

LOVE FOR THE CHURCH AND THE POPE

Mgr Dónal Ó Cuilleanáin

The sun was setting and its fading rays illuminated the cupula of St Peter's as Josemaría Escrivá caught his first glimpse of Rome, of the Vatican, of the See of Peter. He was deeply moved. It had been along and difficult journey. He had travelled by steam packet from Barcelona to Genoa in a raging storm. He continued in a 'banger' of a car from Genoa to Rome on the war-cratered roads of June 1946, 50 years ago. He had been unable to eat or sleep for nearly 48 hours.

Seeking approval

He was in very poor health and his doctor had strongly discouraged him from travelling. But he had to go, because the negotiations to approve Opus Dei as an institution of pontifical right had ground to a halt. The unofficial word from a Vatican official was that Opus Dei had come a century ahead of its time. On hearing this, Alvaro del Portillo, who had been leading the discussions, realized that if the Founder did not represent the case

himself there would be no movement. He told the Father. And so he went.

Fifty years ago, the ideals of Opus Dei were considered revolutionary, a hundred years premature. With our Lady's powerful intercession, Blessed Josemaría convinced the ecclesiastical authorities that the clock should be brought forward, and thus a new corpus in theology and eventually in canon law was devised.

By virtue of the definitive legal approval achieved in 1982 and the erection of the Prelature, the charism Blessed Josemaría received on October 2, 1928 was accorded the canonical framework which best suited it, and which ensured that Opus Dei could serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served in accordance with the specific vocation of its members, lay people in the world, striving for holiness and giving witness to the faith at the cross-roads of society.

Love for the Church and the Pope

On arrival in Rome Blessed Josemaría stayed in a rented flat just outside the walls of the Vatican. That night, aware that the Holy Father was little more than a hundred yards away from him, he spent the night in prayer on the balcony from which he could see the papal apartments.

What motivated him? After all, he was thoroughly exhausted after the arduous journey, weakened by hunger and the diabetes which was in a virulent phase. The simple answer is: his love for the Church and the Pope. It seemed the obvious thing to do.

During the ensuing weeks in Rome, he met many Church leaders and offi-

cial and spoke at length about the Work. Eventually (and it is a story for another day) the path for pontifical approval of Opus Dei was opened, assuring its place in the hierarchical structure of the Church.

The Church as sacrament

'The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men (*Lumen gentium*, no. 1).

The *Catechism* (cf. nos 1115-16) further explains that the seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his body. The Church, then, contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense that the Church is called a 'sacrament'.

If the Church is the universal sacrament of God's presence in the world, by extension we can say that every Christian is also in some way a 'local' sacrament of God's presence in his own environment. A Catholic, proud to be so while being humbly aware of his own inadequacies and sinfulness, a Catholic who knows and values his vocation to holiness and Christian witness, is surely a sign, a sacrament of God's presence in the world.

Giving witness

The sacraments confer what they contain. In order to be truly a sacrament of God's presence we must be 'other Christs, Christ himself'. We can achieve this through a vibrant life of prayer, and by faithfully fulfilling all the duties of our state in life for the

glory of God, striving, in short, to live a thoroughly Christian life. This is how we can contribute effectively to the mission of the Church.

In Denver a few years ago, the Holy Father encouraged young people not to be ashamed of the convictions of their faith, but to spread that faith in order to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern 'metropolis'. He constantly reminds us that the Church needs our energies, our enthusiasm, our ideals, in order to make the Gospel penetrate the fabric of society, transforming people's hearts and the structures of society. 'People need the fresh, vital spirituality of the Gospel,' he added.

In your own family, in your neighbourhood, in your work environment you can be the sacrament of God's presence there. You are the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the leaven in the batch. The sacraments of the Church are holy signs. You also are called to be holy signs, occasions of grace in contemporary society.

Apostolate is not a mission reserved for the hierarchy, priests and religious. The Lord calls all of us to be, with our example and word, instruments of the stream of grace which springs up to eternal life.¹

Speaking up for the Church

St Cyprian taught that if we want to have God as our Father we must have the Church as our Mother. Expanding on this, Blessed Josemaría said if we love the Church, there will never arise in us a morbid interest in airing, as the

1. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Loyalty to the Church*, no. 15.

faults of the Mother, the weaknesses of some of her children.

The Church, the Spouse of Christ, does not have to intone any *mea culpa*. But we do: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. The only true *mea culpa* is a personal one, not the one which attacks the Church, pointing out and exaggerating the human defects which, in this holy Mother, result from the presence in her of men whose actions can go far astray.²

He sometimes said: 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, despite everything.' And when asked: 'What do you mean by that?', he would reply: 'Despite your sins and mine.'

The Church is without stain, immaculate. We, the members of the Church are sinners. Sometimes it may appear that the sins of her sons sully her beauty. But the Church, God's presence in the world, the bride of Christ, is sinless. We, the members, lay and clerical, have every reason to acknowledge our sins. It is a mistake to blame the Church for human actions.³

Personal examination

What is most important in the Church is not how we humans react but how God acts. That is what the Church is: Christ present in our midst, God coming to men in order to save them, calling us with his revelation, sanctifying us with his grace, maintaining us with his constant help, in the great and little battles of our time.

People often say nowadays that the Church is going through a tough time,

2. *Ibid.*, no. 7.

3. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, no. 131.

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and it is true. The sins of very few have caused considerable scandal. They have let down Christ and his Church. They have tarnished her beauty. As a loyal son of the Church, Blessed Josemaría, however, never allowed others insult the Church. He would object, saying: 'I cannot conceive of anyone having true affection for his mother who speaks of her with disdain.'⁴

What is your reaction to recent scandals or to general doctrinal or moral confusion? It is not a time to be cowed, or to retreat or be dismayed. It is a time to take personal stock of our own commitment to the Church, to our Christian vocation. It is a time to strengthen our love of the Church and the Pope and show it in deeds. It is a time to re-enforce our own personal commitment to being an instrument of God's presence in the Church and in the world.

A few months ago the first parish church was dedicated to Blessed Josemaría. Given the special veneration Blessed Josemaría had for city and see of Rome and for the bishop of Rome, it is very fitting that this first parish church dedicated to him is located in the diocese of Rome and was dedicated by His Holiness Pope John Paul II. The

building itself was financed from contributions from all the world over. Many here present this evening gave generously, and I wish to thank you.

Need for prayer

I want to encourage you to pray ardently for the universal Church, for the Church in Ireland and the Church in Dublin. Don't leave the Pope and bishops on their own: pray for them by name. Pray for the priests of your parish and encourage them with your friendship and cooperation. Pray for vocations to Opus Dei, to the priesthood and also to the religious life. And through your own struggle to live a thoroughly Christian life, faithful to the teaching of the Church, be a sacrament of God's presence in the world which will sanctify and transform the world. Let me finish with the words of Blessed Josemaría:

May the daily consideration of the heavy burden weighing on the Pope and the Bishops move you to venerate and love them with real affection, and to help them with your prayers.⁵

This homily was given on June 26, 1996 in the Church of the Miraculous Medal, Bird Avenue, Dublin.

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