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"The most important event in my life was meeting Saint Josemaria"

An interview with Francisco Ponz, former rector of the University of Navarra, who recently turned 100.

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Francisco Ponz Piedrafita (Huesca, 1919) has just turned 100 years old. He is beyond doubt the oldest person that *Nuestro Tiempo* has ever interviewed, and it is truly impressive to witness his good health, lucidity and cordiality. He knots his tie perfectly and says, "Just let me print a few papers," going over to a computer and handling it with ease. "Let me just check this email," he adds as he refuses to sit in the chair in front of the screen.

He still considers himself a university student. "That's a life-long reality!" he says in his deep voice. And it is true that, at 100 years old, he still studies to keep up with the advances in his field. He has published more than 170 research articles, six scientific texts, four student manuals and many other publications on university education.

He also has a book of memoirs, *My Encounter with the Founder of Opus Dei* (2000), in which he talks about his memories of Saint Josemaria.

What excited you the most about your birthday this year?

During my 100th birthday celebration, there were so many moving gestures that it is hard for me to highlight one in particular. Perhaps the personal greetings and embrace of the Grand Chancellor [i.e. the greeting of the Prelate of Opus Dei last summer] or the gratitude and affection of a former doctoral student I hadn't seen for many years, as well as so many demonstrations of affection from the university authorities and former students.

Upon turning 100, when you look back what you are most proud of?

I have always tried not to be proud. Yes, there are things that I am very

satisfied with, very happy with. The most important event in my life was meeting Saint Josemaria, to be able to get to know him, to listen to his teachings for many years, to see his trust in me to work on a wide variety of tasks and in particular at the University of Navarra. Thanks to that experience I have discovered my place in the world and the reason for my life.

You met him in Madrid?

Yes, in October 1939 at a student residence on Jenner Street where he was living. He was a young priest at the time, 37 years old, very much in love with Jesus Christ and Our Lady. He was very simple and close to each of us, and in his look one sensed a great affection. He was interested in our personal circumstances, instilling priestly respect, fatherly love, as well as a great confidence

and encouragement to improve in our Christian life.

Why did you choose to live in the residence?

Professor José María Albareda invited me to the residence to meet the founder of Opus Dei. He was my teacher at the institute of Huesca in my last year of high school. In the practicals in his laboratory, we helped him in simple processes of his studies in Soil Science. I think that my passion for scientific research started there. Despite the age difference, a friendship formed between us. We both moved to Madrid the following year, 1935-36, and quite a few Sundays we would go for a walk and he would show me around the city.

Everything was paralyzed during the Civil War. I had to move many times. I started in Catalonia and ended up in Cuenca. I saw Albareda once, in

Zaragoza, in 1938. He had already asked to be admitted to Opus Dei. I was impressed because when we met, he told me about preparing for the future. When the war ended, the important thing would be to make the country better, and science in Spain would need to be at a higher level. As I later learned, at the beginning of the war, his father and brother had been killed in Caspe, but he didn't talk to me about that then.

When the conflict ended, he told me that he was moving to a student residence -- the Jenner Residence -- and that I should visit him there. I liked the atmosphere and began to attend some Christian formation classes given by Saint Josemaria. In January 1940, Opus Dei was thoroughly explained to me. They prayed a lot for my vocation, among others my professor Albareda, as the founder told me when I asked him for admission three weeks later [on

February 10, 1940]. I then moved into the residence; they added another bed to a room that already had three.

What advice do you have for people who are studying at the university now, in very different circumstances?

That they take advantage of their time. That they take into account that the education imparted at the university is what empowers the future and will help them develop projects to serve better. You have a responsibility to others, and wasting time is a way of harming everyone: family, society and oneself. So don't become selfish. There are students who are trained in an individualistic competitiveness that is not good because they become bitter later on. If they had friends, if they were generous, they would be much happier.

And the teachers?

I remember in a get-together once, a teacher asked Saint Josemaria: "Father, what can I do for my students?" And he replied: "Love them." This is very important. If you really love them, you advise and help them, even if you are demanding on them for their own sake.

You completed your studies in Europe (Zurich, Freiburg ...), something that was not so common in those days.

Actually, in those days almost everyone who did graduate studies and eventually became full time professors went abroad. I had finished my doctorate in the middle of the Second World War—in 1942—and I opted for Switzerland because I had a good scientific background and I did not take part in the war.

I worked for a time in Animal Nutrition at the prestigious Zurich Polytechnic, and then went on to the

Freiburg Faculty of Medicine, where I focused on studies in intestinal absorption processes, the main field of my research at the universities of Barcelona and Navarra. Going abroad is good because you establish relationships with people that you would not have known otherwise, and you get access to fields of work and methodologies that interest you.

Was it a great shock for someone from Spain to leave the country then?

Yes. I remember the 1961 Moscow International Biochemistry Congress. There was no Russian Embassy in Spain yet. I got the visa in Paris, and when we got to the hotel in Moscow, our passports were taken from us. I confess that I was worried about being asked to identify myself on some tour of the city. For example, commuting at untimely hours in the morning was a bit of an adventure as

I wanted to go to daily Mass at the only Catholic church there.

The other Spaniards had their passports returned a couple of days before departure, but mine did not appear. As is understandable, I was already starting to imagine myself not being able to take the plane, with no money to stay in a hotel, with no diplomatic representation and a high probability of being detained. Finally, after insisting, I was able to see the list of passports at the hotel and discovered my name. The passports were alphabetically arranged in Cyrillic letters by the second last name and everything was sorted out.

