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Juan Jiménez Vargas: The Dream Came True

May 18, 1992: two old acquaintances meet in the waiting room at Ciampino airport in Rome. The day before they had attended Josemaría Escrivá's beatification. One was Juan Jiménez Vargas. The other was Don José Carlos Martín de la Hoz, who asked him: "Yesterday, when you saw that crowd in St. Peter's Square, what did you feel?"

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At long last, five years after the birth of Opus Dei, on January 21, 1933, Saint Josemaría thought that the time had come to open up a new way of forming university students in ordinary life, to a life of holiness in the world, through a means of formation (the circles or classes of Saint Raphael) in which they would learn the spirit of Opus Dei, very close to the reality of their lives, whether as students or professionals.

Saint Josemaría had invited many young university students to attend that first class of formation... But that day there were only three of them. One of those touching moments in the history of the Work took place at the end of that circle, when St. Josemaría took those three young people to the chapel of the institution

that the nuns had let him use, and took the Blessed Sacrament from the tabernacle, exposed it in the monstrance and blessed those three young people as if they were a crowd. As a matter of fact, God rewarded that daring beginning by making him see not three, but three-... thirty-three thousand... three hundred thousand, of all races and colours.

One of those three who attended that first class of formation was Juan Jiménez Vargas, a student from Madrid.

Vargas, a student in his final years of medical school in Madrid, was born in Calle San Bernardo, where his father owned a small biscuit factory and where he lived with his three sisters and two aunts.

Juan Jiménez Vargas, enthusiastic about medicine

Juan was a self-made man, a great lover of freedom, a man of few words, short in stature, very forward-thinking. He had studied at the San Isidoro Institute, completed his first years of science at the San Bernardo house, and was finishing his medical studies at San Carlos, near the Atocha station, which is now the Reina Sofía Museum. There, in that place, a university atmosphere of great prestige had been created around the Faculty of Medicine. There was Ramón y Cajal, who was to become one of the great scholars of Spanish medicine. And there was also the youth of Professor Jiménez Díaz, Carlos Jiménez Díaz, who would open a whole school of medicine that still continues on today.

Juan was enthusiastic about medicine, about caring for patients, for the sick, but he was also enthusiastic about combining this

care with research in the field of physiology. He was already involved in important tasks of research, study, care of the sick, and, at the same time, in the cultural and political environment of his time, where young people were very conscious of all the problems that were raised. We are in 1933, in the midst of the Second Spanish Republic, where the cultural environment was very important. There was a great desire to do great things, a Europeanist environment... and there was also a lot of political confrontation. The atmosphere, the subject young people discussed on the street, which was rooted in Juan's soul, was that "*something* has to be done."

That's why December 1932, when a classmate introduced him to Saint Josemaría, was dazzling for Juan. When that first session (the class or circle of St Raphael) was over, Juan understood perfectly well that he

needed to devote his life to the sanctification of his professional duties, while helping St Josemaría carry out the apostolic work of Opus Dei in whatever was needed.

Therefore he spent his free time helping St. Josemaría in the formation of young people, while also devoting all the time needed to his studies.

An inexplicable gift from God

When the Spanish Civil War came, he was fully aware that God was giving him a special grace. He told us so many times in those unforgettable get-togethers that throughout the Civil War he took on the task of looking after the health of Saint Josemaría, the founder: looking after him humanly and spiritually, in whatever way he could, and above all humanly protecting him, helping him to find a place where he could carry out his apostolic work, helping

him to cross the Pyrenees, so that he could continue working on the other side where there was more freedom in the religious field, collaborating with him, looking after him, helping him. We often asked him in our gatherings: "Juan, where did you get that strength, that serenity?" And he would say that it was undoubtedly an inexplicable gift from God.

It is interesting that when the Civil War ended, Juan continued on both plans of his life: in close collaboration with Saint Josemaría, in fact, at the end of the conflict he was appointed director of the first residence that Opus Dei set up in Jenner Street; and at the same time he was working on his doctoral thesis in medicine.

