

shepherd, one who was gentle and strong. Perhaps this explains the new vitality Pope John Paul II alluded to earlier. Through the priests, Cardinal Poletti breathed life into the entire diocese of Rome. The Pope pointed this out in the condolence he sent to Cardinal Camilo Ruini. He recalled his “fervent dedication” as a pastor and his constant attention to “the needs of the clergy.” His mark on the diocese is bound to last for a long time, as the gradual increase in the number of priestly ordinations over the last several years shows.

He cared for the priests of the diocese and for all the faithful, one by one. Pope John Paul II said that the secret of Cardinal Poletti’s fruitful service to the Church is found in his ability to establish a “personal and affectionate relationship” with everyone. This is so proper to a good priest who is able to derive renewed energy from the spiritual paternity at the core of his priestly vocation. Although he was physically ill for years, Cardinal Poletti gave little importance to his suffering and spent himself unselfishly for others. His pains were acute and often amounted to a real Calvary. But nevertheless he always listened to his visitors calmly and with a smile. He never gave the impression that he was in a hurry or making a great effort.

The history of the Church is rich in similar examples. It is not difficult to see that fruitfulness lies in obedience; success lies in service. True happiness is only a reflection of the happiness we are able to communicate to others. This is the message, the very relevant one, of loyalty.

Tracce February, 1997

The following is the complete text of an interview granted to Michele Brambilla, a journalist for the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera.” The interview was published in the magazine “Tracce” in February 1997.

In September 1996, the magazine “Inside the Vatican” published a list of Church entities that are frequently attacked. Among them, was Opus Dei. This was the motivation for the following interview with Bishop Javier Echevarría.

THE PATH OF THE WORK

Father, why so many accusations against the Work? A secret society, powerful and rich, rigidly conservative. ...

Anyone who has visited a center of the Prelature or has met someone in the Work in his daily life is struck by quite a different reality, one of complete openness and normality. This is why we don’t worry about these things: the truth will always come out in the end, despite the gossip.

Opus Dei is a religious phenomenon, and yet the media analyze it with political, sociological and economic categories. Why is this?

Perhaps because, unfortunately,

some people give very little importance to other categories. If you exclude the transcendent dimension of life, your vision of life as a whole becomes distorted. If one sees only the peak of a mountain and overlooks the mass underlying it, he or she won't be able to understand the winds, or the climate, or the landscape.

It is true that we are a entity in the Church, but immersed in the world, which we love passionately. Therefore we don't limit ourselves to lamenting the fact that some people fail to understand how one can work in the world and bring it to God. Instead we try to help them see, sooner or later, that this is the best way to respect the realities of this world, and to be happy.

And How do you explain the gossip, coming even from 'some good Catholics' as Msgr. Escrivá called them, if I'm not mistaken?

Following the example that I saw in Blessed Josemaría, I don't waste time over gossip. I see that in the Church people show a great deal of affection for us and encourage our efforts. That phrase used by our founder, which he took from St. Teresa, refers to specific stages in our history when God allowed certain people to oppose us, thinking that they were thereby doing God a service; and there are still some who do so. But I defend the rights of those who don't understand us: I respect them and love them. Blessed Josemaría said that he would have gladly given his life to defend the freedom of those who disagreed with him. But he asked these

persons to at least respect us.

When Blessed Josemaría Escrivá died, Opus Dei had sixty thousand members. Now there are eighty thousand, from eighty countries, and in the past twenty years several hundred members have been ordained as priests. In today's Church, this 'trend', as they call it, is a rather rare one.

Let me exercise the right, of which we were just speaking, of not agreeing with you. There are many institutions in the Church that are full of vitality. Besides, we cannot divide up the united body of the Church in this way: there are no first and second class citizens in the Church. It is the whole Church, the boat of Peter, which sails united under the guidance of its pastors.

How do people come to Opus Dei?

In a natural way, by real friendship that springs up between people. Everything happens in a very normal way. When people get to know members of the Prelature, they notice that they have defects, like anyone else, but that they are trying to overcome them, and that they are striving to be good workers, exemplary fathers or mothers, loyal friends. With time and a deepening friendship, they come to see that these friends of theirs deal with God as a son or daughter with their father, and that this is the meaning of their life. And this awakens in them thoughts about the meaning of their own life.

Later comes the discovery of the

possibility of becoming part of Opus Dei. As has always been the case in the Church, this is a very personal step. It affects the direction of one's whole life and can only be decided face to face with God. In the lives of many men and women, when they discover Christ passing by in the lives of their friends, and in their own lives, it's as if the sun had just risen, a sun that fills their life with light and warmth, and that will never set.

You've often stressed that Opus Dei is not a movement, but "a spirituality for the laity." What is the difference?

Opus Dei is a personal Prelature, that is, a hierarchical institution of the universal Church, made up of priests and laity under the direction of a prelate who takes care of this portion of the people of God. Its pastoral purpose is to remind many Christians that God is seeking them out in their own place in the world, in their particular situation, and that it is there that they must try to practice the Christian virtues heroically. The faithful of Opus Dei are ordinary Catholics and ordinary citizens. To be one of the faithful of the Prelature does not change one's state in the Church and in society in any way. The people in Opus Dei do not form a group or act as a group. Scattered throughout the world, they receive Christian formation and then spread it.

You say that one must sanctify one's everyday work. I can understand this for a doctor, a writer, or a professor. But Blessed Josemaría spoke of "John the milkman," who every morning, before delivering his bottles of milk, entered a

church and said: "Lord, I offer you today's work." How does one sanctify the work of a milkman? Or what about a worker who is tightening bolts on a production line, or a mechanic?

