

FEMINISM AND THE WORLD OF WORK

Bishop Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei

In this interview the Bishop-Prelate of Opus Dei stresses that true feminism recognizes the differences between the male and female ways of being, while at the same time struggling to overcome unjust discrimination. The challenge for women is not simply to be the heart of a family, if they are married, but also to bring feminine qualities to bear in the workplace outside the home. He then discusses work in general, explaining the meaning of a phrase often repeated by Blessed Josemaría, the Founder of Opus Dei: 'to sanctify one's work.' It has no connection with 'perfectionism' and everything to do with being identified with Jesus Christ who came into this world as one like ourselves and took his place in society through his work in the carpentry shop in Nazareth.

Equal opportunity

1. Recently the Beijing Conference on women has been a dominant theme. What do you consider should be the role of women in society?

The role women are called to play in society and in the Church is as important as men's. I say 'called' to play because unfortunately the role of women is still seen as belonging primarily to the private sphere, with little involvement in shouldering the weight of public office. There are not so many women actively engaged in the world of politics, economics, or international affairs. It is still men who are the principal shapers of our society. However, changes in this field are being brought about very rapidly and in ways never previously witnessed.

In my opinion a woman's role is defined by two elements: who she is,

and what she freely decides to make of her life. A woman—just like a man—should be in a position to determine her own future, her path in life. To achieve this she should have the same opportunities as a man. In this way, she will retain her identity, remaining who she is, and not fall into the trap of thinking she will find her true identity by aping men or imitating their ways and gestures.

What women are calling for—sometimes in silence—are not speeches, promises, and words of praise, but rather deeds to back up the good intentions which we hear so much about. In a word, they are asking to stop being treated as a 'topic', a subject for international conferences, or as a set of awkward people to be given, by way of concession, a quota of power. A woman is simply another person, destined to work with man in

building up the society they both form part of, having the same rights and opportunities.

I give thanks to God when I see how women members of Opus Dei work in all sectors of society: in businesses and hospitals, in universities and schools, as judges, politicians, journalists, and artists. Others, while sharing the same professional pride and responsibility devote themselves exclusively to working in the home. Each one follows her own path, aware of her dignity, proud to be a woman, and meriting ever greater respect.

Sharing the load

2. In your opinion is there any incompatibility between the work of a woman outside the home and work in the home?

I do not see work in the home and work outside as being incompatible, although when the two are combined there is undoubtedly tension. Every woman in these circumstances feels the 'pull' of the home: the need to look after a sick child, to keep up with the thousand and one jobs that running a home involves, not to mention pregnancy and motherhood. Other times the 'pull' comes from the outside job, because the family needs the income, because employers demand results, or because there is great competition for jobs amid widespread unemployment. Tension arises from this two-way pull. To find solutions, we need to look again at the organization of society and of the workplace which are now often taken for granted.

I would like to add a observation which may seem to be evading the issue, but which I don't think really is.

Over the last few years there has been a lot of talk, and rightly so, about the need for a woman not to have her activity reduced only to domestic work, and about how good it is for a woman to 'go out' to work, if she wants to. I think that to round off that line of reasoning, we should also mention the duty of the man to 'get into' the home. The 'tension' between work in the home and work outside is something a husband should feel as well. Only if he shares this experience with his wife, and the two of them find solutions together, will he be able to acquire the sensitivity, the clear-thinking, the self-giving and the refinement which today's family requires.

My answer may seem evasive to some. But what I am asking is: which is the greater problem, the tension women suffer between working at home and working outside, or the fact that they have to suffer this tension alone, because men are shirking their family duties?

True feminism

3. You have spoken at some stage about true feminism. What do you mean by this?

In his *Letter to Women* in 1995, Pope John Paul II pointed out that feminism has been an overall positive development. It is true that there have been excesses which, in the long run, have proved harmful for women. Nevertheless, these can be regarded as side-effects. What really matters is that there have been many improvements as regards the condition of women in the world.

When I spoke of true feminism I was referring to everything that promotes

the cause of women. I think the path of feminism has sometimes got tangled up with others (such as the sexual revolution, or the fear of over-population) which have ended up diverting the movement for the liberation of women from its proper aims. That is why I think that true feminism still has a long way to go. There continue to be many situations that are degrading for women and need to be addressed, such as violence (in society at large and in the home), discrimination in education and cultural affairs or situations of domination and lack of respect.

At the heart of true feminism there obviously has to be a growing awareness of women's dignity. This is very different from other, usually aggressive, types of feminism, that claim that a person's sex is a purely physical thing, with no deeper human or social relevance.

The dignity of women is something women themselves have to become more aware of, so that they lose any sense of inferiority. And they need to have the courage to call things by their name, rebelling, for example, against the devastation caused by the shameful pornography industry, against the sorry, misguided claim that abortion is a right, and against divorce, which can only be described as a social disaster, quite apart from being an offence against God.

The dignity of women is something men must become more aware of too, so that they rid themselves of all false notions of superiority and all desires to dominate. It is true that feminism is fashioning a new type of woman, but deep down what it is doing is calling

men to look upon and treat women in a new way.

