

get used to celebrating that very sublime and sacred act. In effect, I was able to verify something he once said: that he experienced the Mass as work—at times an exhausting effort, such was the intensity with which he lived it.

Throughout the day, he would recall the texts he had read, in particular the Gospel, and many times he commented on it, in a perfectly ordinary tone, as food for his spiritual and human life.

He was conscious of the fact that in the Mass the protagonist is Jesus Christ, not the minister, and that the faithful fulfillment of the prescriptions enables the priest to "disappear," so that Jesus alone shines. Many people who attended his Mass—also in the difficult circumstances of the Spanish Civil War—commented later that his way of celebrating Mass had something that moved them profoundly, and that they felt invited to grow in their devotion to the Holy Sacrifice. I am convinced that what moved those who participated—those of us who participated—in his Mass was precisely that: that he let Christ appear and not his person.

## “Bringing God Near to Us”—on the Fifth Anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI, *Avvenire*, Italy (April 21, 2010)

Today is the fifth anniversary of the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as head of the Catholic Church. John Paul II had died on April 2, 2005. The television networks provided unprecedented coverage of the event. And in the midst of that climate of commotion and of affection for the deceased Pontiff that still pulsed through the streets of Rome, on April 19, we saw for the first time the kindly face of the new Pope on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

Among the motives for recognition of Benedict XVI, perhaps the most notable is his constant effort to make people aware of the nearness of God. This expression—taken from the title of a book of Cardinal Ratzinger about the Eucharist—is also an affectionate way of speaking of the Creator, which the faith shows us as loving and near, interested in the state of his creatures, as a modern day saint affirmed. Indeed, St. Josemaría often recalled that in the midst of the bustle of every day, at times we live as though he were far away, in the heavens high above, and we forget that he is also continually by our side. He is there like a loving Father. He loves each one of us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children—helping us, inspiring

us, blessing... and forgiving (*The Way*, no. 267).

God, who is not subject to time, assumes the time of Jesus Christ and presents it to humanity. As the Pope frequently recalls, God became man so that we could more easily have recourse to him and love him. And throughout these years he has indefatigably shown in an incisive way, that God is Love and that that one does not begin to be a Christian as the fruit of an ethical decision or of a great idea, but through an encounter with a person—Jesus of Nazareth who opens a new horizon in one's life (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). In a world in which God could seem absent or distant, uninterested in mankind, the catechesis of the Pope brings him close to everyday life, to the path of the man and the woman of the Twenty-first Century.

The apostolic task of the Christian consists precisely in helping others to know Jesus in the midst of their ordinary life, so that they can encounter God and speak with him at every moment—not only in sorrowful circumstances—bringing together a “Thou” and an “I” filled with meaning. A “Thou” that, for Catholics, acquires its greatest contact in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, source of the life of the Church.

For those who try to “live” the Holy Mass, any noble human activity can acquire—so to speak—a liturgical dimension precisely through that union with the Sacrifice of Christ. In this perspective, family, professional, and social du-

ties, which take up the greater part of the day of a citizen, do not separate one from our Lord; on the contrary, the incidents, the relationships, and the problems that those activities bring with them, can nourish one's prayer. Supported by grace, even the experience of one's weakness, contradictions, the exhaustion that every human effort brings with it, makes us more realistic, more humble, more understanding, more brothers and sisters to others. And any possible success and joy, for those who walk in God's footsteps, is an occasion to give thanks and to recall that we have to always be at the his service and at the service of our brethren. To live in this friendship with God, recalls Benedict XVI in his last encyclical, is the way to transform our “hearts of stone” into “hearts of flesh” (cf. *Ezek 36:26*), making earthly life more “divine” and, therefore, more worthy of man (*Caritas in Veritate*, 78).

Jesus walked the roads of Palestine and immediately noted the suffering of his contemporaries. Therefore, when one knows and loves the “God who is near us,” the Christian does not remain indifferent to the fate of others. This is the “virtuous circle” of charity: the nearness of God nourishes the nearness to others, provoking openness “towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 78).

On the contrary, distance from God, indifference towards our Creator, leads sooner or later to an ignorance of human values, which

then lose their basis. “Awareness of God’s undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs. God’s love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all” (Ibid.).

