

Russia present at St. Josemaría's canonization

An account given by Russian poet Aleksandr Ivanovich Zorin, an Orthodox Christian who discovered in “The Way” the secret for finding God “here, sitting in front of my desk.”

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The square in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica holds 300,000 people. Today there will be more than 400,000. Half of them will be young men and

women in their twenties. The canonization of Josemaría Escrivá has brought people from around the world to Rome. Volunteers – some 1,800 mostly young people and by no means all Italians – will be on hand. They arrived in Rome two weeks early for special training. And now, in the ebb and flow of the throng, they are able to channel the flood like experienced sea captains. They have command posts – at the airport, in the streets of the city and in Saint Peter's Square.

A dense phalanx of *carabinieri*, at once forbidding and courteous, shut down the approaches to the Basilica. Wheelchairs are allowed to pass. In countless numbers, they group around the colonnade very close to the altar. One of the wheelchairs carries a priest. Thirty years ago he had a serious car accident and became paralysed for life. The trauma does not prevent him from

serving as a pastor, helping people, and celebrating daily Mass....

The sun is already shining on the Basilica's dome, the portrait of Josemaría Escrivá, and the cross atop the obelisk; Saint Peter's Square — cool cool and fresh like a mountain valley — is slowly filling up with pilgrims.

On the roof of the right and left arms of the colonnade, I had the impression there were many bushy plants. These are common in central Rome. Down below there is not a blade of grass — only asphalt and cobblestones, but on the rooftops there is luxuriant growth in boxes and flowerpots. But on closer inspection I realized that these were not plants, but journalists with their branch-like electronic equipment.

Sitting behind me were two older ladies, who appeared to be housewives. Someone had

apparently told them that we were Russians. With raised eyebrows and gesticulating animatedly, they said: “We are praying for the spread of the books of Josemaría in Russia.”

And just in front of me was the massive back of a Nigerian. I ask him – “Are there lots of you?” “Yes, eight hundred.” And pointing to his group, he says, “There we are.”

His back, however, was no hindrance. Gigantic screens at several points in the plaza will allow everyone to see what is going on.

A white marble slab in front of the high altar is decorated with flowers – the gift of a Latin American florist – arranged in the form of broad, colorful palm fronds.

The throng swells, and the sun continues its ascent, shining on the icon of the Mother of God high above the right arm of the colonnade. It

was put there during the reign of the present Pope. It had been brought to his attention that Saint Peter's Square lacked an image of the Mother of God. "This situation must be corrected," he said.

A flaxen-haired, mulatto woman is wearing a red cross around her neck. We are in section 4, or more precisely, the part of the section under her supervision. As the volunteers working in the plaza do not carry megaphones or walkie-talkies, she must call out in a loud voice that she is a doctor, and that people should come to her for even the slightest necessity. She can only offer first aid, and hand out candy for whatever ails you. At the word candy, the older people in the crowd laugh and applaud – a healthy reaction.

The day promises to be sultry, and no one brought umbrellas. Caps, berets

– and when it turns really hot – scarves and maps of Rome are used to provide protection from the sun. We did not bring anything and that evening the left side of everyone’s face– cheeks and necks – had turned brown in contrast to the right side.

The bells of the Basilica ring out – a soft, melodious sound.

Suddenly, the whole square becomes agitated, everyone rises in his place: a white car heaves into view in the road flanking the plaza. In it is the Pope – hunched, concentrated. He raises his head, and, with a trembling hand, blesses the crowd.

The car drives up to the podium. The Pope walks to the altar unaided, leaning on his crozier.

Last night, young people, gathered in front of the Pope’s apartment, formed a sea of chanting voices:

“Viva il Papa!” “The whole world loves you!”

Did everyone always feel that way? The shot that long ago rang out in Saint Peter’s Square gives rise to doubts. I perfectly remember that day in May.... We – a group of Orthodox laymen – were gathered for prayer in a Moscow apartment. The telephone rang, bringing us the horrifying news....

In the unadulterated Buonarotti sky a helicopter circles. Timid, pneumatic clattering. Descending from above the plaza, it emerges from behind the dome, then disappears behind the roofs of the Vatican. What was it doing? Shooting a film, keeping an eye on security?