I was lucky enough to go to the General Archive of the Administration, in Alcalá de Henares, and to hold in my hands the file of

the competitive examination, which in the year forty-two was held for two professorships: that of Physiology in Barcelona and that of Physiology at the University of Santiago de Compostela. Six candidates presented themselves and there you can see the material resulting from this competition. There you can see the boxes where the files of all the candidates are kept. It is very impressive to see the nine research papers that Juan had been doing, from the time he finished his degree until the year '42 when he sat the competitive examination. All nine are very serious laboratory works of great importance for physiology. At the same time, it is very interesting to see the oral presentations, the documents that have been presented, the answers to the examining board's questions. And finally, I was very struck by the report written by the secretary of the examining board,

where he talks about Juan, as the first in the competition, and explains how he knows the historiography well, knows the bibliography well, knows the laboratory techniques well, but ends by saying: "He shows a great love of work."

Juan moved to Barcelona in 1942, where he took up his professorship and where he established an atmosphere of great professional enthusiasm, an atmosphere of drive, of economic and cultural development. It is an environment that suits him perfectly. He is a quiet man, silent, but very realistic. He knows that he will grow and mature as a professor and will be able to create a school of physiology if he works seriously and is able to pass on his enthusiasm for his work to many other disciples.

The beginning of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Navarre

And indeed, in the year '55, Saint Josemaría invited Juan Jiménez Vargas to move to Pamplona so that the incipient University of Navarre, which had already begun with some humanities faculties, could establish the Faculty of Medicine as the first Science Faculty. Juan leaves Barcelona for Pamplona with part of his team, who embark on the adventure with their teacher to start a new professional career. Soon the posts in the Faculty of Medicine are filled by young professors. He also managed to enthuse Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri, who had a big professional project in Granada, to leave Granada and move to set up the University Clinic and the clinical subjects of the Medical degree.

The whole atmosphere that was created in Pamplona, around the Faculty of Medicine, around the University Clinic, around the School of Nursing, spread to the Faculty of Science, to Biology, to Pharmacy, so that it gave the University of Navarra a hallmark of scientific seriousness, of research, of teamwork, of enthusiasm for sanctifying the exciting reality of the health sciences.

When Juan retired and his students came from all over the world to collaborate with him in this tribute volume, each one contributed their own ongoing research and two things became apparent in the spectrum. The first is the breadth of horizons that he had been able to give his students, the wide and varied range of disciples around the world. And the second is the the subject matter. Juan was a man who, from his youth, his early years as a

recent graduate, had been researching things that were very close to reality and to the problems of ordinary people: coughs, sleep, effort, fatigue...

A meeting in Ciampino after the beatification of Saint Josemaría

When St. Josemaría's beatification took place on 17 May 1992, St. Peter's Square was filled with a huge crowd of people, men and women from all over the world, of all races, from all walks of life, of all ages. I had had the good fortune to live with Juan during five summer courses in prior years, and we had been able to talk a lot in a house in Derio, in Bizkaia, called Islabe.

When, in the midst of that crowd that filled Ciampino airport on the 18th, returning from the beatification to the various countries we had come from, the hall of Ciampino airport became a large living room, where

there was a great deal of conversation. When I entered that hall, suddenly, in the middle of the crowd, I saw Juan sitting on his suitcase. He was short in stature and already retired. Our eyes met and he made a gesture, calling me to come closer.

In the enthusiasm of the beatification of Saint Josemaría, and therefore in a certain sense also of the beatification of the spirit of Opus Dei, a question sprang to my mind. "Well, Juan, yesterday, when you saw that crowd in St. Peter's Square, what did you feel?" Juan looked at me as if to say, "What's the matter, how can you ask me about my feelings here, in the middle of this crowd?" As if to say to me, "You seem to have forgotten who I am."

And the answer was very interesting. He told me: "Normal." That is to say, for a man of faith, a man of Juan

Jiménez Vargas' faith, it seemed normal to him that what Saint Josemaría had told him on January 21, 1933, had come to pass. Those three young people in the Porta Coeli Institution had become thirty, three thousand, three hundred thousand, of all races: Saint Josemaría's dream had come true.

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