

800 Nigerians Witness Canonization of St. Josemaría Escrivá

The entire square of St. Peters in Rome was filled with hundreds of thousands of happy people, of all races and colors, language, background. It was October 6, 2002, and they had all come to witness the proclamation of a new saint, Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei.

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Italian authorities put the crowd at over 300,000 and among these could be counted some 800 or so Nigerians, who had also come for the event. In spite of the number of people present however, there was not the usual jostling of people seeking more breathing space. It was one big happy family, each one willing to give up their places so that the others could be better positioned. No one raised his voice; no angry faces could be seen. But for the ebullient joy that was bursting from each one, the gathering could well have been described as solemn. Though it was not a day of triumph, one could not help telling Josemaría Escrivá: Father, this is indeed your day. But he would have rejected any such reference to himself, who always sought above all things only the glory of God.

I was conscious of being a part of history. On May 17, 1992, when

Josemaría Escrivá was proclaimed Blessed also by Pope John Paul II, I did not have the fortune to be present, but now here I was at the very moment the Pope was saying: “We declare and define that Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer is a Saint and we enroll him among the Saints, decreeing that he is to be venerated in the whole Church as one of the saints. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And then St. Peter’s Square resounded with the triple, “Amen, Amen...Amen.” It was simply incredible.

And so the entire Church rejoices as the sanctity of one of her most faithful sons St. Josemaría Escrivá, is recognized. Since 1928, St. Josemaría has taught the Universal Call to Holiness, that God Our Lord calls all men and women, irrespective of their state in life, to the highest summit of holiness. They are to

achieve this through carrying out their daily work with perfection and for the glory of God. Here therefore is a test case of one who has made it to Heaven by living this spirit of sanctification of ordinary work and life.

Each one of the 300,000 persons present at St. Peter's Square on October 6 had a unique story to tell. Members, Cooperators and friends of Opus Dei and the majority of who received spiritual help that Opus Dei offers, were all common beneficiaries of a boundless joy.

I was there with 16 other Nigerians, twelve of whom were my students at Helmbridge Study Center, Surulere, Lagos. Their ages ranged from 13 to 18 years. Earlier we had spent some days in the Spanish capital of Madrid visiting places related to St. Josemaría Escrivá. 74 years earlier, on October 2, 1928, it was in the

course of a spiritual retreat at Madrid that God made him “see” Opus Dei, “a way of sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the ordinary duties of a Christian”. And then in his words, “Opus Dei grew among the sick and poor of Madrid hospitals”, referring to the supernatural ‘energy’ generated for him by the prayers of the sick he often visited and helped. We also made a visited to the Foundation for the Sick, a Royal Foundation cared for by the Apostolic Ladies, of whom St. Josemaría Escrivá was chaplain.

At the Cathedral of Madrid we saw a beautiful side chapel dedicated to St. Josemaría with bas-relief depicting scenes of his life in the city. We also visited some places he had lived in, in the city, throughout all these, conscious of threading the path of a Saint.

Those days in Madrid were a good preparation for 6 October in Rome. And to crown it all, after the ceremony in Rome, on October 11th, we went to the house in Barbastro (Spain) where St. Josemaría was born, and where he spent the first 13 years of his life.

“The divine pathways of the earth have been opened up”, were the poetically apt summary made by St. Josemaría about the spirit of Opus Dei. Men and women, young and old, without changing their place in the world can and must find God in their everyday work.

The crowd at St. Peter’s Square on that memorable day were a testimony to a worldwide gratitude everyone felt towards God, and towards God faithful instrument Josemaría Escrivá, who proclaimed this universal call to holiness.

Sanctify your work, sanctify others through your work and sanctify yourself through your work – a three-pronged recipe for holiness. All that one needs is to mental offer the job at hand to God, strive to finish it as perfectly as possible and thus do a wonderful prayer. To work so to pray, to pray by working, leads to an exciting adventure of love in daily life. Gone therefore are the monotonous minutes of yesterdays. Granted, the tedium remains, but it is a tedium gladly undertaken for one's Love – God. Work takes on new undreamt of meaning, heaven is found on earth. As the new Saint puts it, “Heaven and earth seem to merge on the horizon, but where they really meet is in your hearts when you sanctify your ordinary life”.

Opus Dei began in Nigeria in October 1965 when St. Josemaría sent Dr. Jeremy White an Englishman and Fr.

Gabiola, to bring this good news to our dear country. Now, 37 years later, many projects attest to the spread of this spirit of St. Josemaría Escrivá here in Nigeria. Notable among these is the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT), a technical training school at Ikeja set up as a Centenary birthday present to St. Josemaría Escrivá who would have been 100 years old on January 9, 2002.

Back to Rome: those present for the canonization ceremony came from all parts of the globe: Africa, North and South America and Asia. If you could not tell from their faces, you could guess from their dressings – from the colorful dresses of the Japanese to the high-mountain of head-dresses worn by Nigerians ladies – all cultures were well represented.

Now in St. Josemaría Escrivá, we have another intercessor before the Throne of God. His proclamation as a Saint is further confirmation by the Magisterium of the Church that his message of sanctity in the middle of the world, in the midst of everyday life and work, is and must be a reality for all men and women.

**The Sunday Champion
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