On the giant television screen appears a shot of the crowd taken from a great height. A mass of heads. Forgive me for this comparison, but they look like the densely packed roe

of caviar. I turn around and notice that each caviar egg represents an absorbed, intelligent face.

Above the Pope, above the canopy shading the altar, from the pediment of the Basilica hangs a large portrait of Josemaría Escrivá. The image of a saint: a kindly face wearing glasses against an azure background, like a sky by Michelangelo Buonarotti.

The Mass begins.

At the beginning, before the liturgy of the Word, the Cardinal who is the head of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints addresses the Pope with the request to canonize Escrivá. And the Pope reads out a statement extolling him.

To help people follow the ceremony, the day's liturgy has been printed in a number of languages and distributed. The Pope proclaims the Eucharistic canon, initiating the most

important part of the liturgy. Saint Peter's Square, full of hundreds of thousands of people united in the sacramental prayer, falls as silent as an empty room.

Tracing a fluent cardiogram of silence, a butterfly flits about.

The voice of the Pope, the voice of the organ, the voice of common prayers. Communion....

One thousand priests flow in three currents out towards the motionless ranks waiting in the square. In their hands are chalices containing the holy gifts, and opened out above them, like lilies of the field, are white umbrellas. Each one knows exactly the spot he should occupy.

It is surprising to see this perfect order, which for members of Opus Dei is customary. Even amid the endless ranks of chairs, the communicants – and, I repeat, there

were hundreds of thousands of them – did not jostle one another, but rather approached the chalice-bearing priests serenely.

The shadow of the obelisk, like the hands of a watch, reaches the row in which we are sitting. The obelisk – this ancient monument brought here from Heliopolis – commemorates the deaths of the first martyrs.... In the days of the Roman Empire, Nero's circus was located on this very spot. They threw Christians as living meat to hungry dogs and wild animals. Now on this spot a bloodless sacrifice is taking place.

The hands of a watch can be seen in the portrait of the saint above the heads of the crowd. He also experienced great trials; he shared in the crucifixion of Christ in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. As the Pope said during an audience with the canonization participants

the day after the ceremony: “The most important thing about the founder of Opus Dei was his love of the will of God. The faithful fulfillment of the will of God, no matter the consequences, is the true sign of holiness. The Lord has a plan for each and every individual; he gives everyone a specific mission on earth. The saint lives in order to fulfill this mission. It never occurs to him to live and act outside the bounds of God’s plan. Saint Josemaría was chosen by God to proclaim the universal call to holiness, to proclaim that the ordinary activities that make up daily life constitute the path to holiness. One can say that Saint Josemaría is the patron saint of daily life. Indeed, he was convinced that, for those who believe deeply in God, every circumstance of life is an occasion for encountering God and a stimulus to prayer. When we consider life from this point of view,

we discover in it a grandeur we had not noticed before. We realize that everyone can attain sanctity.”

The next day, after the Mass, the recently canonized saint appears on the television screen.... A film shows him meeting with various groups. Here are the words of Escrivá himself. They ask him: “How can one love Jesus?” “Be with Him in the Word and in the Bread. Speak to Him all day. When Christ comes, however, he comes with a cross. Disease, betrayal – we have to be prepared for such things. When a person is ready, these things lift him up -- the cross exalts.” And more: “There is something divine about everyday life. You must discover this.” And yet more: “I have a great many friends who are not Catholic....”

We among them – we three from Russia. Yes, yes, just three of us

among the hundreds of thousands who came from 84 countries.

The ecumenical spirit is part and parcel of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. It came as a surprise, and as a priceless gift to everyone, when the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church appeared on the podium. Saint Peter's Square exploded in joy!!!

There are two old men nearby. Who are they? Locals, Italians, probably. They have one hearing aid between them and share the earpiece, as well as a single pair of binoculars.

Standing constantly nearby was a young woman volunteer with an outlandish ring in her nose. She helped them into chairs in order to see the Pope as his car passed by. It was funny to see her supporting them, unsteady as blades of grass.

A loudspeaker announces that it is forbidden to throw flowers and flags

and messages at the Pope's car. It is customary on such occasions that children are brought forward as the Pope passes by. The Pope blesses and sometimes kisses them. But suddenly, a child, falling from his mother's arms, lands in the Pope's lap.... A small message in the form of a child's crying – from the 21st century....

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