

El Mercurio (October 26, 1997)

The full text of an interview granted to Magdalena Ossandon, a journalist for the newspaper El Mercurio (Santiago de Chile), published in November, 1997.

I. Another side of Chile

1. *Your last visit here was in 1974 more than 20 years ago. What changes have you noticed?*

Given the pastoral nature of my visit, and the fact that it so short, I can't make a broad judgment. But I can say that over these years the great human, intellectual, moral, and religious potential of Chile has matured. This is grounds for hope, and also a great responsibility for the people of Chile.

2. *While the country has had notable economic growth with the introduction of a free market economy, there have also been efforts to eliminate cultural restraints—what you might call “liberalization Chilean-style.” What do you think about this?*

Material progress is an imperative demand of justice and charity, but it does bring with it a certain ambiguity, since it can also cause injustice and confusion. I trust that Chileans will properly direct this process toward the true “freedom of the children of God” as Scripture puts it. Only a freedom based on the truth about man, the world, and God truly liberates.

3. *Do you believe that respect for contrary opinions—letting each person do his thing, as it were—is a sign of modernity?*

Respect for those who think the opposite of oneself is always a good sign, in any period. But this respect is not incompatible with exercising one's right to build a just society in accord with one's conscience enlightened by the natural law, and in the case of Christians, by the Gospel. It is a right and a duty that cannot be relinquished. Of course, this does not mean going around doing harm to one's neighbor.

4. *You have described Chile and South America as a continent with Christian cultural roots and have also said that Chile has been a treasure of the Church. You also mentioned that some are trying to destroy this treasure. What are the dangers that you see?*

These Christians cultural roots have had a positive influence on the shape of society in the countries of South America, and this is shown in the Christian sentiments of the people, of the nations, of customs, and so on. This is why I spoke of a treasure. The danger that we can see menacing this treasure is nothing other than the process of secularization that has invaded so many societies and countries of the world, and which tries to confine God to the realm of personal conscience so that the Christian message won't have the slightest influence on social life. The event of the incarnation of the Son of God, his death and resurrection, are not a theory to which one simply assents, it is a reality: the central and decisive event, in fact, of all human

history. The living God seeks us out and makes us participate in his life in order to save us, and so that we can illuminate all the paths of the earth with the light of Christ, the only redeemer of the world. I am convinced, as Blessed Josemaría said, that “without Christ, man disintegrates,” he is interiorly divided and perishes. And this disintegration, this interior division, affects the social environment.

5. Some acts of corruption have just been uncovered in Chile. Drug trafficking has penetrated important sectors of society. What measures do you believe should be taken to prevent this scourge, which menaces the integrity of society and the future of generations to come?

It is not for me to determine what measures are adequate in these situations whose details I don't really know. But it would seem that many different steps can be taken by the civil authorities. I can only speak about a moral principle: each conscience has to make a decision to break the vicious circle of “everyone is doing it,” or “I will suffer harm if I don't take up this practice.” With this lack of logic and morality, the problem spreads indefinitely. Many citizens are needed who will refuse—with heroism if need be—to become accomplices. In this way concentric circles of moral rectitude will gradually cleanse the whole of society. But it is Christians who have to be the first to break the vicious cycle.

6. What do you see as the causes of these social sins? Is it moral relativism, or the lack of ethics?

Undoubtedly there are different causes, but I would like to address the

most radical, the one most at the root. The loss of the sense of God in the heart of each man and woman will eventually bring about an erosion of the moral conscience of an entire society. The norms of ethics then lose their objective and universal character. People then cannot distinguish good from evil, and they end up imposing a moral relativism that is corrosive to persons and society.

7. Even though the great majority of people in Chile call themselves Catholic, many do not practice the faith. If they do, it is only to fulfill some of the norms and principles of the Church. Can one be a Catholic by halves? Is it preferable not to be one at all?

