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Father, what did St. Josemaría envision for UNIV?

“Father, what did St. Josemaría envision for UNIV? What is UNIV for?” asked a young Spaniard in a get together at Cavabianca, on a warm Wednesday afternoon.

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The *Piazza del Orologio*, an open courtyard at the centre of the Cavabianca Residence, was the venue for a familial encounter with

the Prelate of Opus Dei, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz. Over a thousand people, mostly university students from all over the world, were in attendance to listen to the advice of “the Father”, as they affectionately call the third successor of St. Josemaría Escrivá. That Wednesday was the fourth day of a week-long event known as UNIV, in which students from all over the world gather in Rome to accompany the Pope, the Father and each other as they actively commemorate the week in which Christ gave himself up for our salvation. They combine this with an energetic interaction of minds and hearts as they get insights into solutions for the world’s problems, the world which older generations are gradually bequeathing to them. This year’s theme was “*Rethinking the Future*” and topics to do with the future of education, religion, gender, the

family and social roles were actively discussed.

Back at the Square, the Father began to answer the question on the purpose of UNIV. “It’s an occasion for us to be with Christ even more; to Romanize us and make us more Catholic, by meeting and sharing with people from other very different cultures and languages, but with the same interest in common: Jesus Christ. We seek to know Christ more and to be more apostolic.” It is 50 years since the first UNIV that St. Josemaría promoted. Back then, only a handful of European students could attend. This year however, the six of us who made the trip from Kenya found ourselves side by side with Japanese, Australians, Mexicans (really fun people), Cameroonians... and dozens of other nationalities as we attentively listened to the Father’s advice on a variety of topics.

Thankfully for us, this meeting by people from all over the world was facilitated by the fact that English is truly becoming the world's common language. There wasn't a single person with whom we could not have a lengthy conversation, and on practically any topic. One morning, for instance, we had Mass at the hotel. In attendance for that English Mass, apart from the Kenyans were Russians, Finnish, Spaniards, South Africans and Cameroonians. All responded in perfect English to the various prayers. In such moments, one experiences the fundamental truth we've often read about in the Catechism, but maybe have never experienced with such vivid force: The Church is truly Catholic, truly One for all peoples regardless of their race, age, or social class.

Shortly after this, we went for breakfast and I found myself at table with Ian, an American, to my left and

Joseph, a Congolese, to my right. Ian is studying in Ireland and had come with the Irish group together with Joseph, who is also studying there and will come to Kenya in the summer for a work camp. We spoke about technology and about Art, well into breakfast time to the point of almost being left by our groups as they set off to visit the many monuments in Rome.

Simon, Andrew and Joseph walking along Piazza Navona

In the “Eternal City” it doesn’t matter which direction you walk. You will most certainly come across a Church with the Blessed Sacrament reserved in one of the many beautiful side chapels. The places where Our Lord is reserved were always our first stop before going around the Churches to admire their beautiful works of art, many dating from the Renaissance period. We would start by thanking

God for the faith that made these places and magnificent works possible centuries ago, and the same faith that helps us appreciate them in our time. Well, some of us had a greater sense of appreciation than others, for the paintings and sculptures are not so easy to interpret at first glance.

Simon, for instance, asked why a group of four men were represented each with an animal at their feet: one an eagle, another a bull, another one with a lion and finally an angel.

“Well, all four figures represent the evangelists, and the animals at their feet are their symbols. The bull is for St. Luke, the lion for St. Mark, the eagle for St. John and the angel for St. Matthew.” With this explanation, whichever church we went into seemed more meaningful to us.

“There they are again, at the ceiling! Look, the four gospels again at that column!” Thus we went along

deciphering and enjoying these Christian mysteries made visible through the work of skilled craftsmen. We felt like those early Christians who lacked bibles, but had the benefit of such images to imprint the lessons of the Bible firmly in their minds and imaginations.

Apart from being with the Father on that Wednesday, another great joy was to be with the Pope on several occasions. The first was on Palm Sunday, where we saw him from up close as he passed by in his Pope Mobile, greeting pilgrims and stopping every now and then to kiss a baby or embrace a sick person. Joseph and Simon propped up Peter on their shoulders so that he could take a good photo of the Pope. But Peter got so carried away at seeing the Pope only a couple of meters away, that he forgot to take the photo! Anyway, we made up for the loss on Wednesday morning during

the audience at St. Peter's Square, when Andrew not only got to greet and talk to the Pope himself, but also received the gift of a shiny white Rosary directly from him. What surprised Andrew the most was that the Pope spoke to him in English as soon as he mentioned that he is from Kenya, reminding him of the things he had said at Kasarani stadium three years ago.

We had a chance to pray at the tomb of St. Paul

We saw the Pope thrice more: in St. Peter's Basilica during the Good Friday service, the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday and lastly in the customary blessing he gives to "The City and the World" on Sunday midday at the Square. On that last occasion, the Pope blesses any religious objects one may have brought for that purpose. So we were there punctually, with bags and

pockets full of rosaries and crucifixes we had bought for our loved ones back home.

“We’ve been there for just a week, but it felt like a month!” said Moses, and someone else added with a bit of a philosophical tone, “When you’ve done so many things, met so many people and walked so many kilometres daily, time seems to expand!” Time has indeed expanded, and with it, our minds and hearts to fit in all those experiences, different sights and places, the Pope, the Father, and our brothers in the faith.

So, what was the purpose of all that walking around, doing things and meeting people? Why did we go all the way to Rome and what is UNIV for? “It’s an occasion for us to be with Christ even more; to Romanize us and make us more Catholic, by meeting and sharing with people from other very different cultures

and languages, but with the same interest in common: Jesus Christ.”

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