

documentation

INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE OPUS DEI PRELATURE IN BRITAIN
6 Orme Court, London W2 4RL - Tel: 020-7221 9176 - Fax: 020-7243 9400 - E-mail: info@opusdei.org.uk

DOSSIER

November 2008

ST JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Documentation about a totally groundless accusation that was levelled at the Founder of Opus Dei years after his death

Foreword

In Brief

A collection of twelve testimonies about the opinions of St Josemaría:

a) On the Jewish people:

Roberto Ackerman
Bishop Alvaro del Portillo
Rabbi Simón Hassan Benasayag
Renée Soskin
Rabbi Angel Kreiman
Pablo Gru
Viktor Frankl
Olga Marlin

b) On Hitler:

Domingo Díaz Ambrona
François Gondrand
Fr José Orlandis
Fr Pedro Casciaro

Letters

Photocopies of fuller versions of three of the above testimonies:

Roberto Ackerman
Domingo Díaz Ambrona
Olga Marlin

Media

Statement by President Cossiga (from the Opus Dei Press Office, Rome, January 1992)
The saint who loved England (from the *Westminster Catholic Record*, November 2002)

This Dossier has been prepared by the Information Office of Opus Dei in Britain.
For more information visit the internet site <http://www.opusdei.org.uk>

FOREWORD

It has occasionally been suggested that the founder of Opus Dei, St Josemaría Escrivá, was a ‘holocaust denier’, or in some degree sympathetic to Hitler. The allegation was first made in a *Newsweek* article, dated 13 January 1992, and has been echoed several times since. It is completely false.

Firstly, there is a lack of evidence for this allegation. If St Josemaría had been anti-semitic or a supporter of Hitler it should be noticed somewhere, either in his extensive writings, or in his actions, in a life that has been thoroughly documented and put on the record – and not always by sympathetic authors. But there are none from those sources, only one story regarding something that someone once understood him to have said in private, unsupported by independent testimony, and – if correct – made public many years after his death, when obviously St Josemaría was unable to correct any misunderstanding.

St Josemaría (1902-1975) lived his life in the public gaze. From at least as early as 1959, when he was profiled in *The Times*, he was well-known internationally. In his writings and actions (including filmed get-togethers) there is nothing that could support a charge of being anti-Semitic or a supporter of Hitler. Also, nobody alleged during his life that he harboured such tendencies.

For instance, the distinguished journalist Tad Szulc interviewed him for the *New York Times*. If Escrivá had shown any sign of such tendencies Szulc, who later wrote *The Secret Alliance – the extraordinary story of the rescue of the Jews since World War II* (Pan, London, 1991), would certainly have made it known; but he made no such claim, either at the time of the interview (1966) or in the extracts he used for his book on Pope John Paul II (Scribner, New York, 1995). Another person who met him (and left some brief impressions in writing) was the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, himself a holocaust survivor.

Secondly, there is considerable evidence the other way, which gives a reasonably clear picture of the views of St Josemaría on the Jewish people and on Hitler, and by implication he was clearly not likely to be a holocaust denier. The picture emerges from certain of his statements on video, from anecdotes, and accounts by people who met him, some of them in the form of letters that have not been published until now.

Far from being pro-Hitler, there is documentary evidence that Escrivá deplored Hitler and the Nazi ideology, and was speaking about it very clearly at least as early as 1941. As one of the witnesses writes, it should be understood that, in the Spain of those days, at a time when the Nazi crimes were relatively unknown there, one did not easily encounter people who would condemn the Nazi system so forcefully.

Some of the testimonies have been collated in this dossier, along with other evidence also verifying that St Josemaría held the Jewish people in high regard. Perhaps the most vivid direct evidence is from a video of him speaking in a get-together; the clip can be seen via a link on the Opus Dei information office website, www.opusdei.org.uk/art.php?p=24902, and the transcript is in the dossier.

This issue of Documentation contains the following material:

- Some of the most important testimonies in summarised form;
- Photocopies of fuller versions of some of these testimonies, and other material in the public domain.