It is possible to be Catholic by halves, but it is a very sad thing. In the light of the message that the Lord placed in the heart of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá—which was reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council—there has been a great deal preached, also here in Chile, about the “universal call to holiness,” that is to say, about the divine calling to the fullness of Christian life, a call received by all of the faithful at baptism. The distinction between being a Catholic by halves and not being Catholic at all makes no sense for a true person of faith, who seeks the best and not lesser evils, and who pursues an ideal in life to which it is worthwhile committing oneself.

8. Inconsistency seems to be habitual in the entire world today? What can you say about this tendency?

I don't want to generalize, because that would not be just. In any

case, this is a constant tendency of our nature which is wounded by original sin. The Christian answer, as the founder of Opus Dei taught so profoundly, is “unity of life,” something to which the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* gave such importance: the faithful Catholic is always one and the same, and must make the effort to act consistent with the faith, whether in the street, with one’s family, at work, in private and public life, in the spiritual and the temporal sphere, in the intimacy of his or her conscience and in the midst of the crowd. To work in this way gives one authenticity and also harmony and serenity; and it helps one to be faithful and to make others happy.

9. Taking into account the problems that ordinary persons encounter in a competitive world, and which cause such ailments as stress, depression, anxiety and so on, how can the “holiness” of lay people in the middle of the world be possible and actually lived?

This is just what Christian realism is. Holiness, like life itself, does not develop in an “ideal,” non-existent, world, nor in easy circumstances, but rather in the real world of ordinary, everyday difficulties. What is more, holiness comes about through these real world difficulties: there is no sanctity without the cross. Blessed Josemaría speaks of “mystical wishful thinking” in regard to sanctification. What he means is we can find ourselves saying “If only I were there and not here,” “If only I worked in that job and not in this one, because then I would be able to sanctify myself.” This kind of reasoning is an illusion, an evasion, an excuse. On the con-

trary: it is precisely here in these real, present circumstances, wherever one finds oneself, that our Lord wants us to be saints. And he has given us the necessary and sufficient graces for this, proportioned to the difficulties that we have to overcome.

II. The law of divorce

10. Chile is the only country in the world that does not permit divorce. At this moment a proposal is making its way through Congress that would permit the dissolution of the bond of marriage, a proposal opposed by the hierarchy of the Church. Isn't it up to civil society to make its own laws?

Civil authorities make the laws, but the laws, in order to be such, should be just, that is to say, they should respect what is proper to each thing and should serve the common good. They should not depend solely on the will of the legislators, but on those norms of good and evil that are intrinsic to man. These norms comprise the natural moral law. The Church, like man himself, did not produce this law, but found it written in the depths of our human nature. According to this law, matrimony is in itself indissoluble. The Church—comprising the hierarchy and the lay faithful—cannot be other than opposed to a law of divorce, which tries to legalize something that is unjust. If, in a delicate matter like this, it were to act otherwise, it would only facilitate the disintegration of civil society, as one can see happening in so many countries. Experience shows that divorce only brings about further evils and never truly good things.

11. Doesn't it seem to you that such a rigid attitude on the part of the Church has caused many of the faithful to distance themselves from her?

One cannot characterize as "rigid" something that corresponds to the truth of man, the common good of society, the express command of Christ to the Church, and, we mustn't forget, to all of humanity. In its defense of the stability of the family the Church is just as "rigid" as in its defense of life, or of human rights. To those who have wanted to eliminate those rights, the Church has in fact seemed "rigid." But humanity must thank the Church for not having given in to this pressure. Throughout the centuries the demand of a high standard of conduct *seems* to have separated many faithful from the Church, and yet it does not separate, but attracts, because it is consistency with Christ, with God, and consistency attracts.

12. If the Church is merciful and forgiveness is fundamental to it, why does it not accept the human condition of error or breakdown in a marriage and allow these people to rebuild their lives through a second marriage?

