

# **"I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three thousand million..."**

At the beginning of 1933 St Josemaria gave the first of what would afterwards be called "St Raphael circles". The St Raphael circles or classes are the axis of all the other Christian formational activities for young people on the human, spiritual, and religious-doctrinal levels. They include a preparatory course and a professional course.

12/12/2012

On Saturday, January 21, 1933, Juan Jimenez Vargas, then a young medical student, showed up with two friends so that Father Josemaría could give them a class of religious formation (or "St Raphael circle"). The meeting took place in the Porta Caeli shelter, in a room made available by the nuns who ran the shelter.

Under the patronage of Saint Raphael would be the work of Christian formation of young people. From it would come Opus Dei's celibate vocations, which the founder would place under the patronage of Saint Michael for their formation, both spiritual and human. Married people who participated in the apostolic tasks of the Work, or who

formed part of it, would have Saint Gabriel as their patron.

Ultimately the founder came to the conclusion that the apostolate with young people should not function as any type of association, but could be carried out in the setting of an "academy," a private facility offering supplemental education.[1] But first there was a change in Father Josemaría's life that, although at first sight it would seem to have little to do with the Saint Raphael work, was in fact closely connected with the beginning of the formation of university youth.

"After a lot of prayer to our Lord," we read in his diary entry for December 9, 1932, "I found, providentially, a decent little apartment in which to live with my family. *Deo gratias.* I requested a loan from the 'Corporation,' to be paid, like the

other, in a year. So I'm able to move."<sup>[2]</sup>

The apartment was on the second floor, left-hand side, of a building on Martinez Campos Street. The rent was 1,380 pesetas a year, to be paid monthly in advance.<sup>[3]</sup> This arrangement must have been quite an improvement in some way for Father Josemaría to have welcomed it with a *Deo gratias*. Once more Doña Dolores had to move her furniture, but this time to a good-size apartment, where its quality would be more easily observed; in the apartment on Viriato Street there had not been room even for her chairs. Now, without waiting until he could have an "academy," Father Josemaría started hosting meetings with priests and students. There, at the apartment, they had their get-togethers and he gave them formational talks.

That he undertook to pay 1,380 pesetas a year should not, however, be taken to imply an improvement in the financial situation of the Escrivá family. Consider this anecdote jotted down by Father Josemaría a few days after he signed the rental agreement:

"Yesterday my pocket watch stopped. This put me ill a real bind, since it's the only watch I've got and since my capital, at the moment, amounts to seventy-five cents... I talked this over with my Lord, and suggested that he have my guardian angel, to whom he has given more talent than all the watchmakers in the world, fix my watch. He seemed not to have heard me, because I shook and fiddled with the broken watch again and again, to no avail. Then... I knelt down and started saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary. I think I hadn't yet finished when I picked up the watch, touched the hands... and it started

going! I gave thanks to my good Father."<sup>[4]</sup>

It seems this was not an isolated or fortuitous incident. Evidently he was used to handing over mechanical problems to his guardian angel – "the watchmaker, I'll call him from now on," he writes.<sup>[5]</sup> The angel in any case, now certainly had no lack of work, for it was many months before Father Josemaría was able to pay to have the watch repaired.

Poverty – "my great lady," he called it – presided over his whole life, including the start of the Saint Raphael work, the work with young people. The rental agreement was signed December 10. So what was his financial situation at the end of November?

Around this time, he found a discarded picture of the Immaculate Virgin, smudged with dirt, near the gate of one of the schools run by the

Foundation for the Sick. Father Josemaría used to pick up religious pictures thrown out on the street and then, when he got home, burn them. But when he picked this one up, he got the feeling that an offense had been intended – that this was a page torn from a catechism out of hatred. "For this reason," he says in his journal, "I will not burn the poor picture, though it is badly done and the paper it's on is cheap and torn. I will save it, and put it in a nice frame when I have the money... and who's to tell me that there won't someday be a devotion, of love and reparation, to 'Our Lady of the Catechism'!"[6]

On December 2, a week before renting the new apartment, not having the money for a small frame, he took stock of his evangelical poverty with neither pride nor lamentation. "I am," he says, "more impoverished than ever. Our poverty (my great lady, poverty) has for years

been as real as that of the people who beg in the streets. Our Father in heaven feeds and clothes us (with nothing superfluous, and even without some things normally considered necessities), just as he feeds and clothes the birds, as the Gospel says. This financial situation doesn't bother me the least little bit. We're used to living on miracles."<sup>[7]</sup>

He got a loan for the apartment, and managed to get a frame for the picture. In exchange for that favor and homage, he asked our Lady to provide him a place where he could teach catechism. Our Lady did not have to be asked twice.

Father Josemaría was very familiar with the poor neighborhoods between Tetuan de las Victorias and King's Hospital. Groups of shacks, with miserable hovels here and there, made up "La Ventilla," or "Barriada de los Pinos."<sup>[8]</sup> In 1927

the Missionaries of Christian Doctrine built in Los Pinos the School of the Divine Redeemer, for the children of those poor families. The school was at the bottom of a valley; when it rained, water from the surrounding areas poured down there in torrents.