Andrew Soane
Director, Information Office of the Opus Dei Prelature in Britain

IN BRIEF

Testimonies about the opinions of Saint Josemaría

1. On the Jewish people

- a) A video filmed during a meeting in Venezuela on 14 February 1975 shows Escrivá quite spontaneously expressing his great love for the Jewish people, to a Jewish person. The clip runs:

Speaker: Father, I'm Jewish

Escrivá: I love the Jews very much because I love Jesus Christ madly, and He is Jewish. I don't say He was but He is. 'Iesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula.' Jesus Christ continues to live and he is Jewish like you. And the second love of my life is also Jewish – the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ. So I look on you with affection...

Speaker: I think you have answered my question, Father.

(The transcript is taken from Bernal, *A Profile of The Founder of Opus Dei*, Veritas, Dublin, 1977.

When the film clip was shown to the press corps in Rome at the time of the allegations (1992), the journalists unanimously agreed "That is the end of the matter." The speaker was Roberto Ackerman, who wrote a letter to *Newsweek Magazine* a copy of which is included in this dossier.)

- b) Statement of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, January 1992 on seeing the allegation that Mgr Escriva was a supporter of Hitler, which seems to have first been published in *Newsweek Magazine*, edition 13

January 1992:

"It is absolutely contrary to reality to affirm such a thing of a person who so deeply loved the Jewish people and who always so vigorously condemned any kind of tyranny. Today, as soon as I read this magazine article, I contacted the Israeli embassy and some representatives of the Israeli community and I expressed my solidarity with them and my indignation at such lies. I know that in so doing, I am doing nothing more than share in the pain felt by Monsignor Escriva on account of the holocaust suffered by the Jewish people due to the criminal Nazi program." (Opus Dei Press Office, Rome.)

- c) Article by Rabbi Simón Hassan Benasayag in *ABC newspaper*, Spain:

"I know from first hand... that I have received understanding from my friends on Opus Dei, respect and friendship; and also I have detected in people of this Catholic institution a good desire to know better the reality and life of the Jewish people... Apparently they ran out of new things to say about Opus Dei; the invention of a Nazism or an anti-Semitism on the part of the founder is fantasy at its most extreme." (*Tribuna Abierta*, p.40 of *ABC*, Madrid, 12 January 1992.)

- d) Letter from Mrs Renée Soskin to a member of Opus Dei in London:

Dear Mr Stork

Thank you for your letter of Feb.11th. Of course I remember Mgr Escriva who stayed in our London home. I agree with you that it is absurd to consider him an anti Semite. This gentle, kindly tolerant man discussed Judaism with us. I fully support your view.

Kind regards

Renée Soskin

Feb. 16th (1992)

(It was in Mrs Soskin's house in Hampstead, London, that Mgr Escrivá stayed in the summers of 1961 and 1962. A sister of Max Beloff, she founded and ran the Bury Lawn School in Milton Keynes, retiring in 1997.)

