

which is always a “defeat for humanity” (Speech to Diplomatic Corps, January 13, 2003), this does not mean that the Pope’s words have been useless. It means rather that perhaps we have not sufficiently sought peace, in all its manifestations: peace in consciences, in families, in the workplace, in public life.

I would like to emphasize, finally, that John Paul II defends Love against its most powerful enemy: the ego of each person when he allows himself to be carried away by his own weakness and selfishness. The Holy Father has inspired deep decisions in many young people, helping them to discover their Christian vocation, because his testimony is backed up by his life, by his daily physical spending of himself.

For the past 25 years, he has been a credible witness to God’s Love for each human being, traveling all over the world. And even more so now, when his bodily weakness allows us to better glimpse the strength of divine Love in his life. Many people have been moved, especially recently, by his unconditional self-giving, which is simply the intensification of what he has been doing throughout his entire pontificate. He has spared no effort, spurned no sacrifice.

The first Christian community in Jerusalem put the sick in the path of Peter, so that at least his shadow would touch them and cure them. I ask God that the shadow of the steps of John Paul II may cure us of our ills, and that we may learn from the life of this credible witness to God’s Love.

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“John Paul II: Unflagging defender of truth”

Bishop Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, discusses the twenty-five years of John Paul II’s pontificate, the Christian roots of Europe and the prospects for peace in Holy Land. An interview with Paolo Cavallo.

Elevated to the altars on October 6 of last year, on June 26 we celebrate the canonical feast of St. Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei. He is a saint of our own day and age, who wanted the Work to be a path that would give meaning and dignity to work and to ordinary life.

His successor, Bishop Javier Echevarría, directs the Work’s activity throughout the world. A “father and mother” for hundreds of thousands of persons committed to this path of daily sanctification, and a person who is close to the Pope, Bishop Echevarría is a privileged witness to these twenty-five years of John Paul II’s pontificate, of the challenges that the Church faces in fostering peace and human dignity and safeguarding the roots of Christian culture.

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The Pope’s pontificate has spanned 25 years of the world’s history. How do you view his accomplishments?

The scope of the Pope’s activities is so extensive that it hard to give a brief summary. John Paul II is a unique figure in our moment of his-

tory. His moral authority is universally recognized. His prestige is such that no one can ignore his efforts on behalf of human dignity, respect for life, peace, and the poor of our world. The Pope has shown with his deeds, as did his predecessors, that he is “the servant of the servants of God,” an unflinching defender of truth, and an advocate for all men and women, in whose dignity he believes with all his strength. But there is something more important than his personal prestige. In the past 25 years John Paul II has made Christ present to our day and age; he has encouraged humanity to turn to Jesus for the answers to the fundamental questions about the meaning of human existence. This is the ultimate reason for his authority.

Nevertheless, it doesn't seem that he is actually making much headway. Why not?

Some of the Pope's efforts clearly contrast with the reigning mindset and culture. Thus people may view them as obligatory but out-of-date, as necessary but destined to fail. This apparent discordance is not a sign of irrelevance. Real teachers are not enclosed in their own times. His efforts should be viewed from the perspective of the Church's teaching authority. They indicate a direction that we should follow, one that everyone finds difficult, but that can be ignored only at the expense of our civilization. They hold up values that should be beyond argument: the promotion of peace, the defense of life, the affirmation of justice, the offering of and asking for pardon. What we can't do is to try to choose

one of these values at the expense of another. The good is indivisible.

Does Opus Dei owe a great deal to this Pope?

The message spread by St. Josemaría since 1928, later confirmed by the Second Vatican Council, has been particularly attractive because it is a rediscovery of the extraordinary beauty of Christian holiness. Sanctity is an ideal that should be sought and put into practice in every moment of life, as much in times of peace and serenity as in times marked by discord and suffering. It is an ideal within reach of all men and women. Everyday life can at times seem mundane, but if we seek Christ, what is routine is transformed into a path towards God and our own happiness. I am grateful to all the Popes, from Pius XII down to today, because they have all shown great affection for Opus Dei. But we have a particular debt of gratitude to John Paul II, because during his pontificate several events of special importance for Opus Dei's history have taken place, such as the canonization of St. Josemaría.

