

Saint Josemaria and Saint James the Apostle

July 25 is the feast of Saint James the Apostle. Here is the story of several trips Saint Josemaria made to Santiago de Compostela, where the Apostle's remains are preserved, including his first pilgrimage there in 1938 during the difficult days of the Spanish civil war.

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In July 1961 Saint Josemaria was in London. Andres Vazquez de Prada, in his biography of the founder of Opus Dei, tells us that “two days after arriving he was informed that the ordination of a group of priests of the Work, which was to take place in Madrid, had to be delayed due to some technical difficulties. The day after receiving the news, on Saturday July 22, he decided to go see the Bishop of Madrid, Leopoldo Ejjo y Garay, who was spending the summer in Vigo, a town in northeast Spain near Santiago de Compostela.”

On July 23, 1961, Saint Josemaria flew to Spain with Alvaro del Portillo. In Biarritz, Fr. Florencio Sanchez Bella, then the Counselor of Opus Dei in Spain, was waiting for them. Vazquez de Prada continues the narrative: “They slept in Vitoria, and on Monday crossed the plateau amid stifling heat in a car that couldn’t go very fast. On arriving in Vigo, he

embraced Bishop Leopoldo and asked ‘What is the problem?’ [for the ordinations]. There was no problem, the Bishop of Madrid replied, and everything was ready. It was simply that he hadn’t seen the Founder for so long and didn’t want to miss this opportunity.”

Before returning to London, Saint Josemaria wanted to visit those attending the summer course being held in La Estila Residence, in Santiago de Compostela. “As usual in those years, the centers of studies in Madrid and Barcelona were moved to La Estila for a joint semester of internal studies,” Jose Antonio Galera, then director of La Estila, wrote in a detailed account of the visit.

While Saint Josemaria was seeing Bishop Leopoldo in Vigo, Galera recalls that in the midday get-together in La Estila on July 24 “they

had read a letter from England with news of our Father's stay there." That night, at 10:15, Fr. Florencio Sanchez Bella called: "he informed me briefly that on the following day, July 25th, they would reach Santiago with the founder at about 10 am."

With the Residence still under construction and a number of acts planned to celebrate the Solemnity of Saint James the Apostle, the arrival of Saint Josemaria surprised the students while they were eating breakfast, says Galera, and they reacted with "an enormous roar of rejoicing."

Twenty minutes later Saint Josemaría began a get-together in the auditorium. Galera writes that "it had been many years since we had had the opportunity of seeing the Father. For many of us, that was the day when we first met him. More

than a hundred of his numerary sons were there.”

That first get-together lasted three-quarters of an hour. Afterwards Saint Josemaria celebrated Mass in El Pedroso, the adjoined conference center that had just opened. When he finished he was shown the Residence’s visitors book (which he didn’t sign), and which contains the dedication written by Cardinal Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII.

In the afternoon he wrote several letters, and had two more get-togethers in the auditorium, the first one after lunch and the second late in the day. In the second get-together he was asked, “Father, why do you talk to us so much about freedom?” He replied: “It is a topic we need to insist more on nowadays, because some people are dedicated to denying our freedom. You need to repeat the truth everywhere: that

you are completely free in the professional, social, and political realms, with the same freedom that other Catholics, our equals, have.”

On the following day, Saint Josemaria celebrated Mass in El Pedroso at 6:15 am. At 7:15 they left by car for Biarritz for the return flight to London.

In 2004 Jaime Cardenas, then director of La Estila, in an article published in *El Correo Gallego* under the title “Saint Josemaria Escriva and the Holy Year,” recalled how “Saint Josemaria wanted to come to Santiago, among other occasions, during three Holy Years. The first was in July 1938, amid the difficult circumstances of the civil war that prolonged the Holy Year from 1937 for a year longer. He also came to Santiago in September during the 1943 and 1948 Holy Years. In the latter visit, he came in order to

encourage the apostolic work at La Estila, which was just beginning its efforts in the city of the Apostle.”

The 1938 pilgrimage

“In a few days I will pass through Leon on the way to Santiago, to gain the jubilee indulgence. I will remember to pray for you next to the Apostle. Try, in exchange, to pray for me: ask that I may do everything He wants, no matter what the cost.” This is what Saint Josemaria Escriva wrote in July 1938 to one of the fellows he was in contact with, shortly before making the trip to Compostela from Burgos, where he was living at the time.

The Holy Year in Santiago de Compostela is celebrated whenever July 25 falls on a Sunday. Pope Calixtus II, who had made a pilgrimage to Compostela as Archbishop of Vienne (France), established in 1122, when placing the

last stone of the cathedral, that the first Holy Year would take place in 1126. But it would be Pope Alexander III, with the bull *Regis Aeterni*, who established, on July 25, 1178, that the Jubilee Year was to be a permanent event, endowing the pilgrimage with the maximum spiritual privileges, including a plenary indulgence.

Only on two occasions was the jubilee year celebrated when the feast of Saint James didn't fall on a Sunday. The first exception was in 1885, when it was convoked to celebrate the end of the process of identifying the remains of the Apostle Saint James. The second was in 1938, when it was extended because of the chaotic circumstances during the civil war in Spain. The extension, which the Vatican confirmed on December 18, 1937, a few days before the closing of the Holy Door, was granted by Pius XI, following the petition of the

Archbishop of Santiago, Tomas Muniz de Pablos.

The third exception will be in 2022, since Pope Francis has granted the prolongation of the present Holy Year throughout next year as well.