- e) Address of Rabbi Angel Kreiman at congress on Josemaría Escrivá in Rome, 8-12 January 2002
“Many of Josemaría Escrivá’s concepts call to mind the Talmudic tradition and reveal his profound love for the Jewish world, as well as his passionate love, which he openly repeated, for two Jews, Jesus and Mary... Moreover, that which most likens his teaching to Judaism is the vocation of man to serve God through creative work, perfecting creation every day, through perfection of work.”
(From address at a congress in Rome, published as *Congresso Internazionale “La grandezza della vita quotidiana”*, tomo IV, Edizioni Università della Santa Croce, 2003, Roma. Rabbi Angel Kreiman is International Vice President of the World Council of Synagogues.)
- f) Letter from Pablo Gru published in a Buenos Aires newspaper, 17 January 1992
“I have to express the astonishment and amazement, as well as the deep sadness, with which I received the item published in your paper, dated 9-1-92, which made reference to alleged anti-Semitic expressions of the founder of Opus Dei, Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, whom I had the immense joy of knowing personally, and whom I consider to be a saint.
I am Jewish by race, the son of Jewish parents, and all my family is Jewish. I have known Opus Dei since nineteen years ago, when from the first moment I was received with open arms, and I have belonged to the Prelature for twelve years. I have never heard an offensive word from the least of its members, much less from the founder. On the contrary, from its founder I have learned to respect all persons, whatever their race or creed, and even more the Jews, the people from which came – and to whom preached – Jesus Christ. My siblings, also of Jewish race, have known Opus Dei and its founder for even longer than me, and can give the same testimony.”
(Letter from Pablo Gru published in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, which had echoed the allegation made in *Newsweek*.)
- g) Letter from Viktor Frankl to a member of Opus Dei in Vienna:
“If I am to say what it was that fascinated me particularly about his personality, it was above all the refreshing serenity which emanated from him and warmed the whole conversation. Next the unbelievable rhythm with which his thought flowed, and finally his amazing capacity for getting into immediate contact with those he is speaking to. Mgr Escrivá evidently lived totally in the present instant, he opened out to it completely, and gave himself entirely to it. In a word, for him the instant possessed all the qualities of the decisive (Kairos-Qualitäten).”
(From a brief letter to Fr Juan Bautista Torelló, dated August 1975. Frankl was a well known psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and Dachau.)
- h) Letter from Olga Marlin to *Newsweek*, 11 February 1992:
“I myself am of Jewish origin, from Bronx, New York, and I cherish some words which I heard from the Founder of Opus Dei on 16 May 1971 when I met him in Rome prior to visiting my parents in USA. Msgr Escrivá cordially inquired about my parents, and when I mentioned that my father is Jewish he reacted with special affection. He said very warmly, “Jesus and Mary were – are! – Jewish”. He told me to give my father a big hug for him, that he loved him very much, and asked my father to pray for him and for Africa (where I have been working since 1960). He also gave me a rosary for my father saying: “even if he doesn’t use it, ask him to keep it in memory of me.” The image portrayed in the issue of *Newsweek* bears no resemblance to the cordial, beloved figure of the Founder of Opus Dei as I knew him over a period of twenty years.”
(From a letter from Olga Marlin to *Newsweek*, which was not published.)

2. On Hitler

- a) Letter of Domingo Díaz Ambrona to Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, 9 January 1992. The testimony of Domingo Díaz Ambrona, who was not a member of Opus Dei, describes an encounter on a train in 1941:

“Here was a priest who had accurate information about the position of the Church and of Catholics in Germany under Hitler’s dictatorship. Fr Josemaria spoke very forcefully to me against that anti-Christian regime, and with an energy that clearly showed his great love of freedom. It is necessary to explain that it was not easy in Spain at that time to find people who would condemn the Nazi system so categorically or who would denounce its anti-Christian roots with such clarity. And so that conversation, taking place as it did at such a historically significant moment, before all the crimes of Nazism had been revealed, continues to impress me profoundly.”

(From a letter from Domingo Díaz Ambrona to Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei. The letter was published in various places. The *Catholic Herald* published an edited English translation, 28 February 1992.)

- b) Testimony of François Gondrand:

“I have heard Josemaría Escrivá refer to Nazism and Fascism in very severe terms, which did not surprise me at all for the Popes had done the same. Even if the papal authority had not already made any pronouncement, I was convinced that the blessed Josemaría possessed such a Catholic ‘sixth sense’, due to his great love for the Church and his solid doctrinal formation, that he would have thought and behaved in that way.

But in fact, the Church had made pronouncements on the matter, and I know that he had spread the knowledge of them, and made it his business to ensure that the 1937 Encyclical of Pius XI condemning Nazism was made known in Spain. This was years before it was eventually made public in this traditional Catholic country (cf. *Entretien sur le fondateur de l’Opus Dei*, Paris, 1992, pp 30-34). It is true that it was in right in the middle of a civil war, in which the authorities of the Nationalist side would have been peeved by this condemnation, given that Germany was lending them a hand against their ‘red’ enemy.

I myself remember hearing Mgr Escrivá on one occasion saying in the strongest terms that he considered the German people as having had the misfortune of having been governed for years by “the greatest scoundrel [tr. *salopard*] that the earth has known”. About a hundred persons were present.”

(From a letter from François Gondrand written in October 2001 after a nearly identical version of the original allegation surfaced in a British newspaper.)

- c) Recollection of Fr José Orlandis, one of the oldest members of Opus Dei still living:

“On 15th September 1939, the day after he asked to join Opus Dei, during a retreat in Valencia, ‘being with the Father in his room, without me asking him anything, he confided: ‘This morning I have offered the Holy Mass for Poland, this Catholic country undergoing a terrible trial with the Nazi invasion.’”

(Urbano, *El Hombre de Villa Tevere*, Plaza y Janés, Barcelona 1995.)

