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A Canonization Adventure

Getting to the canonization of Saint Josemaria by plane and wheelchair from Alberta proved to be a real challenge for a Calgary man and his wife. But with the new saint's intercession and a little help from their friends, it turned into a canonization adventure.

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I live in Calgary, Alberta with my wife Maria and our three children. About 20 years ago, I incurred a spinal cord injury and have been going about my daily duties in a wheelchair ever since. When I heard of the impending canonization of Saint Josemaria I was filled with mixed emotions. On the one hand I was filled with exuberant joy and thanksgiving that the Founder of Opus Dei was being raised to the alters as an example of holiness in everyday modern life; and on the other hand, I was fighting back feelings of trepidation at the thought of the difficulties my wife and I would face in making the pilgrimage to Saint Josemaria's canonization in Rome. The thing I quickly became certain of was I must go. Saint Josemaria had just done too much for me and my wife, my family, work and friends. I could almost see the grins on Josemaria's and our Lord's faces as they encouraged us to

sanctify all of the little hassles that loomed on the horizon: financing the expedition, finding someone to look after the children, the long flight confined to a cramped airline seat, wheelchair accessible accommodations, wheelchair accessible transportation to and from the airports and around Rome, the wear and tear on Maria pushing me around a 4000 year old city, and the crowds...

One of the first snags we encountered was at the airport in Toronto where we had a one hour lay over before transferring to an Alitalia jet to Rome. After de-planing on a special Air Canada supplied wheelchair narrow enough to fit down the aisle on the aircraft, we waited for my wheelchair to arrive. Five minutes passed before our attendant radioed baggage to find out where my wheelchair was. Almost instantly a baggage handler

appeared with my folded and taped shower-commode wheelchair that was checked-in for Rome. I pleaded with the baggage handler to make sure the shower-commode in fact made it on to the Alitalia flight and it and he scurried off. Our attendant then asked if my wheelchair was black with surgical tubing taped around the push rims. When I responded affirmatively, he turned pale and dashed off out of the gate. He arrived in a few minutes pushing my wheelchair. It turned out that an elderly lady with mobility problems was one of the first off of our flight. She saw my wheelchair sitting at the gate and, thinking it belonged to Air Canada, hopped in it and headed home. Thankfully she had not gone too far before our attendant found her.

After an 8 hour flight through numerous time zones, our Alitalia jet landed at Fiumicino outside of Rome.

Though tired, we had finally made it. Unfortunately my shower-commode wheelchair did not. We combed the luggage carrousel for an hour, filled out a missing baggage claim, connected with a specially ordered wheelchair accessible mini-bus and made it to our hotel. We absolutely had to arrange a replacement for my shower-commode before going to bed. I really needed to use it the next morning, on October 6. Our only hope was to try a telephone number I had plucked off the web a week earlier of a non-profit organization in Rome that provided assistance to disabled travelers. We were put through to a lady called Annagrazia, who spoke impeccable English and understood the urgency of our situation immediately. Half an hour later Annagrazia phoned to say that the second medical supply owner that she had contacted would retrieve a new shower-commode chair from his warehouse, drop it off

at our hotel that evening, and charge us 4 euros a day for rent. This was miracle number one.

Miracle number two happened the next day. In all of our pre-trip planning, we could not get a clear picture of the best way a quadriplegic in a manual wheelchair could get from their hotel to St. Peter's square. Though only 10 minutes away by car, the hotel and the Vatican were separated by a rather steep valley, traversed by narrow streets, lined with even narrower sidewalks dotted with street lights, garbage cans and scooters, some of which were even parked there. Our hotel concierge Sandro mentioned that the Cornelia subway station had an elevator and it was only an 8 minute walk away. The subway station closest to St. Peter's did not have an elevator but the one before it, Cipro, did. From Cipro, St. Peter's was only about a 15

minute walk and he thought it was all flat. So we headed out on our reconnaissance mission and found our way to the elevator to take us down to the Cornelia subway station. As I pressed the elevator down button, I heard a voice behind me say: "It's surprising the people you can bump into on the streets of Rome." It was Steve Pearse with his wife Laura and 11 month old son, Andrew. Of all of our Western Canadian friends who traveled to Rome I cannot think of anyone with a better physique for hauling me around over those little cobble stones that make up the streets of ancient Rome. Maria later shared with us that the evening before she had asked our Lord and St. Josemaria for assistance in getting to St. Peter's, and specifically that we meet up with our friends the Pearses.

There were many more little contradictions offset by little

miracles that occurred to us and others on our canonization adventure. These are all confirmation of the importance and efficacy of St. Josemaria's message of sanctifying ordinary life. On the morning of October 6, as Maria and I were hurrying to the taxi to go to St. Peter's for the canonization Mass, a glint of silver and grey caught my eye from the doorway of a storage room off of the lobby of our hotel. It was my shower-commode wheelchair. When I stop and recollect our canonization adventure, I think I can still sense the grins on St. Josemaria's and our Lord's faces.

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