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London, August 1958: You can't, but I can!

The founder of Opus Dei first visited London in 1958. He stayed from the beginning of August to the middle of September. He returned in each of the following years until 1962. In 1958, he arrived on August 4 and the following day wrote on the back of a holy picture, 'Sancta Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, filios tuos adiuva (Holy Mary, Seat of Wisdom, help your children); Oxford, Cambridge, 5-VIII-58.'

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He made a quick tour of London. When he got to the City, the streets were crowded with people: office-workers, men in business suits. The traffic was dense with red omnibuses and black taxis, all pressing ahead at a feverish pace.

Almost every building displayed plaques with foundational dates: “Established in 1748”; “... in 1760”; “... in 1825”... St Josemaria’s mind took in the full historical meaning of all this, and its consequences: continuity in work, trade with every continent, riches, and economic power... formed a tough, worldly, seemingly impenetrable shell. The City seemed like some mighty, centuries-old tree. And mingling in the multitude of people, each intent on their own affairs, were all sorts of exotic faces and costumes: Indian, African, Chinese, and Arabic.

Securely anchored in the presence of God, St Josemaria weighed up all these facts. He thought about how insufficient all his effort and daring would prove at such a world crossroads. He must have felt a touch of discouragement on measuring his material resources against the power of the City. He refused, however, to

be overwhelmed. Facing up to our Lord in the silence of his prayer, he reviewed all possible resources and arrived at the salutary conclusion that to take all this to Christ – all those souls, all those businesses – demanded a supernatural lever, and supernatural strength.

During that first visit he toured London and some of the nearby sights: the Houses of Parliament, Fleet Street, Westminster, Whitehall; Oxford, St Albans... In the morning of Sunday August 10, he went to the City again. It was still more impressive this time, devoid of life. At the weekend the change was total: deserted streets, the buildings locked and barred, a deathly silence throughout. That Sunday, writing to Michael Richards, the first man to ask for admission to Opus Dei in England, who was then studying in the Roman College, he said: “This England, you rascal, *è una grande*

bella cosa [is a big, beautiful thing]! If you help us – you especially – we will do some solid work in this crossroads of the world. Pray and offer little mortifications with joy.”

His days were filled with prayer and work. Thinking of all those people walking the streets of London, so many of whom did not love God, or had only a superficial knowledge of Christ, St Josemaria felt powerless to do anything for them. His very powerlessness brought him closer to God, like a child who takes refuge in his father. And he turned to prayer, which is “the secret of Opus Dei’s effectiveness” and, as he said to the people in London, worked like a great umbrella against bad weather and difficulties.

On August 11, he visited Cambridge. Two days later, during a get-together at the Work’s student residence in London, Netherhall House, he spoke

of beginning apostolic work in Oxford, Cambridge, and Manchester. England, he pointed out, was a world crossroads. People of all nations came there; and many of them were from places where Opus Dei was not yet present, where people were hoping for it to go. His sons in Opus Dei drank in his words.

One of his trips took him to Michelham Priory and Eastbourne. At the shrine of Willesden (north-west London), he renewed the consecration of the Work to the Heart of Mary on August 15. It was there, apparently, while pondering the evangelization of England, that he received a locution, a message from the Lord: “You, no! I, yes!” God could do what St Josemaria could not.

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