- d) Recollection of the late Fr Pedro Casciaro:

“With respect to Nazism and Fascism... Opus Dei began its stable work in Italy and Germany when these regimes were no longer in power. On one occasion I heard him [Saint Josemaría] speak with admiration for Cardinal Faulhaber, who had had the courage to publish some advent conferences in Munich’s cathedral during the Nazi period.”

(Urbano, *El Hombre de Villa Tevere*, Plaza y Janés, Barcelona 1995.)

Caracas, February 24, 1992

Director,
NEWSWEEK

Dear Sir:

I would like to say a few words in relation to your article on the subject of "Monseñor José María Escrivá de Balaguer, founder of Opus Dei, in the January 13, 1992 edition.

Before getting to the point, allow me to introduce myself, in order to clarify the final part of this communication.

I am the son of Jewish parents. I was educated in an entirely Jewish and conservative environment, and my elementary and secondary education took place in a Jewish school. I was an organizer and leader of certain Jewish organizations in my community during my youth, and I continue to be a Jew and feel proud to be so.

I was a student leader at the Central University of Venezuela in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of intense violence between the Marxists and Christian Democrats. I acted as National University Secretary-General for the latter from 1973 to 1978.

I was a founder of a Student and Youth Travel Organization in 1978. This was a highly controversial agency, in connection with which I made contact and established relations with many public and private organizations throughout the world.

I have always expressed my convictions with great clarity.

That has brought me inevitable and intense confrontations, which I have always faced up to without shirking. I have often engaged in sharp debate and confronted aggressions of all kinds, without fear of their consequences, when attempts have been made to force me to change a decision I had reached on the basis of my convictions.

I relate all this only to give you an idea of my personal experience on the possibility of finding antisemites -- who obviously exist. Jewish families train their children to be sensitive to the slightest doubt, surprise, or prejudice when a person one is meeting learns that one is Jewish.

When I met Monseignor Escrivá on one of his trips to Caracas, he gave me an experience on the basis of which I can state without a doubt that his supposed antisemitism is entirely false.

At a place called Alto Claro, near Caracas, hundreds of people gathered to hear Monseignor Escrivá. I myself was motivated to go by suggestions of some friends, and an invitation by a person for whom I had the highest esteem, as well as by simple curiosity.

On reaching the place of the meeting, I asked to be allowed to pose a freely expressed question. In response I was given a microphone and told to speak after the two people before me had asked their questions. This allows me to assure you that there was no manipulation of my question or consultation with Monseignor Escrivá in relation to it. I

began by saying: "Father, I am a Jew and . . . " I was interrupted by a quick, vigorous, and entirely clear response. "I love the Jews very much; my two greatest loves are Jews, and I say 'are' because they still live as far as I am concerned -- Jesus Christ and Holy Mary -- and they are Jews." This is obviously not a verbatim rendering of his response, but it is what I remember.

The rest of my question, "I would like to know what you think of the Jews," was now unnecessary, since he had already answered it without hesitation and without any kind of doubt, convincing me that it had come from the bottom of his heart.

The reason, as I explained at the outset of this letter, for having made a brief personal introduction, is to show that I have throughout my life had the opportunity to observe doubts, negative attitudes, and prejudices, which allows me to know with a high degree of certainty when I am in contact with a person who does not like my religion or who has antisemitic attitudes or opinions.

With this communication I hope to make a small contribution to allaying the doubts -- unfair in my opinion -- on Monseñor Escrivá's true feelings about the Jews.

Let me express in advance my appreciation for your publication of this letter.

Sincerely yours,

ROBERTO ACKERMAN

Caracas, Venezuela

Caught on a train with Mgr Escriva

I HAVE read reports concerning Mgr Escriva related to Hitler and Nazism. I am in a position to state categorically that such reports are wrong.

I was able to talk to Mgr Escriva when I unexpectedly met him on a train, on the Madrid-Avila route in August 1941. I took the opportunity to discuss with him the contemporary historical situation. We were at a decisive moment in European history.

I had recently returned from a trip to Germany. There I had been able to experience the fear Catholics had of expressing their religious convictions. This led me to become suspicious of Nazism. For, like many Spaniards, the negative aspects of the system and its philosophy had been kept hidden from me, dazzled by the propaganda of a Germany presented as a force which was at least going to wipe out communism.

