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Snow-covered Volcanos: Saint Josemaria's Confinement During Wartime

A brief history of the months Saint Josemaria spent in forced confinement amid the Spanish Civil War, with excerpts from the meditations he preached during those days.

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In the first year of the Spanish Civil War, Saint Josemaria continued to carry out a wide-ranging but clandestine pastoral work, to the extent that circumstances allowed, risking his life when necessary for the good of souls. Thousands of priests and religious had already lost their lives for the faith. After a real odyssey, he found refuge in the Honduran Consulate in Madrid, which along with other friendly sites granted asylum to many thousands of people during those months.

The offices of the Consulate occupied two floors of a building on Paseo de la Castellana, no. 51. Saint Josemaria lived there with four of his sons (Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Juan Jiménez Vargas, Eduardo Alastrué and José María González Barredo) and his brother Santiago from mid-March until August 30, 1937. They lodged on the ground floor, accessed directly through the vestibule. In

total, almost one hundred people sought refuge in that house.

The living conditions were very trying. Men, women and children were obliged to live together in the confinement of a few square meters. There were no beds; they slept on mattresses spread out at night on the floor. Since only one bathroom was available, it was necessary to wait in line to use it. Only two meals a day were provided, at midday and in the evening; and due to the food shortage, these barely reached subsistence level. Saint Josemaria lost sixty-five pounds during those months. Afterwards, when his mother saw him she failed to recognize him at first; only later did she realize he was her son, by his voice

From the first moment of their confinement, the climate the founder created contrasted sharply with the

general tone of pessimism. To stay busy during the day, he set up a schedule that included Holy Mass, norms of piety, study, language learning and family life. A point in *The Way* alludes to these circumstances: “The plants were hidden under the snow. And the farmer, the owner of the land, remarked with satisfaction: ‘Now they’re growing on the inside.’ I thought of you, of your forced inactivity.... Tell me, are you also growing on the inside?”[1]

The founder of Opus Dei tried as often as possible to guide the prayer of those accompanying him in their tiny room. Employing the figurative language that he used in his correspondence during those months to get through the censors, he writes: “I spent a pleasant time with the children, talking about all kinds of things. It’s a pity I can’t send you the brief notes that Eduardo took. But I

trust that Mr. G. Angel will have already told each of you what you need to know. The following amusing scene is often repeated. The little ones and the grandfather are seated on their refugee mattresses.

Everyone is very serious, very....grave—that's the right word. But once the formal topic is over, uncle Santí, who believes he's a child and perhaps still is, starts doing his calisthenics, seriously threatening the safety of those next to him.”[2]

One of those accompanying him, Eduardo Alastrué, had a particularly good memory. As soon as Saint Josemaria finished speaking, he set down in writing what he had heard, trying to follow as closely as possible his words and style. Although his notes are not a verbatim account, they are of great value because they offer eye-witness testimony of the founder's teaching in those trying circumstances. In a letter dated July

1937, Saint Josemaria writes: “Here are some more notes of the talks I’m giving to these fellows. Although often they don’t get what I say right (though sometimes they do), I have them keep on taking notes, since they can always be of some benefit to you.”[3]

Saint Josemaria always saw God’s hand in every circumstance, whether favorable or not. He had identified himself so closely with our Lord that he was totally convinced that all things work together for the good of those who love God:[4] *omnia in bonum!* From the first moment of his confinement, he strove to draw the maximum spiritual benefit from those very difficult circumstances. He accepted God’s will with all his strength and urged others to do the same.

All things would be possible, he assured them, if they remained

faithful to their Christian vocation, striving to “grow on the inside” by intensifying their supernatural life.