When the University of Navarra was beginning in a provincial capital like Pamplona, how did you imagine its international expansion?

In 1954, due to a special insistence of the founder, the faculty of Medicine

began. I was a professor in Barcelona and it was very clear to me that everything was going to work out. Saint Josemaria transmitted total confidence in the projects he urged forward, and I was sure that if he had an interest in starting the University of Navarra, then it would turn out well. And it would be a good university. I didn't know that it would be third or fourth in ranking in Europe, that it would be just behind Oxford and Cambridge, but it was going to be a good university.

Why the insistence of Saint Josemaria on Pamplona for the University?

I never asked him, and Ismael Sánchez Bella [the first rector of the University] told me that he didn't either. I would say that, on the one hand, there was no university in Navarra or in nearby areas. Besides, the region had a reputation for being

very Christian; thousands of Navarrese priests and religious were known for their missionary work around the world. And, on the other hand, it was the most autonomous Spanish territory in all educational and economic matters. Therefore the people in Navarra might be able to better understand the presence of a private university. There are complaints about not having a university in Navarra that date back to the 19th century.

In 1966, Saint Josemaria invited you to become rector. How did you react to this decision?

I had been a professor in Barcelona for twenty-two years, happy with my research work and the teaching job assigned to me, and I was happy with my students, to whom I tried to give a clear and updated teaching. In March 1966, José María Albareda, the rector at the time, died. Soon after, I

traveled to Rome for other matters and I was able to see Saint Josemaria. Only then did I know that he had thought of me to succeed Albareda as rector. I tried to avoid expressing my fear before a position of such magnitude. Albareda was a figure of international renown who had held high positions of government in the CSIC since its creation. But seeing that Saint Josemaria trusted me, I said, "Here I am, for whatever is needed."

What does it take to run this university?

What does it take? On the one hand, a lot of peace [laughs]. Don't be scared by anything. Serenity, knowing how to listen and study together with others the roots of the problems that arise, not being carried away by the emergencies, trying not to hurt anyone, and most importantly, living collegiality. In the

collegial system of government of the University, the rector presides over the meetings but considers himself one more. Therefore, you have no risk of becoming a tyrant. It is very healthy, because four eyes see better than two, and here there are twenty. So there are more possibilities to decide correctly. In addition, and above all, the rector needs to have recourse to God and to the intercession of Our Lady.

In your farewell address as rector, you said that the only thing you had to do was "to let the University continue going forward," since the first ones had already done the hard part.

The most important thing in a university which is just beginning is the style, the spirit. And that, right from the start, was already a reality. Saint Josemaria taught us to live and work in a Christian way, in cordial

unity with one another, to care for others and especially for those who suffer. What remained to be done was to continue with the natural development of the University, to expand the campus, to construct buildings, to hire professors, and other similar things, at the same time trying to ensure that the nucleus of the founding spirit was lived even better.

You were rector in May 1968, a time when many European universities experienced student revolts that did not have much repercussion here. Why?

I would say that the general environment here in the university was to work, go to class and be trained well. I think the student rebellions of those years were due above all to two factors. On the one hand, there was a great distance between the teachers and the

students; between the platform where the professors taught and the students' desks. That didn't happen here. If there was a problem, our academic authorities were accessible and, in addition, the students elected their own representatives by vote.

On the other hand, the reasons given in the other Spanish universities, in the public ones, were almost always in opposition to the Franco regime. It was an easy justification. But here we had nothing to do with the educational policies of the Franco government, and didn't suffer much from them. The only student incident here was the famous sit-in on June 20, 1969. More than two hundred students gathered in the hall of the rector. There were no riots or violence. We listened to their requests and responded to them. When it was over, it turned out that they didn't leave trash on the floor, which is pretty good considering the

students were eating their sandwiches there!

Of your years here, which would you say have been the best and worst moments?

The best moment for me was October 1967. Six professors from major universities in the world—Harvard, Coimbra, Leuven, Paris, Munich and Madrid—accepted our honorary doctorate. And the next day an assembly of the Association of Friends was held that brought together in Pamplona tens of thousands of people. That represented great moral support; it was amazing to see so many people supporting the University.

And Saint Josemaria also delivered that famous campus homily, "Passionately Loving the World."

Of course! I think it was the first homily that Saint Josemaria read in

public. And he himself gave it great importance because at the time there were people who put labels on Opus Dei that did not correspond to its reality. So he wanted to make clear the key aspects of the spirit of Opus Dei in that homily.

On that October day—despite always trying to hide and disappear—Saint Josemaria was the center of attention of the academic world, the Church, society and the media as the founder of Opus Dei and founder of the University of Navarra.

And the hardest moment?

Remembering hard times is always painful... There was a time, in the 70s and early 80s, when there was a huge demand for university slots and unfortunately we did not have buildings for so many students. We encountered serious difficulties in acquiring the land legally destined for the campus, so we could not

build. We had to put up dividers in the Central Building. On the third floor, a classroom was set up for three hundred first-year law students. They were very difficult years...

In general, the bad moments came from anti-University attitudes such as ignorance or malicious misinformation; and of course there were the terrorist attacks we suffered here. In any case, it is best to remember Saint Josemaria's advice: to always forgive.

You have reached a respectable age, and should now have a lot of wisdom. What is happiness for you?

[Laughs] To give thanks. To thank God for so many things. When you sincerely give thanks you are happy. I hope that God, with his immense mercy, despite so many personal shortcomings of mine, receives me as

a good Father and lets me thank Him
for everything He has done for me.

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