Now I wished to know the opinion of this priest whom I had only known because he had baptised my daughter during the civil war, in the Riesgo Sanatorium, which was under the protection of the British flag.

For the reasons I have just given I was very surprised by the emphatic response from the founder of Opus Dei. He had precise information of the church's situation and that of Catholics under Hitler regime. He spoke to me strongly against this anti-Christian regime, with a vigour which made plainly visible his great love for freedom.

One must realise that, in the Spain of those days, one did not easily come across people who would condemn the Nazi system so forcefully, and who would denounce its anti-Christian roots with such clarity. And so this conversation, which we had at a time when the Nazi crimes were as yet unknown, left a deep

impression on me.

I am not in Opus Dei. But I recognise the holy life of this priest. And I can say forthrightly that anyone who holds the opposite view for the reason given in newspaper reports, is uselessly seeking to stain the image of a future blessed of the church: one who, in addition to being a saintly man, was a great lover of freedom.

Domingo Diaz Ambrona
Madrid

Nairobi, KENYA.

11 February 1992

Letters Editor,
Newsweek,
444 Madison Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10022
USA

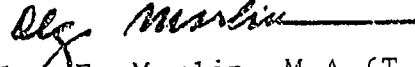
Dear Sir,

I was surprised and saddened to read in your publication (Newsweek 13 January) an accusation against the Venerable Josemaria Escriva to the effect that he was anti-Semitic. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I myself am of Jewish origin, from Bronx, New York, and I cherish some words which I heard from the Founder of Opus Dei on 16 May 1971 when I met him in Rome prior to visiting my parents in USA. Msgr Escriva cordially inquired about my parents, and when I mentioned that my father is Jewish he reacted with special affection. He said very warmly "Jesus and Mary were -are!- Jewish". He told me to give my father a big hug for him, that he loved him very much, and asked my father to pray for him and for Africa (where I have been working since 1960). He also gave me a rosary for my father, saying: "even if he doesn't use it, ask him to keep it in memory of me".

The image portrayed in the issue of Newsweek bears no resemblance to the cordial, beloved figure of the Founder of Opus Dei as I knew him over a period of twenty years.

Yours faithfully,


Olga E. Marlin, M.A. (T.C.D.)
H.dip.Ed.

UFFICIO INFORMAZIONI DELLA PRELATURA DELL'OPUS DEI IN ROMA

Rome, January 9th 1992

"It is ridiculous and historically false to attribute antisemitic sentiments to Mons. Escrivá", in a statement yesterday Francesco Cossiga said.

The President of Italy, communicated his unconditional solidarity in a telephone conversation with Mons. Alvaro del Portillo.

As soon as he had learned of what was being said about Josemaría Escrivá in some of the media, Francesco Cossiga called the Prelate of Opus Dei to let him know that in his opinion it was "ridiculous and historically false to attribute antisemitic sentiments to the Founder of Opus Dei. Mons. Escrivá had particular esteem for the Jewish people". And he added: "His love for and defense of freedom and his total rejection of any form of totalitarianism were proverbial".

The President of the Republic recalled with affection his recent visit to the central headquarters of Opus Dei at the end of December, 1991. On that occasion Francesco Cossiga again visited the Crypt where the body of Mons. Escrivá is buried and expressed his satisfaction for the forthcoming beatification of the Founder of Opus Dei, which will take place this coming May 17.

The saint who loved England

by Mgr RICHARD STORK

IT IS NOT very widely known that the newly canonised St Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, spent more time in London than in any other capital except Rome and Madrid.