Saint Josemaria stressed that their prayer should be filled with great trust in God, with the certainty that He always hears us. “Let’s speak to Him in loving confidence, as intimate friends, as brothers, as sons. Jesus: we want to see you, to speak to you! We want to contemplate you, immersed in the immensity of your beauty, in a contemplation that will never cease! It must be wonderful to see you, Jesus! It must be wonderful to see you and be wounded by your Love, to be inebriated and sustained by your Love, to lose interest altogether in worldly things. Lord, it must be wonderful to remain lovingly immersed in your wounded Heart, loving you unceasingly and being loved by You. If only we could relive the enchantment of that ancient legend of the monk who

spent centuries enraptured by your infinite beauty, centuries that seemed only a moment.”[5]

His prayer often included a petition for more grace to respond better to the calling to the Work: “Christ never tires of teaching us. Like a loving mother, he doesn’t let up in his recommendations. Why not throw ourselves into your arms, my God, upon your open chest? Why don’t we allow you to move our will with deep affections and firm resolutions? My God, I love you! Make me fall ever more in love with your Work. May I serve you ever more faithfully each day. May my hands transmit the sacred water flowing from your side to the souls of those around me. May I myself be ever more inebriated by that heavenly water.”[6] And he continued: “Even if I had a thousand lives, I would dedicate all of them to your service. Even if I were to undergo such a great misfortune as

to be left alone, come what may I'll persevere on this path, with your help. And we will continue giving free reign to our affections: first humility, for having chosen me despite my wretchedness, for entrusting this treasure to me; then thanksgiving, for letting it fall into my hands; then cries of petition that I may correspond, asking for perseverance, for me, for all my brothers.”[7]

Saint Josemaria also prayed for each of his spiritual sons: “I want to see myself now, my God, close to the Wound in your side; and I want to call to mind all my children, those who now are living members of this living Body of your Work. I will mention each one by name and consider their qualities, virtues and defects. And then I will beseech you, as I urge them towards you one by one and say, *Enter inside!* I will place them in your Heart. I would like to

do so with each one, and with all who will come afterwards and form part of this supernatural family, throughout the centuries until the end of the world. All of us united in the Heart of Christ, all made one through love for Him, and all of us detached from earthly things by the strength of this love and by mortification. We want to be like the first Christians, making present once again their spirit in the world. Let's begin, then, by making this phrase a reality within the Work: *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.*"[8]

Trust in God was especially needed now: "The worst possible situation. Well, so what? Our Lord would seem to be telling us: 'My son, the worst revolution in history; your interior stained by the germs that have infiltrated from outside; all of this, to be sure, is passing over you like a furious storm. But nothing should rob you of your peace, except grave

sin. As far as my Work is concerned, you know that it will be carried out, because I have so disposed it, with you, without you, or in spite of you. Do you think that I haven't taken into account that in the full bloom of youth you have given yourself completely to your God, with all the love your human heart can muster? Remain faithful. As for the rest, what does it matter?"[9]

He often referred to the situation of the Work God had asked him to found: "The Work. What is the Work now? Hardly anything is visible; it is truly the mustard seed. A few men, without prestige, without financial means or experience, almost all of them just setting out in life. But we know that, in the supernatural field of the Church, from this mustard seed there will rise a bush destined to cover the entire world, in which many birds of the air will seek shelter."[10]

The essential thing was to beseech God unceasingly for his help: “Jesus’ reply to his mother is apparently negative. But our Lady continues to ask with the supernatural stubbornness that is perseverance. Does our Lord at first seem to refuse to listen to us? Then we ask again. Since this year of revolution began, how many things I have asked for that have not been granted to me. Am I discouraged because of this? No. I go on asking, with the confidence that, if it is for the glory of God—and it is, that’s why I’m asking—my prayer will be accepted.”[11]

Much of his preaching was directed to raising the sights of his spiritual sons, so that they wouldn’t remain trapped in the current situation: “What significance is one year in the life of a Work that must last until the end of time? Besides, won’t God make up for our apparently lost time

if He sees us maintain our good will? The revolution caught us off guard, absorbed in our work, yearning only to serve Him. Afterwards, perhaps we were confused for awhile. But we never lost our right intention: of that I'm sure.”[12]

