

Sonsoles, 2 May 1935: The First Pilgrimage

In May 1935, Josemaría Escrivá and Ricardo Fernández Vallespín made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Sonsoles in Ávila, and the custom of the May pilgrimage was born in Opus Dei. In this episode, historian Alfredo Méndiz comments on some details from a text written after their experience.

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During the month of May, the month of Mary, it is traditional in many parts of the world to pray to our Lady more frequently and more intensely, to place flowers beside her images, to go on pilgrimages to her shrines, and so on.

In Opus Dei, in that context of that month of greater devotion to the Virgin Mary, there is a custom particular to the month of May: the pilgrimage to a Marian shrine. The way Saint Josemaría, the founder, shaped it is specific to Opus Dei. But in its essence, of course, it adds little

to the broader phenomenon of Marian devotion lived throughout the Church during the month of our Lady. Rather, it is a way of participating in something that is already abundantly present in the life of the Church, joining in with a distinctive style.

The ultimate goal of the pilgrimage, as with all Marian devotion, is an encounter with Christ, the identification with Christ. Mary simply facilitates that encounter with her Son. It is striking that the homily in *Christ is Passing By* in which Saint Josemaría recounts how the custom of the pilgrimage began is titled “To Jesus Through Mary.” That homily was actually first published in a Spanish women’s magazine from the 1960s and 70s called *Ama*, where they gave it a title they thought would be more appealing: *¡Son soles!* (“They are suns!”). But Saint Josemaría did not like the change of

title. When the homily was later published separately as a pamphlet and, later still, as part of *Christ is Passing By*, he called it “To Jesus Through Mary.”

It is also telling that the passive protagonist of that first pilgrimage, Ricardo Fernández Vallespín, was the very same young student to whom Saint Josemaría, in 1933, had given a book on the Passion of Christ, inscribing it with these words: “May you seek Christ. May you find Christ. May you love Christ.” The pilgrimage, which is one way of drawing close to our Lady, is thus presented to us as the fast track to seeking, finding, and loving Christ.

Our Lady of Sonsoles (Ávila)

The custom of the pilgrimage was not pre-planned. It was born at the very moment when, improvising as they went, the first pilgrimage took place,

which was 2 May 1935, at the shrine of Sonsoles, in Ávila.

Three people made that pilgrimage: Saint Josemaría, who was living in Madrid at the time, and two of his first followers, Ricardo Fernández Vallespín and José María González Barredo. There is a document that, along with other secondary sources, allows us to reconstruct quite accurately what happened that day. It is a fourteen-page manuscript written that same May of 1935 by Ricardo Fernández Vallespín and Saint Josemaría, Ricardo writing the first three pages and Saint Josemaría the remaining eleven. The text is a mix of narrative and spiritual reflection (the latter especially by Saint Josemaría), and despite the difference in page count, the two parts are roughly equal in length: Saint Josemaría's part takes up more pages simply because it's written in fairly large handwriting. These

fourteen pages, titled *Notes on a Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Sonsoles*, are preserved in Rome, in the General Archive of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

I think the best way to begin the story of this first pilgrimage is with the words Ricardo Fernández Vallespín uses to begin his pages: “The reason [for the pilgrimage] was a promise I had made to the Virgin Mary, quite some time ago, before I joined the Work, when I was bedridden with an illness that prevented me from completing a project-based exam at the School of Architecture. It meant that I would finish my degree a year later. I promised our Lady that I would go visit her at her shrine in Sonsoles, walking the route from Ávila to the shrine, if I passed the exam, which seemed unlikely from a human point of view. But my friends, who were

taking the exam with me, completed the project and I passed.”

This had happened in 1933. In September or October of that year, Ricardo Fernández Vallespín had indeed been quite ill. He was studying Architecture in Madrid and was in the second-to-last year of his degree. To move on to the final year, he needed to pass this exam, which was a month-long process consisting of developing an architectural project based on a previously drawn sketch or preliminary plan. He made that promise to our Lady, his friends helped him, the illness was shorter than expected (in another text he says that it lasted about fifteen days), and he passed the exam and moved on to the final year. In June of the following year, 1934, he was able to complete his degree.