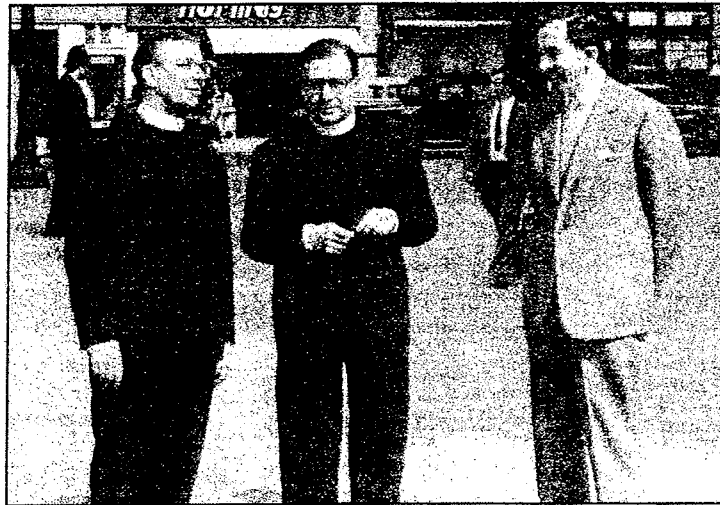
St Josemaria loved England in a special way, saying he was grateful for the five very peaceful summers he had spent there, from 1958 to 1962. He was glad to hear that before the Reformation it was 'The Dowry of Mary' a country with a deep devotion to Our Lady and to the saying of her Rosary.

"England", he wrote in a letter, "is a great and beautiful place - a crossroads of the world".

St Josemaria first came to London on 4 August, 1958, which was Bank Holiday Monday. At that time I was the Director of Netherhall House in Hampstead, a student residence and then one of only two centres of Opus Dei in England.

St Josemaria was accompanied by Fr Alvaro Portillo, who succeeded him as head of Opus Dei and Fr Javier Echegarria, the present prelate.

They had driven from Rome across Europe and had then taken a car ferry to Dover arriving at midday. Unfortunately the people who went from Netherhall to meet them had got caught up in the



Outside St Paul's Cathedral in August 1959

heavy Bank Holiday traffic made even worse by the motor racing at Brands Hatch, and they arrived rather late. St Josemaria was very happy when at last they met him, and he gave them a big embrace.

We had rented a house in the Westminster diocese so that he could work well and be close to us. This was Woodlands in Courtney Avenue, Hampstead. The house belonged to a Jewish couple, Mr and Mrs Joseph Vegoda. There he did a great deal of writing and used it as a base to visit all parts of the country.

The day after his arrival, Tuesday, 5 August, St Josemaria said Mass for the first time in England in an oratory that had been set up in the house. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in the oratory. Each day he set aside half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon or evening for prayer. There was a fine painting of the Immaculate Conception above the altar.

I remember Ron Winstanley (who now lives in Manchester), telling me that St Josemaria said to him during a visit he paid to Woodlands, probably the following year in September 1958, that Jesus must feel very much at home

in this house, because it was a Jewish home. He stayed there also in 1960. In 1961 and 1962 he stayed at another house in West Heath Road, Hampstead. As it happens, the owner of this house, Mrs Soskins, was also Jewish. She was the sister of Max and Norah Beloff.

After Mass on the morning of 5 August, 1958 he was very keen to see Netherhall House. At that time I was still a layman, and the Director of the Residence.

Founder

He arrived unexpectedly, and I was suddenly informed that the founder of Opus Dei was on the premises. I immediately went to greet him and led him to the director's office. St Josemaria noticed that I had a photograph of him in a small leather frame on a side table. On the reverse he wrote an aspiration, a short prayer he used to like to say, and recommended to the members of Opus Dei: *Sancta Maria, Sedes Sapientiae, filios tuos adiuv!*

(Holy Mary, Seat of Wisdom, help your sons and daughters!)

St Josemaria noticed a wall-tapestry depicting a walled city, bearing a quotation often used by him: *Frater qui adiu-*

vatur a fratre quasi civitas firma (A brother who is helped by a brother is like a fortified city). The tapestry had just been completed, and had recently been hung up. It still looked quite 'new'. So he suggested that we should send it back to the centre where it had been made, so that they could pour coffee over it and trample on it to make it look antique! Which in fact is what happened.

On 9 August, he went to Westminster Abbey (where he said the Rosary) and Westminster Cathedral. A few days later, on 17 August he went to see and pray in the crypt of St Etheldreda's, Ely Place and St James, Spanish Place. He also visited some Anglican churches, including the Annunciation in Bryanston Street. On another occasion he visited St Paul's Cathedral.

He had a liking for the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, where he used to get ideas that he could pass on to others for the decoration of the centres of Opus Dei; and he also used to visit the nearby Brompton Oratory.

Twice in 1958 he went to Canterbury. He had a great devotion to St Thomas More so after visiting the cathedral he went to the Anglican church of St Dunstan, to pray at the tomb of the Roper fam-