Another frequent topic was the unity of all the people in the Work: “For our prayer to be truly fruitful, don't we have to foster among ourselves the same union that existed among the Apostles, not by our physical proximity to one another but by our identity of thought, feeling and will? Yes, we have to see the Work's concerns as our own, loving with the Heart of Christ; our thoughts must pass through the head of the one in charge. This is true unity, proper to a healthy, vibrant body.”[13] Unity with the others also meant offering God their daily annoyances and adversities: “Amidst our apparent inactivity, we have the possibility to

do a great deal of good. We can accompany each of our brothers in danger and protect them. Conversely, each time we overlook a mortification, each time we shorten the prayer, we harm them, we fail to help them to bear their sufferings and reject temptations. Always keep this consideration in mind. May it spur you on in your interior life.

Don't forget that, although we Christians are many in number, we form a single body in Christ, in union with the holy souls in purgatory and those now part of the Church triumphant.”[14]

His meditations were imbued with the strong awareness of his spiritual paternity: “When a member of our body is wounded, the eyes, hands and mind strive to remedy the damage. In this supernatural organism of the Work, the same law has to apply. When your brothers, who are my sons, suffer, how can we

fail to be moved? If someone is in danger, even if not immediate, how can we be at ease? I suffer when I think of the members of the Work who are separated from us, in the trenches or in prison. And I fully understand St. Paul's words: 'Who is sad, and I am not sad? Who is sick, and I am not sick?' Thus the Apostle to the Gentiles expressed the union in charity that he experienced with his brothers. How can I fail to pray for those who are far away, sick or in danger? Lord, pour forth your graces abundantly into their hearts, minds and wills; anoint each of their senses with your merciful love."[15]

In one meditation, he told those accompanying him: "You can be like those snow-covered volcanoes, whose ice on the outside conceals the fire raging inside."[16] He often reminded them that the heart of the Work is the effort to attain holiness in the little things of each day: "Wait

for your moment and prepare for it with prayer, with the exact and faithful fulfillment of your current small duties, with conduct that will attract other souls to the Work.”[17]

Caring for little things means caring for small details of charity towards others: “How difficult but how important it is to practice charity in small details! How often there escapes from our lips a harsh comment, a condemnatory judgement, an impolite gesture towards our neighbor. Why? Is God asking us to judge others? On the contrary, doesn’t he require us to cover their wretchedness with the cloak of charity? We should never speak rudely about anyone, even when we’re right in our judgments?”[18] And he insisted: “By avoiding critical spirit towards our neighbor, even when justified, we’ll also avoid turning into gossip-mongers who enjoy spreading

negative comments about others.”[19]

Finally, he reminds them: “Our struggle is worth nothing if we don’t rely on God. His help is all important. Let’s ask him for *gaudium cum pace* in all our struggles. Let’s beseech Him to grant us grace, strength, patience and humility, so that in knowing ourselves we trust only in Him.”[20]

For further reading:

Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. II, Scepter, ch. 1.

José Luis González Gullón, *Escondidos. El Opus Dei en la zona republicana durante la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939)*, Rialp, pp. 209-218.

[1] *The Way*, 294

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Letter to his sons in Valencia*, July 1, 1937. The “little ones” are the five who are listening to him; “the grandfather” is Saint Josemaria; “uncle Santí” is his brother Santiago, then 18 years old; “Mr. G. Angel.” is the guardian angel.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Letter to Isidoro Zorzano*, July 1, 1937 (AGP, RHP, EF-370701-4).

[4] Cf. *Rom* 8:28.

[5] Meditation, 4 June 1937.

[6] Meditation, 30 August 1937.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Meditation, 4 June 1937.

[9] Meditation, 19 July 1937.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Meditation, 11 July 1937.

[12] Meditation, 24 August 1937.

[13] Meditation, 19 May 1937.

[14] Meditation, 8 April 1937.

[15] Meditation, 7 April 1937.

[16] Meditation, 6 July 1937.

[17] Meditation, 4 July 1937.

[18] Meditation, 19 June 1937.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Meditation, 21 June 1937.

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