Why did he choose to make a pilgrimage specifically to Sonsoles?

Most likely because he had spent part of the summer of 1933 in Ávila and, among other things, had gone on an outing to Sonsoles with a group of friends, which he says left a strong impression on him.

Sonsoles is about five kilometres from Ávila; close enough for a hike, but not a casual stroll. The shrine stands on a hill. Several traditions, some quite fanciful, are associated with the image of the Virgin venerated there. It has even been said that the statue was carved by Saint Luke in a workshop he had in Jerusalem, sent to Saint Peter in Rome, and then given by Peter to some apostolic men to bring to Spain. According to one tradition, the men were disciples of the Apostle James in Spain; according to another, they were seven men sent from Rome to evangelise *Hispania Baetica* by Saints Peter and Paul. One of them would be Saint Secundus, the first bishop of

Ávila, who is said to have brought the statue. Later, during the Muslim invasion, Christians supposedly hid the image of the Virgin, which was rediscovered after the Reconquista. Again, traditions vary regarding the origin of the name “Sonsoles.” The version I like best is the one Saint Josemaría recounts in the homily I mentioned earlier: “During that visit to Sonsoles,” he says, “I was told the origin of the name of the shrine. The statue had been hidden during the wars between Christians and Muslims in Spain, and after a number of years it was found by shepherds. According to the story, when they saw it they exclaimed: ‘What beautiful eyes; they are suns!’ [In Spanish: *son soles*].”

Unfortunately, archaeology does not support these traditions. The image of Mary seems to date from the 12th century at the earliest, and the remains of the original chapel are

from the same period. (Some elements remain in the presbytery of the current shrine, which dates to the 15th century.) All the same, for Ávila, the Virgin of Sonsoles holds great significance: in 1934, exactly one year before the pilgrimage, she was declared patroness of the diocese.

The May pilgrimage: a Marian custom in the Work

But let us return to the story of the first pilgrimage, once again with a passage from Ricardo Fernández Vallespín's account. In Madrid, after attending Mass, the three pilgrims boarded a train bound for Ávila. Ricardo lets his mystical side take over when he describes the scene. He writes: "We left Madrid... How journeys affect me! For during them, when the trees and telegraph poles rush backwards, it seems that my thoughts follow the same path..., and

memories return to me of those past days, when I had not yet found the true path, and all my yearnings for tenderness and love sought fulfillment on earth..., and I could not find it. Now I know where to find what I seek, but... there is always a touch of nostalgia when remembering the past.”

The path he said he had found was his vocation to Opus Dei. He had asked for admission in November 1933, shortly after recovering from the illness that had originally inspired the pilgrimage, and not long after ending what he once called a “half-relationship.” All that is known about this relationship is that the girl was the one who ended it, and that for Ricardo, by his own admission, the breakup didn’t cause any great pain. Still, judging from what he wrote about the pilgrimage to Sonsoles, it seems he did feel some nostalgia. In any case, at that time he

was firm in his vocation to celibacy. Saint Josemaría could fully trust him; in fact, he had appointed him director of the first Opus Dei residence, the DYA Residence on Ferraz Street.

In the following paragraphs, Ricardo Fernández Vallespín relates other minor details from that day, and at one point he describes how what would become the first pilgrimage unfolded: “Along the way, the Father said that with this pilgrimage we were beginning a custom in the Work of God...”

It is worth pausing here to mention what Saint Josemaría wrote in his notes, showing that the idea didn’t occur to him “along the way,” but a few hours earlier, partly during Mass and partly on the train. Specifically, Saint Josemaría writes: “During the *Memento* at Mass, with a very special insistence, greater than my own, I

asked our Jesus to increase in us, in the Work, our Love for Mary, and that this Love be expressed in deeds. On the train, without meaning to, I kept thinking about the same thing: Our Lady is surely pleased with our love for her, embodied in manly Marian customs; we always have her image nearby, greet her filially when entering or leaving the room, care for the poor under her protection, have the Saturday collection... *Omnes... ad Iesum per Mariam*; Christ, Mary, the Pope...”