Close to the Apostle in Logroño and Saragossa

Saint Josemaria first became familiar with the Apostle Saint James when he moved to Logroño at the age of 13. His new parish there was Santiago el Real (Saint James the Royal). The door of the church had a large image of Christ's disciple seated on a horse, and the reredos contained a number of polychromed reliefs from the 16th century showing various scenes from the life Saint James.

And while in Saragossa studying for the priesthood he was a witness of the special relationship between the discouraged Apostle Saint James and

Our Lady of the Pillar. In the Holy Chapel, where he celebrated his first Mass on March 30, 1925, a marble relief over the central altar represents our Lady's appearance in Saragossa. In the image, Mary is indicating to Saint James and his disciples the exact spot where she wants her pillar to be placed. Over the centuries the pillar has been worn down by the kisses of the faithful, Saint Josemaria among them.

In his 1938 trip, besides gaining the jubilee indulgence, Saint Josemaria wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to greet the newly consecrated Bishop of Leon, Carmelo Ballester. He had a deep friendship with this Pauline religious, who had invited him to the ceremony of his episcopal consecration on May 15 that year. The founder had been unable to attend since he was at the front lines in Teruel, but “we sent

him a modest gift and offered him the prayers and sacrifices of all of us that day,” he wrote in the May 1938 edition of *Noticias*.

In a letter on July 11 to Bishop Santos Moro of Avila, he told him that he wanted to come to see him, but “not immediately, because on my way to Santiago the Bishop of Leon wants me to accompany him on his feast day. So I will spend a number of days in Leon starting next Friday.”

Stopover in Leon and a meditation in a taxi

On July 15, at 10:15 am, Saint Josemaria left Burgos by train. Fr. Eliodoro Gil was waiting for him in the Leon station and brought him to the episcopal residence where Bishop Ballester received him warmly. He also met another old friend there, Fr. Jose Maria Goy, who was Vicar General of the diocese, and

in the afternoon went out with him to take a walk through the city.

On July 16, feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, he wrote to his sons in Burgos: “Today I had breakfast with the bishop.” And to remove any concerns about his own health, he added: “He made me eat (you won’t believe it!) fruit, ham and chocolate.”

Ricardo Fernandes Vallespin was also in Leon, having just arrived from the front at Teruel. On July 17, Fr. Eliodoro went with Saint Josemaria and Ricardo to the station to catch the train but they arrived late and it had already left. So they took a taxi and caught up with it in Veguellina, 20 miles from Leon.

Fr. Eliodoro wrote that the time spent in the taxi “gave the Father the opportunity to give us a meditation which I have never forgotten. He took as his topic a donkey at a water wheel that we saw along the road.

Using this animal as an example, he spoke to us about the effectiveness of steady hard work: though monotonous, such effort fills the sluices with water to irrigate the lush fields. From the car window we could see the beautiful Orbigo valley, covered with beets and hops. The Father's words clearly emphasized the importance of humble obedience and faithful fulfillment of duty: treading the right path, wearing blinkers, but enlightened by the inner light of faith, knowing ourselves instruments in God's hands."

“Next to the Apostle’s remains”

The pilgrims, who reached Santiago de Compostela at midnight, spent the night in La Perla Hotel. “The next day, July 18, our Father went to the cathedral; he prayed both in the Blessed Sacrament chapel and in the small crypt where Saint James’s

remains are kept in a silver urn. He had come to Compostela as a pilgrim seeking to purify his soul and receive the treasure of grace which the Church maternally dispenses through the Holy Year indulgence.” This account is found in one of the internal publications of the Work (*Obras*, February 1985: “Remembrances of our Founder: the Burgos Epoch”).

From Leon he had written to his sons in Burgos: “Pray that this jubilee of Saint James will cleanse me and enkindle my soul” (Letter, July 16, 1938).

Saint Josemaria celebrated Mass next to the tomb of the Apostle. A brief but intense remembrance of this Mass appeared in the August *Noticias*: “At the end of July, in Santiago de Compostela, near the Apostle’s remains, Holy Mass was offered without any rush. Hands

joined before his face, the celebrant paused and prayed for each and every one of you. A well-known professor, your friend and brother, served the Mass, joyfully uniting himself to the Father's petitions and thanksgiving. You can be sure that in spirit you too gained the Holy Year indulgence."

At the end of the Mass, "following the custom of pilgrims he gave the Apostle an 'abrazo,' an embrace to show gratitude to Saint James for bringing the Gospel to their land" (*Obras*, February 1985).

On the following day, July 19, they returned to Leon, and on the 20th Saint Josemaria was back in Burgos. Some days later he wrote to a fellow who was sick telling him, among other things: "I came back earlier than expected from my last trip, despite the wonderful bishop of Leon, who treated me with

extraordinary affection and confidence and repeatedly urged me to stay on" (Letter, July 26, 1938).

“Camino de Santiago” and *Camino*

“During those months in Burgos, Saint Josemaria put the finishing touches on the revision of his book *Consideraciones Espirituales*, which had been published four years earlier in Cuenca with 440 points for meditation. He decided to lengthen it to 999 considerations and, a few months after his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, he also decided to change the title to ‘*Camino*,’ *The Way*.”

These words were written by the priest and journalist Carlos Carrasco on June 26, 2004, feast of Saint Josemaria. He continues: “Saint Josemaria’s book *The Way* is not a manual for pilgrims, although not a few people carry it in their knapsacks.” But it contains “a flood

of light and counsels for those who face a long journey that embraces our whole life, and that doesn't end until we reach the eternity of God.” And he concludes: “Saint Josemaria opens the book with a challenge for the wayfarer: ‘Don’t let your life be barren. Be useful. Blaze a trail... And set aflame all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you bear in your heart.’”

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