

Mass of the Assumption, Our Lady of Willesden, 15 August 2008

Saint Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, went on pilgrimage to the church of Our Lady of Willesden, West London, on 15th August 1958, and performed the consecration of Opus Dei to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

20/08/2008

The Feast of the Assumption this year was also the fiftieth anniversary of Saint Josemaría's visit to Willesden. To mark the anniversary the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei, Mgr Nicholas Morrish, concelebrated the Willesden parish evening Mass with thirteen other priests. The congregation included members of Opus Dei from all over London, as well as very many parishioners attending the Mass on the Feast of the Assumption. The homily was delivered by Fr Paul Hayward and is given here in full.

“A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown.”

“The Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, [is] taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as

Queen over all things..." (*Lumen Gentium* 59).

Like all Mary's great privileges, the Assumption reveals to us a truth about Christ Himself. Christ died for us and rose from the dead, and in so doing opened up the possibility of our own resurrection and entry into heaven, whose doors had remained closed to us because of sin. In the Second Reading today we have heard St Paul reminding us that "Death came through one man" – Adam – "and in the same way the resurrection of the dead has come through one man" – Christ.

All of us therefore share in the hope of our own glorious resurrection, at the end of time. But in Mary's case it seemed fitting for this to take place at once, as soon as the moment had come for her to leave this world – a moment which tradition refers to as her "dormition" – her falling asleep

in the Lord. It was fitting that she who was all pure should be spared the corruption and decay of death, and should be taken up straight away to dwell with God in heaven, who at the Incarnation had chosen her as his own dwelling place here on earth.

As Pope Benedict has said, “She made room for the Lord in her soul and thus really became the true Temple where God made himself incarnate, where he became present on this earth. Thus, being God’s dwelling place on earth, in her the eternal dwelling place has already been prepared, it has already been prepared for ever. And this constitutes the whole content of the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary, body and soul”.

St Josemaría, the Founder of Opus Dei, from a tender age had a special love for a particular image of the

Dormition of our Lady, the sleeping Virgin, which was in a side chapel of the cathedral in the town of his birth, Barbastro, in north east Spain. He fondly recalled his visits there, and remembered how on this Feast the people would file in front of the recumbent image of our Lady, respectfully kissing her feet as they passed.

For him, the Feast of the Assumption would make him feel, as he wrote in 1931, *as though I'm there [in heaven], with the Blessed Trinity, with the angels receiving their Queen, with all the saints acclaiming our Lady and Mother.*

Those same sentiments appear in a meditation which he preached here in London thirty years later, in 1961, and which is included in the book of his homilies entitled *Christ is Passing By: Why is it that we feel today this intimate delight, with our heart*

brimming over, with our soul full of peace? Because we are celebrating the glorification of our mother, and it is only natural that we her children rejoice in a special way upon seeing how the most Blessed Trinity honours her.

From the earliest times of the Church, the hearts of men and women have been filled with joy as they have listened to the wonders of God being proclaimed. On the very birthday of the Church, the day of Pentecost, when Peter and the disciples went out to proclaim the *magnalia Dei*, the mighty works of God, the souls of thousands were immediately touched by grace and converted.

And when this “mighty work of God”, the Assumption of Our Lady, was solemnly proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950, there was jubilation not only in St Peter’s Square, where great

crowds had gathered to hear the announcement, but throughout the whole world – jubilation which has lasted down to our own times and will continue to fill the hearts of all future generations.

Four years after that proclamation, in 1954, a Marian Year was declared for the whole Church, to celebrate the centenary of the solemn definition of another of Mary's great privileges, the Immaculate Conception. Shortly beforehand, Pope Pius XII had established that in every diocese there should be a special shrine where Mary could receive the veneration of the faithful; and for the diocese of Westminster, it was precisely Willesden that was chosen for that honour, the statue of Our Lady here being crowned in that same year, 1954.

The shrine of Willesden itself dates back many centuries, and we know

that by the time of Henry VIII it received a large number of pilgrims, including St Thomas More, who like many others came to pay homage and present his petitions before the statue of the Black Madonna, as it was known.

However, in 1538 the statue was removed by order of Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, and is thought to have been burnt in a great bonfire of statues in Chelsea. More than three and a half centuries were to elapse before the new statue which replaces it and which is now venerated in the Shrine Chapel here was blessed by Cardinal Vaughan, in 1892.