One of the nuns, Sister San Pablo, tells us this:

One morning – I remember this very well, because there had been a heavy snowfall and everything was white – we saw from our community's recreation hall, which was on the floor above the school, two priests coming, in cassocks and cloaks. It must have been early, because everything was still white and clean; later it all turned into a mire. Father Josemaría, accompanied by a priest named Father Lino, had come to ask us to let him set up a catechetical program in the school.[9]

Tuesday, January 17, 1933, was the day they made this visit, as we can tell from Father Josemaría's journal entry for January 19:

"Last Sunday I went to Pinos Altos, or Los Pinos, where there is a school run by nuns. In that school, starting on the 22nd, we will teach catechism. On Tuesday, despite the heavy snowfall, Lino and I went to see the place and to greet the sisters and their chaplain. Those sisters have a very good spirit. They were surprised to see us come in the snow. With such a small thing we've gained something for the Lord." [10]

## **A medical student**

Father Josemaría's group of followers was at that time very much reduced. Some had left Madrid. Others were suffering "illnesses and other tribulations," and still others had grown tired of following him because "their hearts were not entirely in

it."<sup>[11]</sup> In those circumstances the appearance of a medical student by the name of Juan Jimenez Vargas turned out to be especially providential. Father Josemaría spoke with him a couple of times. In their second interview, on January 4, 1933, he laid out before the student the supernatural panorama of the Work. And along with this vocation came a few of Juan's friends as well.

These friends were passionately patriotic young men heavily involved in political activities, which generally took place on Sunday – precisely the day set for the catechism classes. Something from within must have calmed those agitated students to make them decide they were more needed to teach catechism than to take part in political rallies. The first visit to Los Pinos was set for Sunday, January 22, 1933.

Meanwhile, Father Josemaría had already begun to work on the souls of those students. On Saturday, January 21, Juan showed up with two friends so that Father Josemaría could give them a class of religious formation. The meeting took place in the Porta Caeli shelter, in a room made available by the nuns who ran the shelter.

"Last Saturday, thanks be to God, I began the work which is under the patronage of Saint Raphael and Saint John with three boys at Porta Caeli. After the talk we had a short time of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and I gave them Benediction. We will get together each Wednesday." [12]

Juan was impressed by the faith and devotion that shone through the liturgical gestures and prayers, and especially by "the way he held the monstrance in his hands and gave the blessing." [13] Years later Father

Josemaría explained what had been going through his mind when he gave that blessing with the Blessed Sacrament:

"When class was over, I went to the chapel with those boys, and I took our Lord sacramentally present in the monstrance, raised him, and blessed those three..., and I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three billion..., white, black, yellow, of all the colors, all the combinations, that human love can produce. And I fell short, because this has become a reality after not even half a century. I fell short, because our Lord has been generous beyond my wildest dreams." [14]

Extract from: Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* Vol. I: *The Early Years*, Princeton NJ: Scepter Publishers, pp. 367-371.

## Notes

[1] During his retreat in Segovia, in 1932, he wrote that the work of apostolate with university students should be done "under the protection of Our Lady of Hope and the patronage of Saint Raphael the archangel. This – now and later – on the basis of academies, without forming any kind of association" (Apuntes, no.1697). That idea is also expressed in an earlier entry: "The work of Saint Raphael and Saint John will always be done in our academies, without our forming with the students an association of any kind" (Apuntes, no.921).

[2] Apuntes, no.890.

[3] A copy of the lease can be found in AGP, RHF, 0-15113. The lease is for "the apartment at 4 Franco Giner Street (formerly Martinez Campos), second floor, left." The monthly rent was 115 pesetas. Item no.3 of the "Conditions of Contract" states, "A

delay of four days in the payment of the rent will be considered sufficient cause to initiate eviction proceedings."

[4] Apuntes, no.892.

[5] Apuntes, no.893.

[6] Apuntes, no.883.

[7] Apuntes, no.884.

[8] In his journal entry for July 18, 1932, referring to a visit made to Father Jose Maria Somoano (who was then near death), he wrote: "The doctor in charge said we were putting him at risk, so I had to leave King's Hospital. After hearing the confessions of some children at 'La Ventilla,' I went to Father Norberto's house" (Apuntes, no.787).

[9] Sister San Pablo Lemus y Gonzalez de la Rivera, AGP, RHF, T – 05833. See also Pilar Angela

Hernando Carretero, AGP, RHF, T – 05250, p. 1.

[10] Apuntes, no.907.

[11] Apuntes, no.863

[12] Apuntes, no.913.

[13] Juan Jimenez Vargas, AGP, RHF, T –04152/1, p. 19. Another of the students present was Jose Maria Valentin-Gamazo: see AGP, RHF, T– 02710.

[14] See AGP, PM 1975, p. 278. "Our Father told us many times," comments Bishop del Portillo, "that when he gave that blessing with the Blessed Sacrament, he did not see just three boys, but three thousand, three hundred thousand, three million. . ., white, black, yellow, of all languages and from all parts of the world" (Instruction of 9 Jan 1935, note 25).

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