



A PROJECT IN THE HOLY LAND

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1. Saxum: One Reality, Three Initiatives

The *Saxum* project arose as a way to help pilgrims to the Holy Land to deepen the roots of their faith and to encourage dialogue among people of different religions. It all started in 1994 when Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, then the Prelate of Opus Dei, made a visit to the holy places and encouraged the building of a center that might make this a reality. *Saxum* is just 18 km from Jerusalem and close to Emmaus, the village that Jesus walked to with two of his disciples after his resurrection.

Three Types of Activities

1. **Saxum Visitor Center** will offer an educational tour of the Holy Land via advanced projection technology, personal explanations, audiovisual and digital recreations about the geography of the holy places, the Bible, and the key moments of salvation history. Thousands of people will be able to prepare themselves for a more fruitful experience of the Holy Land.

The center has a chapel where visitors will be able to attend Mass and approach the sacrament of reconciliation.

There is also an auditorium for presentations and conferences, where the “The Holy Land Dialogues” will be celebrated annually to promote intercultural knowledge. In the Visitor Center, courses of continuing education will be available for tour guides, as they accompany thousands of pilgrims each year.

2. **Saxum Conference Center** will offer spiritual retreats preached by priests of Opus Dei. Through these activities, people from all over the world can have a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ. The Saxum Conference Center can host up to 50 people and is equipped with a chapel, a dining room, and various other rooms and common spaces.

3. **Saxum Hospitality Training Center** is a center of hospitality training, especially geared toward women in the nearby area. It hopes to give rise to new employment opportunities, both in terms of the domestic management of *Saxum* and also by offering professional training – for employment or for starting up small businesses – in sectors related to tourism, gastronomy, and hospitality. The center will offer the international qualification system NVQ (National Vocational Qualification).

2. Interview with Antonio Quintana, Secretary General of the *Saxum* Foundation

“*Saxum* is a dream of Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro del Portillo that has become a reality.”

“The initiative will help a number of Christians to strengthen the roots of their faith.”
“We want to facilitate a deep interreligious and intercultural dialogue in this crossroads of cultures and religions that is the Holy Land.”

What is *Saxum*?

Saxum is a center of formation found in the very special place that is the Holy Land. The project is comprised of three great initiatives: a house where activities of spiritual formation will take place, a center that attends to pilgrims, and a school of hospitality and social promotion for women.

At the same time, *Saxum* is a “dream come true” of Saint Josemaria Escriva – the founder of Opus Dei – and of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo. Saint Josemaria wanted that thousands of Christians would have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Christ in his native land and to meditate the passages of the Gospel in the place where it actually occurred. By knowing the Holy Land, the places where Christ was, where He prayed, where He worked with his hands, where He preached and did miracles, where He suffered, it is easier to find Him in our life, to get to know Him, to fall more in love with Him each day.

The Holy Land is frequently presented as a crossroads of cultures and religions. What role does *Saxum* hope to play in this diverse environment?

Through its activities, *Saxum* would like to facilitate a profound interreligious and intercultural dialogue in this complex crossroads of cultures and religions. From the beginning of the *Saxum* project, both in its design and in its execution, believers from the Holy Land’s three principal religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) have worked together in perfect harmony. The spirit of cooperation, the insistence on work done well and the respect for all beliefs have prompted many workers to say that working for *Saxum* has been a gratifying experience of peaceful human coexistence. In all the workers, we see a great enthusiasm to make this project a point of departure for the peace this land needs. We want to be able to reproduce this atmosphere of dialogue and of friendship in which the building was built so it can permeate everything that will go on at *Saxum*.

How would you describe the relationship between the political and religious authorities surrounding this project?

For Israel's political authorities, *Saxum* is a new tourist attraction and a promoter of cultural initiatives such as the "Way to Emmaus," on which we are working together. For their part, the religious authorities think the initiative will increase the number of pilgrimages and will help many Christians to revalue the roots of their faith, while at the same time offering a breath of solidarity for those Christians living here in the Holy Land

Furthermore, people from all over the world will converge in *Saxum*. This is an interesting motive for the civil and religious authorities here who, from the very beginning, manifested their gratitude and interest in this initiative and willingness to collaborate.

In what way could the *Saxum* project benefit people in the area?

Saxum has the goal of promoting the integral formation of the person. It will offer a whole program of activities from which certainly the neighbors of Abu Gosh and other neighboring vicinities could benefit, both Christians and non-Christians.

This formation is especially directed towards encouraging peace, living together, creating spaces for co-existence. For example, in the center that offers women's formation, we anticipate that Christians, Jews and Muslims will study and work together, and that is not very typical in the Holy Land. One could think that this is nothing more than a drop in the ocean, but we are convinced that simply by creating centers of coexistence, even if they are small, it will be possible to build a lasting peace. In the same way, through the visitor center, we will have the opportunity to offer professional formation to tour guides, who provide so much effectiveness in the development of pilgrimages and who will seek to help each pilgrim to experience the Holy Land as a place of peace and respect for others.

What has been the total cost of the construction? And how is this being financed?

The cost of the construction has been around 31 million euros. It's important to take into account that the project has been financed with more than 100,000 donations from people from 50 countries. For example, we have received both a large sum of money saved over many years precisely to donate for projects in the Holy Land, as well as the coins contained in a small piggy bank of a little child eager to give all he had. There are many stories of magnanimity that will be written one day. The fundraising campaign took us to all five continents. I can assure you that a project in the Holy Land is considered as something very personal for Christians from all parts of the world, and they have collaborated with the hope of being able to have a personal connection to the land of our Lord.

When do you expect to be able to start activities?

