the moment when I knelt before the mortal remains of Saint Josemaría, at mid-day on June 26, 1975. I thought for a moment about my camera, but didn’t feel able to take any photos. I wouldn’t have

taken the photos I did, had I not been asked to do so by Don Alvaro del Portillo. Ana Lorente and I photographed the events of those days. On June 27, shortly before the burial, I realized that my filial duty of taking photographs of the Father had come to an end. Then someone suggested, “Helena – his hands.” I took up my camera one last time and focused on his hands, which were so expressive. That was the last photo of him that I took.

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