How does Benedict XVI conceive his mission as head of the universal Church? In the Mass at the commencement of his Pontificate, he explained that the task of Shepherd could seem heavy, but in reality it is “beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God’s joy, which longs to break into the world.” On that same occasion he noted that “there is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ,” and “there is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him” (Homily, April 24, 2005). This is how the Pope understands his mission: to communicate to others the joy that proceeds from God, to arouse in the world a new dynamism of commitment in the human response to the love of God.

In these five years of his Pontificate, there has been no lack of attacks on the Pope provoked by those who are attempting to tear the Creator from the landscape of the society of mankind; nor has there been a lack of suffering in the face of the inconsistency and the sins of some people who were called to be “the

salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14-16). None of this should surprise us, for these difficulties form part of the ordinary path of the Christian, since the disciple is not greater than his teacher as Jesus proclaimed: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (Jn 15:20). At the same time we should not forget what our Lord added: “If they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (Ibid.).

Here resides the indestructible optimism of the Christian, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who will never leave the Church forsaken. *Historia docet*: How often in the course of twenty centuries, have not prophetic voices arisen, proclaiming the end of the Church of Christ! However, propelled by the Holy Spirit, once the trials were overcome, it has shown itself younger and more beautiful, more filled with energy to lead mankind along the paths of salvation. We saw this in these years: the moral and intellectual authority of the Pope, his nearness and interest in those who are suffering, his firmness in the defense of the Truth and of the Good, always with charity, has strengthened men and women of all beliefs. The Roman Pontiff continues to be a spotlight illuminating the intricate vicissitudes of the earth.

In the fulfillment of my task as a bishop, thousands of persons of good will—Catholics and non-Catholics, and even many non-Christians—have confided to me that the solid and hopeful responses of Benedict XVI before the various dramatic events of humanity, have meant for them a confirmation of the Gospel,

or a motive of drawing nearer to the Church, and, above all, a renewed interest in getting closer to that “God who is near us” who the Pope proclaims. There are many of us who feels ourselves enriched every day by this joyful proclamation of Benedict XVI, seasoned by the light of the faith, expressed with all the resources of intellect, in crystal-clear language, and with the testimony of his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. May God conserve him for us for many years as a guide for the Church, for the good of all mankind.

✠ Javier Echevarría  
Prelate of Opus Dei

## Interview granted to the magazine *Palabra*, Spain (June, 2010)

*At the conclusion of the Year for Priests*

1. *The Year for Priests convoked by the Holy Father on the anniversary of the Holy Curé of Ars’ death is about to end. You had the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to Ars recently. Since the Church points to him as a model for priests, what do you see as the most important features of the life of St. Jean Marie Vianney?*

His humility, his piety, his spirit of joyful penance, among many other things. But I think the most important feature of the life of the Holy Curé of Ars is his complete dedication to his ministry. This is why, at

the end of the Year for Priests, Benedict XVI proclaimed him as the patron of all priests (he had already been patron of confessors for some time). The figure of St. Jean Marie Vianney is a strong call for us to be priests through and through: for the good of souls we have to be ready to set aside anything that could hinder, even if only slightly, our pastoral service. As a holy pastor of our own day and age, St. Josemaría Escrivá, used to say graphically, we have to be *one hundred percent priests*.

2. *The work of priests is assisted by many good points in people: for example, the readiness of many young people to take part in volunteer work, and their openness to the faith. But at times it also meets with reasons for discouragement and resistance: religious ignorance, a secularist mentality, misunderstandings, etc. In spite of all this, can priests work with confidence today?*

We not only can but should carry out our priestly work with optimism and confidence. But we need to keep in mind that the effectiveness of our ministry does not come from ourselves—from our preparation, our qualities, etc., although we have to be diligent in all this in order to be better instruments—but from the action of Christ working through each priest. At the same time, we have to overcome any resistance, by spreading the truth with charity.

3. *The priestly life revolves, in great measure, around the liturgy. Its highest moment is the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sunday. Could you make some specific recommendations to priests, to help foster a fruitful celebration?*