And how could the Son of God, the Redeemer, work as a carpenter for so many years? Jesus did this, and he did it very well, as the Gospel clearly tells us. I am moved when I think of a God who spent years 'tightening bolts', as you say. Blessed Josemaría used to stress that, in God's sight, jobs can't be classified as important or unimportant: the divine value of a job is not measured by purely human standards. Its value depends on the love that we bring to it: our work will take on eternal value if we carry it out as children of God. Speaking in human terms, if the bolts are not properly tightened, the whole structure will eventually fall down.

Do the members of Opus Dei have the duty to be outstanding in their work, to be the best? Does one have to 'triumph' to be a saint?

Actually the opposite is the case: to become saints is the only triumph that really matters for eternal life. And since this means identifying oneself each day more and more with Christ—despite each one's weaknesses, always trying to struggle against them—we discover the great responsibility that we have toward the world. What happens around us matters a lot to us, and we want to contribute, as far as we can, to improving it. Human perfection is an important dimension of Christian work. But this doesn't mean being a

perfectionist or seeking success for the sake of success alone. It means working well, being generous, really putting oneself at the service of others. Success is not the ultimate criteria: what gives meaning to life is something very different.

Some members of Opus Dei have been implicated in the scandal of the tangentopolis. Have any measures been taken? How do you explain this fact which must have been a surprise to some members?

I don't think that anyone can himself to make a judgment on such recent and complex events, which transcend personal guilt to such an extent that they stand as an accusation against a whole social system. The truth will come out with calm and with time. And no one has the right to judge the conscience of another.

I feel certain of the good faith of each and every one of the faithful of the Prelature, because one cannot live in Opus Dei without a sincere desire for sanctity and justice. If one admits, although I don't concede this, that these implications, as you call them, are well founded, then we have the duty of helping to see that the personal conduct of each is oriented towards the judgment of God. For a person who is trying to sanctify his work, professional ethics is totally necessary.

Msgr. Giussani (the founder of Communion and Liberation) said on

one occasion to Vittorio Messori, who later repeated it in a book, that Communion and Liberation members are "the guerrillas, the irregulars, the rock-throwers. But those people in the Work, they have the tanks: they are well armored with rubber-coated treads. Nobody has heard of them yet, but they're here, believe me. And we will be talking about them more and more, you'll see."

I have fond memories of Msgr. Giussani and his friendship, especially with my predecessor. I pray to God that, all joking aside, the presence of Christians may become ever more evident in all environments. In this regard, I think that all Catholics could learn a lot from the apostolic zeal of Msgr. Giussani and the people in Communion and Liberation.

I have a question about an apparent contradiction. You say that, in giving such importance to the role of the laity in the Church, Opus Dei anticipated the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, to use a rather presumptuous expression, you are 'avant-garde'. On the other hand, those who truly consider themselves 'avant-garde' in the Catholic world accuse you of being traditionalist, too conservative or even behind the times. Who is right?

We don't claim to have anticipated the Second Vatican Council. We acknowledge that God inspired Blessed Josemaría to found Opus Dei, which is a reality willed by Him, and that one of the Council's clear teachings is the importance of the laity in the life of the Church. No

(*). This is the political scandal that rocked Italy the past few years, in which judges, politicians, etc. were convicted of bribery and the like (n.t.).

one can claim to have a monopoly on God's designs. Fifty years ago, Blessed Josemaría was considered a heretic by some who thought that he was too progressive. Today, others view us as reactionary. As I said before, these kinds of judgments only show that one needs to view the history of the Church from the proper perspective. The Church's advance is not a function of the tension between progressives and reactionaries. Its path is marked by tradition, by adherence to a divine mission given at a specific moment but valid forever. Tradition must be practiced in a living, increasingly deeper way.

How is your relationship with Pope John Paul II?

Filial, affectionate, full of trust. I saw the Pope recently and confirmed once again the full adherence of Opus Dei to his teachings and guidance as Pastor of the whole Church, successor of St. Peter, and the Vicar of Christ.

You lived alongside Josemaría Escrivá for twenty years. What kind of a person was he?

A priest of God, a great man, an affectionate father, and a very humble and joyful saint. All these qualities meant that being close to him was very enjoyable. His Christian joy was contagious. Among all that I owe him, I think my greatest debt is for the practical example he gave me. It was his example, even more than his words, that taught me how one could find God in everyday circumstances. I've had the enormous good fortune of liv-

ing with 'a spiritual giant' the founder of Opus Dei. Such good fortune is also a great responsibility for me.

Vittorio Messori, in his book "Opus Dei: Leadership and Vision in Today's Catholic Church" says that when he went to the central offices of Opus Dei, he was impressed by the solidity of the buildings, the marble floors, the columns and that the young man who accompanied him explained that this was "a matter of economy—all this has to last for centuries." Do you really believe that Opus Dei will always be present in the Church's future?

Yes I do, because when God is determined to bring something about, he is more faithful than we are; he is stronger than our weaknesses. What God wants will be. We have the certainty that God will never abandon men and women, if they do not abandon Him.

Il Sole-24 Ore May 24, 1997

On May 24, 1997, the newspaper "Il Sole-24 Ore" published the following article by Bishop Javier Echevarría entitled "Solidarity and the Value of Work."

SOLIDARITY AND THE VALUE OF WORK

Certain legal decisions have given rise to a renewed discussion in Italy of the question of the basic right