These are two different things. The Church applies the mercy of God toward the one who errs, sins, or suffers. But it also preserves the truth of Christ, who declared that marriage is indissoluble and not provisional. The Pope himself cannot change this state of things, no matter how much compassion he may and does have toward those who are affected or suffering. To the adulterous woman Jesus said, "Neither will I condemn you," but he added, "Go and sin no more." In short, mercy cannot contradict moral

truth. If it did it would be a false mercy. The Church obviously extends its mercy to the victims of divorce, the spouse who has been abandoned, the children who have been badly wounded, all of the consequent evils, and the victims who some people may not sufficiently take into account.

13. Some fear that if the divorce law is approved, it will be followed by abortion and euthanasia. Do you share this concern or do you consider this unlikely?

I too share those fears because, unfortunately, this permissive sequence you speak about is an historical fact that can be seen in many societies.

III. Opus Dei in Chile

14. What is your impression of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Chile, having visited it after a 20-year absence? What changes have you noticed?

During these years its apostolic work has developed and that is a motive for joy. The world is always changing, and the faithful of Opus Dei, who live and breathe in the world, also change in temporal matters. In Chile and all over, the preoccupations of women and men in this land, their ideas and their tastes, are a lot different from those of 20 years ago, and they reflect that the circumstances, needs and mentality of the people have changed in Chile. But the spirit of Opus Dei has not changed. It is a specific way of living Christianity that emphasizes, among other things, divine filiation and the sanctification of work. This spirit is lived today as it was lived in 1974, but it is incarnated in a different historical reality.

15. *There are still some who criticize Opus Dei and characterize it as ultra-conservative and elitist, and say that it is intent on reaching the top levels of economic power. How do you answer these criticisms, and in what aspects do you think the members of Opus Dei in Chile should improve?*

In Chile I have seen that the apostolic work of the women and men of Opus Dei are reaching, thanks be to God, people of all social levels: students and small-scale farmers, manual workers and businessmen and women, prominent people and simple people who are never mentioned in the press. I was very happy to see what they are doing in La Pintana [a corporate apostolic work of the Prelature]. I have seen young people and priests of Opus Dei taking care of prisoners in Santiago. I have looked at the work being done with poor farmers in San Fernando through the agricultural school Las Garzas, which began operations in 1963. As far as self-criticism is concerned, the faithful of Opus Dei undertake it every day: we make a daily examination of conscience, reviewing our behavior, finding many mistakes and omissions, and making resolutions to improve, trusting in the grace of God. I urge, in Chile and everywhere else, that every day, we be and become more conscious of the fact that we are children of God. Yes, I have come to remind them that they must strive to fulfill well, neither more nor less, what every Christian is called to practice: love of God and of neighbor, prayer, sanctifying work, social responsibility, disinterested service of the Pope and of the Church. We see that we can improve in everything, that we can never feel ourselves satisfied.

16. *Considering that many faithful of the Prelature are economically well off, what do you say to them in regard to the parable of Jesus that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven?*

Allow me to begin by adding something to your question. The vast majority of the members of the Opus Dei are people without any kind of wealth or power, people with just enough to live on, living by the sweat of their brow, people of modest means who find things very tight at the end of the month. Those who are wealthy are by far the minority, and what I tell them, with the Gospel in my hand, is that they must administer their goods with a sense of solidarity and with apostolic generosity, with detachment both of the heart and of the pocket-book. I tell them that they should apply to themselves the parable to which you alluded, as we all should apply it to ourselves, detaching ourselves from our own ego.

17. *Chile has received worldwide recognition for its rapid economic growth. This has brought with it an increase in consumerism and materialism, of having rather than being. How do you see this change of mentality and how should Chileans confront the "price" of economic growth?*

In Chile, as in many other countries, I have preached the constant need to love society with deeds. I tell people to live with a holy and healthy austerity in the face of practical materialism, refusing to create artificial needs, being detached from what one has or does not have, knowing how to

do without superfluous things, giving and sharing with generosity. I have especially emphasized this in regard to children, that they be educated in austerity and taught not to become too soft on themselves. If our children are allowed to become "bourgeois," which is a kind of social evil, it prevents their hearts from having any room for the great ideals that Jesus is presenting to them.