What does Opus Dei do to support the Pope's efforts? For example, the Pope has been speaking out about the European constitution and the need for recognition of Europe's Christian roots. What has Opus Dei done in this regard?

The mission and commitment of Opus Dei is to give formation to the faithful of the Prelature and to anyone else who asks for it. A consistent spiritual formation fosters personal responsibility, a desire to contribute to the

building up of a more Christian and more human society. To ignore the Christian roots of Europe would be to deny the reality of European history, something the Bishop's Commission of the European Union has noted clearly. The Church does not pursue privileges but rather tries to be of service to everyone. It is a question of respecting reality, instead of going along with the anti-clerical prejudices of the past. In fact, Christianity is the cradle of Europe. In this context, Opus Dei emphasizes the responsibility of each person, in particular of each Christian citizen, to contribute to the evangelization of culture through one's work, showing a spirit of initiative, going against the current if need be and opening up a path for future generations.

But it seems that the Church wants to dominate European politics

Along with the value of freedom, it is necessary to keep pluralism in mind. No one could think that Catholics are promoting a 'single model' for Europe, neither in cultural matters nor in politics. The many cultures living together in Europe are, notwithstanding their common Christian roots, quite distinct from each other, but no one is trying to make them uniform. What is essential, ultimately, is respect for reality and respect for history, in a climate of freedom and pluralism."

Freedom and peace are interrelated. Will there ever be a day when peace comes to Palestine?

In the Holy Land the fight is over a piece of land. The dispute is a question of justice. Among the Palestinians and Israelis there are men and women capable of living together in a spirit of fraternity. Peace is a gift from God, but it requires men and women of good will on earth. It must be constructed with human effort. Authentic peace is inseparable from justice. It requires a spirit of understanding and forgiveness, and an effort by people to know and value one another. St. Josemaría often said that peace within and between peoples can only arise out of peace in consciences. And he added that violence neither conquers nor convinces. The one who uses it is always left defeated.

War often has its origin in situations of extreme poverty, such as in Africa. The African continent needs help. Has Opus Dei committed itself to doing something for the poorest people of Africa?

When the Pope announced his intention to canonize St. Josemaría last year, an organizing committee was set up. Among others things, the committee established a solidarity fund for Africa with contributions from people attending the canonization. We called it Project Harambee 2002. So far, more than a hundred thousand people, as well as various entities and institutions, have contributed to the fund. The money collected is going to help 18 educational projects in sub-Saharan Africa. One of these is a center for the social reintegration of children obliged to fight during the

civil war in Sierra Leone. It is only a drop in the ocean of need. But Project Harambee 2002 has been a way to channel the natural happiness of those who have received graces through St. Josemaría towards a desire to remember those in need. Life is made up of joy and sorrow, health and sickness, strength and weakness. Our life will always contain both light and shadows. What is important is putting one's life at the service of others."

St. Josemaría and Genoa

St. Josemaría felt a close fraternal tie to Genoa. It was the first Italian city in which he set foot, on his first trip to Rome. Here is a brief description of that in the words of Bishop Echevarria.

Genoa was indeed the first Italian city in which St. Josemaría set foot. The ship that brought him from Spain arrived in Genoa on June 22, 1946, in the evening. Waiting for him was Father Alvaro del Portillo, who was later to be his successor as head of Opus Dei. He had come by car from Rome. They spent the night in the Columbia hotel, which no longer exists.

On the following day, June 23, St. Josemaría celebrated Mass, probably in the Church of St. Sixtus and the Child Mary on Via Prè, which at that time was still visibly damaged by bombs. I say "probably" because the disappearance of the Church registers prevents us from being absolutely certain that the Mass was actually celebrated there. That was his first Mass on Italian soil.

For the faithful of Opus Dei from this province of Liguria, the fact that the founder said his first Mass in Italy precisely here in Genoa has a special significance. Knowing St. Josemaría, I am sure that he prayed intensely for the city in which he was staying and for its inhabitants.

He wanted centers of Opus Dei to be opened in Genoa as soon as possible. Today we know that many Genoans, men and women from all walks of life, have come closer to God thanks to the message of St. Josemaría. I am happy to see how this personal apostolate is spreading throughout all of Liguria, in both eastern and western areas. Activities of spiritual formation are offered by Opus Dei in San Remo, Imperia, Savona and Rapallo.