A few small details of the construction still need to be finished. We are also still awaiting a few permissions on the legal level. As of now, during the week of November 6th to the 12th, the first edition of *Holy Land Dialogues* will take place at *Saxum*, an activity that will bring together 450 people from 35 different countries. The majority of them are donors who are coming to see the project for themselves, to make a pilgrimage, to dialogue, to pray in the holy places and to experience sincere days of living together in this very open environment.

We think that by June of 2017 everything will be ready for the Activities Center to begin functioning and, a bit before that, the Visitor Center.

3. Interview with Almudena Romero, director of the Visitor Center of the *Saxum Foundation*

“We want pilgrims to be able to grasp the space-time coordinates of their faith.”

The Saxum Visitor Center will offer the pilgrim a multimedia tour of the Holy Land. Equipped with up-to-date technology, it aims to help every pilgrim make better use of their visit to the holy places. The facilities include a chapel and confessionals. A training program for tour guides is also being developed.

What is the purpose of the future Visitor Center?

There are two objectives: to offer pilgrims a deeper understanding of the Holy Land and to help tour guides improve their training. For pilgrims, we will offer a multimedia tour explaining this land's history, with special attention to each of the holy places. In this way we intend to help them take better advantage of their journey so that they can visit each site equipped with a knowledge that deepens their experience.

What will pilgrims find in their visit?

A dynamic tour of the Holy Land using descriptive panels, touchscreens, multiscreen videos, a timeline from Abraham to Jesus Christ, a demo of Jerusalem in ancient times and a giant map of the Holy Land on which pilgrims can walk in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses, David and Christ. The tour is accompanied by traditional music and even aromas typical of the places being visited.

There is a chapel with confessionals. Groups may wish to celebrate Mass there or do some common prayer. Many groups of pilgrims lack a place where they can receive the sacrament of reconciliation during their Holy Land experience, and here they will have it available to them.

We also have a multipurpose room for conferences or courses, which also includes a small cafeteria for the pilgrim to recover from the day's journey. For tour guides, the multimedia library could be especially interesting, as it is equipped with information about the places and specific time periods of the Holy Land.

How will the Visitor Center aid the work of tour guides?

For tour guides accredited by Israel's Ministry of Tourism, we will offer courses of continuing education, in collaboration with *Polis – The Jerusalem Institute of Languages and Humanities*, a local academic center that has worked together with the designers on the historical and archaeological contents of the tour mentioned earlier.

Additional training for tour guides will focus on the history and significance of the holy places. In addition, we are launching the “Way to Emmaus” project, which involves walking from *Saxum* to Emmaus Nicopolis, a town considered from antiquity to be the place where Jesus broke bread with two disciples after his resurrection. *Saxum* is halfway between Jerusalem and Emmaus Nicopolis and will be an information point for walkers.

What is the inspiration behind this initiative?

Our main inspiration comes from the teachings of Saint Josemaría, who advised people to “get into the Gospel as one more character in the scene.” It's very helpful to know what the era was like in which Jesus lived, and to become familiar with the land in which he walked. We want to help pilgrims grasp the “space-time coordinates” of our faith.

The designers of the Visitor Center's museum (Antonio Vaíllo as the architect and Dr. Carlos Bernar as the director and audiovisual scriptwriter) have proposed as a unifying theme the word understood as the Incarnate Word and as Sacred Scripture including the Old and New Testaments.

Who could benefit from your services?

The doors are open to all types of pilgrimages and to visits by groups, families or individual pilgrims. We think it will be especially useful for all Christians, from whatever denomination. But we are also hoping that members of other religions will want to come for its cultural interest. Those who want to come here only have to write us and book their visit.

When will the Visitor Center be operational?

We hope to open the Saxum Visitor Center around May 2017. Before the opening, there will be a presentation day for tour agencies and guides. We want to share with them the advantages of including a visit to our center as part of their ordinary itineraries.

4. *Saxum*: the Name and Inspiration for the Project

“As one more character in the scene”

Saint Josemaria Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, wished to visit the Holy Land to be able to literally follow in Christ’s footsteps. In the words of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, “He had a great desire to go to the Holy Land; he prayed as one more character in the Gospel, taking note of every detail. But since he had never been there, he would recreate the landscapes in his head as best he could given what he had read and studied.” Saint Josemaria spread this desire to visit the Holy Land to his spiritual children in Opus Dei and to many other people, and he hoped that many Christians would have the opportunity during their lifetime to “pray, kneel down, and kiss the ground that Jesus walked on,” according to Blessed Alvaro.

“Saxum, yes you are”

In 1994, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo (who had been the closest collaborator of Saint Josemaria and was then prelate of Opus Dei) traveled to the Holy Land to do a pilgrimage to give thanks to God. Bishop Del Portillo passed away on March 23rd, 1994, only a few hours after returning to Rome from the trip. He had celebrated his last Mass in the church of the Cenacle in Jerusalem.

That same year – inspired by the desire of Saint Josemaria and in memory of Blessed Alvaro – some faithful of the Opus Dei prelature together with a number of cooperators and friends began the planning and search for a future home to offer spiritual retreats as well as a welcome center to host and guide pilgrims.

By 1939, Saint Josemaria had already begun calling Alvaro del Portillo by the name “Saxum” (which in Latin means “rock”) for his fidelity and strength. Writing from Olot, the young Alvaro del Portillo responded to the founder in a letter: “I hope that, in spite of everything, you can count on one who, more than a rock, is a bit of mud without any consistency. But how good God is!” (13 July 1939).

In giving the project this name, its promoters express their gratitude to Blessed Alvaro del Portillo for his life of service to the Church and for his sowing of friendship between people of different cultures and religions.