IV. The Third Millennium

18. The coming of the third millennium is producing a certain fear in some people. They are upset by prophecies of the end of the world. Does the coming millennium frighten you?

Why be afraid? There is only hope, only great expectations in the face of the great challenges of the third millennium. Among other things, I hope for great apostolic horizons for the Church, together with the tribulations that have always been part of its history. The future is for the daring.

19. The Church has asked us to prepare for the Jubilee by means of a three-year celebration: the year of Christ, the year of the Holy Spirit, and the year of the Father. How should Catholics prepare for the coming of the third millennium and what is the significance of the year 2000?

I have not ceased to recommend to everyone, in accord with the indications of the Church that you mention, to pray centered on the mystery of the incarnation, that is on that redemptive irruption of God into time that we are going to commemorate with the mil-

lennium. This prayer should be a contemplation of the holy humanity of Christ, perfect God and perfect man, which will lead us to fall in love with him. The apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* is a clear and stimulating document in which the Pope has spelled out a well-defined path to follow. And it has been a joy to see in many local Churches, including in the dioceses of Chile, so many initiatives in that same direction.

20. Considering the poor health that he is in, is the teaching of the Holy Father valid? There are some who discount the validity of his words.

It is obvious that the Holy Father does have his ailments, to a great extent as a consequence of his intense work, of his unconditional dedication to the task of the pontificate. But thanks be to God, he works with a young heart. I really think that few, very few, could work at his pace. The validity of his teaching, of his authority, of his words and his deeds, are not in the slightest affected by his difficulty in walking or the fact that his left hand tends to shake. As the Pope himself has remarked with his usual good humor, he does not govern the Church with his feet, and he signs his name with his right hand. Above all, the fundamental reality for Catholics is that, independent of the health of the Vicar of Christ, the Holy Spirit guides the Church through the successor of Peter.

21. Is it true that the Pope has leaned on Opus Dei a great deal? In what way do you believe that the Prelature has been a support for the Church and for the Holy Father?

The Pope is supported, and supports himself, on whoever tries to serve the Church, souls, and humanity. In Opus Dei we love the Pope, the present Pope, and whoever might become the Pope in the future for the simple fact of being Pope, with a filial love that moves us to be fully at the disposition of his teachings. The Prelature only exists to serve the

Church as the Church wishes to be served. In anything that the Pope asks of us, therefore, we try to help him. Having said this, I would like to add that the principal service of the Prelature to the Church is to carry out Opus Dei; that is, to propagate the Christian life among ordinary men and women in every walk of life and personal situation.

Pastoral Trips

The Prelate of Opus Dei was in **Germany** in July. Besides spending several weeks working in Solingen, before beginning a long apostolic trip throughout South America, he wanted to accompany Stephan Puhl, one of the Prelature's faithful who was gravely ill and who died shortly afterward.

Bishop Echevarría took advantage of his stay in Solingen, a city close to the border, to meet with faithful of the Prelature in Brussels on July 19, and in Maastricht on July 26 where he prayed at the Marian basilica Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk. On July 27 he had two get-togethers with German faithful of the Prelature: one of them in Maarhof and the other in the Müngersdorf International University Residence, in Cologne.



The Prelate visited **Argentina** during the first half of August, and had occasion to meet with thousands of people. The twenty-third anniversary

of Blessed Josemaría's 1974 visit to Argentina fell in the month of June.

On Tuesday, August 5, the Prelate of Opus Dei went to the city of Rosario. In the evening some 5,000 people awaited him in the covered stadium of the Club Provincial. The get-together lasted for more than an hour. On the 7th and 8th, Bishop Echevarría held two get-togethers in the Costa Salguero Exposition Center in Buenos Aires, with more than 12,000 people in attendance. He answered questions on various aspects of Christian life. He transmitted to all the blessing that he had received from the Pope before leaving Rome, and exhorted them to pray for the Holy Father and to accompany him spiritually in preparing for the Jubilee.

Bishop Echevarría made several visits to Austral University of which he is honorary Rector. The University hosted a get-together with young people; another was held at Los Molinos high school.