In the excerpt I have cited, he refers to some of the devotions, aspirations, and so on, that were already being practiced in Opus Dei in those early years. And he continues: “But something more was needed in the month of May. Then I saw the ‘May pilgrimage,’ as a custom that must be established — and has been established — in the Work.”

Back to Ricardo: “We began this custom, praying the first part of the Rosary on the way there [...]. We offered this first part of the Rosary for the branches of the Work of St Raphael and St Gabriel.” (That is, for the students and young professionals being formed at Ferraz.) “When we finished the Rosary, I went ahead at a brisk pace and reached the shrine quite a bit before the Father and Barredo. I entered the chapel, knelt before our Lady, and asked forgiveness for having taken so long to fulfil my promise.” When the others arrived, “All together, we prayed the second part of the Holy Rosary [...], and we offered this part to ask for perseverance for all our brothers and for more vocations to the Work.” And a little later he concludes: “On the way back, we prayed the third part for the intentions of the Holy Father.”

With this, the basic shape of the May pilgrimage was established: one part of the Rosary on the way there, a second (the mysteries for the day) at the Marian shrine, and a third on the return journey.

In his reconstruction of those hours, Ricardo Fernández Vallespín includes other minor details: a visit to the cathedral, lunch at a hotel, telephone calls that José María González Barredo had to make, the return train to Madrid at six in the evening, etc. Other anecdotal details appear in Saint Josemaría's notes, such as being distracted during the Rosary by a hoopoe bird. What doesn't appear in those notes is the detail of the wheat stalks which, according to what he wrote in the homily "To Jesus Through Mary" later on, he gathered along the way.

In his notes, Saint Josemaría adds a few more reflections. For instance,

he comments on his personal motivation in relation to the Virgin Mary, which led him to recognise and embrace the inspiration to establish the May pilgrimage as a custom specific to Opus Dei. He says that he understood how to concretize it as they walked along, with the tripartite Rosary described in Ricardo's account. That first time, they prayed a *De profundis* and a *Regina caeli* after each part of the Rosary, but those prayers were incidental elements that soon fell out of use and never became normative. Note that Opus Dei was still in formation, *in fieri*: everything was, in a way, quite provisional. What Saint Josemaría made very clear is the spirit in which the pilgrimage should be made: "Of course, it should never be an artistic outing, nor a country trip, but a pilgrimage of prayer and penance."

In the second half of his notes, Saint Josemaría draws some ascetical

reflections from an experience common to anyone ascending a hill or mountain: “From Ávila, we had been watching the Shrine, and, as is natural, upon reaching the foot of the mountain, the House of Mary disappeared from view. We commented: this is what God often does with us. He shows us the goal clearly, lets us contemplate it, to strengthen us in the path of his most lovable Will. And when we are already near, he leaves us in darkness, apparently abandoning us. That is the hour of temptation: doubts, struggles, darkness, fatigue, the desire to lie down and rest... But no: forward. The hour of temptation is also the hour of Faith and filial abandonment in our Father-God. Away with doubts, wavering, and indecision! I have seen the path, I have set out, and I continue on.” Shortly afterwards, developing the same idea, he adds: “We’ve arrived; we see the Shrine of Mary once

again. So it is with the soul that perseveres in its apostolic path. The night passes, and the soul sees with new light, a light that will not go out until it possesses God-Love.”

These words are a call to faith, to trust in God, and an invitation to look forward. While Fernández Vallespín, on the train, was looking back, Saint Josemaría looks ahead to the future, to what lies beyond. Before us lies the house of Mary, he tells us. And we must go through Mary if we wish to reach Jesus.