For a long time the present statue had an inscription around it saying in Latin: *imago per nefas abducta amore filiorum reducta*: “the statue [was] carried off by wickedness and brought back by the children’s love”.

The love with which Our Lady's children affectionately restored her image here in Willesden finds an echo in an incident in St Josemaría's life in 1971, when he was given a beautiful but damaged statue of Our Lady, which had been recovered by a devout woman in Switzerland. It was presented in its battered state to St Josemaría, whose reaction on seeing it was to ask: ***From where have they thrown you out, our Mother? You are very beautiful! Perhaps you were in a cathedral or in a very large church and thousands of souls used to come to pray to you. Welcome to our house, our Mother! We love you very much and we will try to show this to you with deeds.***

He immediately arranged for the statue to be carefully repainted and gilded, and the artist looking after this work took the opportunity to write, on several places on our Lady's

garment, in very tiny, almost invisible, letters, the words *amo-te*, *amo-te* [I love you, I love you]. St Josemaría was deeply moved when he learnt of this, and he commented: ***My children, when it becomes necessary to carry out some restoration in our life, when we have to rectify, when we have to be ashamed, when tears come to our eyes because we have not known how to love God with the pure, cleanest love, which Jesus Christ and his blessed Mother – who is also our Mother – demand of us; at those moments of [contrition], we should say what Saint Peter said, having denied Christ three times: Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.***

We are having this special celebration to commemorate the day exactly 50 years ago when St Josemaría chose the shrine of Willesden to renew the Consecration

of Opus Dei to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary – a consecration which he first made at the shrine of Loreto in Italy in 1951, and which has been renewed every year since. The reason for that first consecration was that St Josemaría sensed that Opus Dei was facing some very grave but hidden danger, and he later spoke of having received a warning *that I should be on my guard because a great tribulation was going to break out against the Work and against me [...]. I suffered bitterly. [...] Not knowing to whom I could turn here on earth, as always I turned to heaven. On August 15, 1951, after a penitential trip [to] Loreto, I consecrated the Work to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary.*

Our Lady – the Woman who is stronger than the dragon, as we have heard in today's First Reading – answered St Josemaría's prayer, and the danger passed. St Josemaría was

later to say that *Our Opus Dei was born and has developed under our Lady's mantle. She is the good Mother who consoles us, who smiles on us, who encourages us in the difficult moments of the blessed struggle.*

Our Lady of Loreto, Our Lady of Willesden... St Thomas More had to face certain critics who mocked him for praying sometimes to Our Lady of Walsingham, sometimes Our Lady of Ipswich... And Mgr Ronald Knox used to say how our non-Catholic friends sometimes laugh at us for addressing ourselves now to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, now to Our Lady of Good Counsel, now to Our Lady of Lourdes, and so on, as if they were so many different people. But, he said, the case is far worse than that, if they only knew. Every individual Catholic has a separate Our Lady to pray to – each of us can call her *my* Mother, the one who

seems to care for me individually, who wins me so many favours, who stands by me in so many difficulties, as if she had no other thought or business in heaven but to watch over me.

Today is also another anniversary – two other anniversaries in fact, as it is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Great Britain, Mgr Nicholas Morrish, the chief celebrant at this Mass, and also of one of the concelebrants here, Fr John Joly – two more reasons for us to give thanks to God. St Josemaría used to speak of how trustingly and eagerly he prayed for his sons who were going to be ordained and for all those who would follow after them. *I prayed so much*, he declared, *that I can say that all the priests of Opus Dei are sons of my prayer.*

When making the consecration to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary on behalf of all the members of Opus Dei, St Josemaría addressed Our Lady in these words: *We consecrate to you our being and our life; everything that is ours: all that we love and all that we are. Our bodies, our hearts and our souls are for you; we and our apostolates are yours. We want everything, in us and around us, to belong to you and to share in your motherly blessings.*

Like St Thomas More, who had confidently prayed before Our Lady of Willesden over 400 years before him, St Josemaría also placed all his trust in Our Lady's powerful intercession, as he said to her with filial devotion: *Since your prayer is all-powerful in the presence of God, allow us to choose you as special protector: so that, after a holy life here on earth, we may have the happiness of praising the*

*Blessed Trinity with you for ever
in heaven. Amen.*

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