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The Saint who loved England

St. Josemaria visited Britain for the first time on 4th August 1958, fifty years ago. Mgr Richard Stork, who was then director of one of two centres of Opus Dei in England, remembers...

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It is not very widely known that St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, spent more time in London than in any other capital except Rome and Madrid.

St. Josemaria loved England in a special way, saying he was grateful for the five very peaceful summers he had spent there, from 1958 to 1962. He was glad to hear that before the Reformation it was “The Dowry of Mary” a country with a deep devotion to Our Lady and to the saying of her Rosary.

“England”, he wrote in a letter, “is a great and beautiful place – a crossroads of the world”.

St. Josemaria first came to London on 4 August, 1958, which was Bank Holiday Monday. At that time I was the Director of Netherhall House in Hampstead, a student residence and then one of only two centres of Opus Dei in England.

St. Josemaria was accompanied by Fr Alvaro Portillo, who succeeded him as head of Opus Dei and Fr Javier Echevarría, the present prelate.

They had driven from Rome across Europe and had then taken a car ferry to Dover arriving at midday. Unfortunately the people who went from Netherhall to meet them had got caught up in the heavy Bank Holiday traffic made even worse by the motor racing at Brands Hatch, and they arrived rather late. St. Josemaria was very happy when at last they met him, and he gave them a big embrace.

We had rented a house in the Westminster diocese so that he could work well and be close to us. This was “Woodlands”, in Courtney Avenue, Hampstead. The house belonged to a Jewish couple, Mr and Mrs Joseph Vegoda. There he did a great deal of writing and used it as a base to visit all parts of the country.

The day after his arrival, Tuesday, 5 August, St. Josemaria said Mass for the first time in England in an

oratory that had been set up in the house. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in the oratory. Each day he set aside half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon or evening for prayer. There was a fine painting of the Immaculate Conception above the altar.

I remember Ron Winstanley (who now lives in Manchester), telling me that St. Josemaria said to him during a visit he paid to Woodlands, probably the following year in September 1959, that Jesus must feel very much at home in this house, because it was a Jewish home. He stayed there also in 1960. In 1961 and 1962 he stayed at another house in West Heath Road, Hampstead. As it happens, the owner of this house, Mrs Soskins, was also Jewish. She was the sister of Max and Norah Beloff.

After Mass on the morning of 5 August, 1958 he was very keen to see Netherhall House. At that time I was still a layman, and the Director of the Residence.

He arrived unexpectedly, and I was suddenly informed that the founder of Opus Dei was on the premises. I immediately went to greet him and led him to the director's office.

St. Josemaria noticed that I had a photograph of him in a small leather frame on a side table. On the reverse he wrote an aspiration, a short prayer he used to like to say, and recommended to the members of Opus Dei: *Sancta Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, filios tuos adiuva!*

(Holy Mary, Seat of Wisdom, help your sons and daughters!)

St. Josemaria noticed a wall-tapestry depicting a walled city, bearing a quotation often used by him FRATER

QUI ADIUVATUR A FRATRE QUASI CIVITAS FIRMA (A brother who is helped by a brother is like a fortified city). The tapestry had just been completed, and had recently been hung up. It still looked quite “new”. So he suggested that we should send it back to the centre where it had been made, so that they could pour coffee over it and trample on it to make it look antique! Which in fact is what happened.

On August 9, he went to Westminster Abbey (where he said the Rosary) and Westminster Cathedral. A few days later, on 17 August, he went to see and pray in the crypt of St. Etheldreda's, Ely Place and St. James, Spanish Place. He also visited some Anglican churches, including the Annunciation in Bryanston Street. On another occasion he visited St. Paul's Cathedral.

He had a liking for the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, where he used to get ideas that he could pass on to others for the decoration of the centres of Opus Dei; and he also used to visit the nearby Brompton Oratory.

Twice in 1958 he went to Canterbury. He had a great devotion to St. Thomas More so after visiting the cathedral he went to the Anglican church of St. Dunstan, to pray at the tomb of the Roper family where the head of St. Thomas More is kept. This he did every year he came to England.

One of the things he liked about London was that he wasn't recognised, as he was in Rome, and could move about freely.

One day, however, while he and his priestly companions were walking along Victoria Street on the way to the Cathedral, a man wearing a

turban and a form of Eastern dress stared curiously at them. “*¡Qué mirará! Si va vestido más raro que nosotros*”, he joked. (What is he looking at! What he’s wearing is more peculiar than ours!)

It was in the hustle and bustle of the City of London, in the heart of the financial world, that he experienced a “locution” from God. The date was 10 August, 1958. As he looked around him on that day he saw all the powerful banks and other financial institutions, their buildings depicting their wealth and world-wide influence.

He would later say, “I somewhat lost my composure. I felt useless and powerless. Josemaría, you can’t do anything here. Without God, I could not even pull a blade of grass from the ground. My whole miserable weakness was so apparent that I almost grew sad—and that is bad.

Why should a son of God be sad? He can be weary, like a faithful donkey pulling a cart. But sad? Never! Sadness is evil. Suddenly, in the middle of the street, where people from all corners of the world were crossing paths, I felt within me, in the depth of my heart, the motion of God's power.

“I felt him reassuring me: ‘You can do nothing, but I can do everything. You are weakness, but I am strength. I shall be with you, and that will have an effect. We shall lead souls to happiness, to unity, to the way of salvation. In the City of London, we shall sow peace and happiness in abundance.’”

By Mgr Richard Stork

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