God, who is infinitely just and infinitely wise, created men and women with different missions, and gave both of them the same possibility of reaching holiness. It does not make sense to try to alter this arrangement, and we are witnessing what such an attempt leads to: a lack of mutual understanding and harmony, and a failure to understand humanity itself.

Women's role in the Church

4. The Pope's Letter to Women has really opened things up as regards women and indeed feminism. Nevertheless not long ago Cardinal Ratzinger repeated the Church's opposition to women priests emphasising the infallibility of that decision. Could you explain these two apparently contradictory positions? What would you say is the role of women in the Church?

With his Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and with other documents, John Paul II has 'demolished' the arguments of those who thought they could find support in Sacred Scripture for the theory of woman's inferiority to man. In one of those documents, the Pope described woman's mission in the world in very significant words: 'God has entrusted mankind to woman.' With her moral strength, her capacity to take care of each and every person, woman is the expert in humanity par excellence.

We could say something similar about the role of women in the Church: 'God has entrusted the Church to women.' We have frequently read and meditated on the Gospel passages

which tell of the Crucifixion and Death of our Lord. Jesus addressed some of his last words to his Mother, Holy Mary, when he said: 'Woman, behold your son,' pointing to St John. As we all know, in that Evangelist—that Apostle, that beloved disciple—the entire Church is represented. In that 'Woman', we find Mary and, in some way, every Catholic woman receiving from our Lord the task of looking after his Church.

To my mind this is not just a pious thought. In fact, the history of the Church has often been the history of the transmission of the faith 'from mothers to children'. The understanding of the faith, the mercy, faithfulness and good example of so many women has been like an unbroken chain—a vital ingredient of the living Tradition of the Church, which began with Mary and echoes the teachings of Christ to the present day.

The Church is adorned with the virtues of its women saints. Let us turn our eyes, for example, to the millions of women who, in all ages, environments and professions, have given and still give witness to Jesus Christ. Let us think of those who live consecrated lives, and I am especially happy to say this as a member of Opus Dei whose way is different from the vocation to the religious life. What other institution on earth can present a testimony to compare with the eight hundred thousand women religious who serve God and mankind, praying, looking after the sick, educating youth?

But our awareness of woman's dignity does not mean that women have to do the same things as men do and in

the same way, nor vice versa. I have already spoken about Tradition in the Church. And about service. Well, to see access to the priesthood as a way of reaching the higher echelons of power is a mistaken way of looking at things in the Church. These realities need to be seen with eyes of faith. That way it becomes easier to understand that not everything which is different has a lesser or greater dignity.

And let me add that it is not John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger who have taken up these positions. The Pope and the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have reminded us what is the will of Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church. I am grateful to them, as I am sure millions and millions of other people are, for their firmness in stating what belongs to the patrimony of the faith, even though at times such a stand may prove uncomfortable.

Sanctifying work

5. What does Blessed Josemaría mean by his maxim 'to sanctify work'? While not wanting to look down on any sphere of activity, it is difficult to imagine how some forms of work which are less highly regarded by society can be sanctified, for instance, domestic work.

If we underestimate service to others we are falling into a way of thinking which is neither very human nor very Christian. Was it not Christ himself who told us that he had come 'not to be served but to serve' (Mt 20:28)? Man finds himself, he becomes himself, when he gives himself. To detect the love that lies behind a

small act of service is a sign of a deep wisdom.

Moreover, when service is carried out in the context of a family, as 'domestic' work, its value multiplies. The family and the home are not a tedious set of trifling material tasks. The home and the family, which have their starting point in a genuine love between a woman and a man, are the first school of life, the place where each person learns how to behave: a person who knows how to live in his family will know how to live in society. And woman is as it were the keystone of the family: thanks to her—and I am not engaging in flattery—everything hangs together.

It is in the family where our more spiritual aptitudes develop: our relationships with God, dialogue with and respect for others, understanding, and the virtues in general. The family is also the place where we acquire our most basic habits. Family atmosphere, affectionate behaviour, cleanliness and order, sharing a table and so on, are all aspects which make up the marvellous human quality of hospitality and create a suitable environment in which to bring up the coming generations. Father, mother, children, the girl who helps in the home, grand-parents: each and every one helps to build up the family atmosphere. That is why I am convinced that any one who has grasped the value of the family, will recognize that domestic workers have a most important role to play.

I might also mention that the Church is 'the family of the children of God'. And that the Pope, who is the head of the Church on earth, claims as a title of

honour that of being 'the servant of the servants of God'.

Even though it might sound a little dramatic, I think those who look down on the work of domestic workers are somewhat snobbish.

You may have heard of the University of Navarre, an apostolic undertaking of our Prelature, and its University Hospital. I remember that Blessed Josemaría liked to point out that the prestige of the Clinic is due both to the eminent doctors who work there, and to the men and women who work to keep it clean, prepare the food, and serve the material needs of patients. Together with the doctors and nurses, they have succeeded in making the patients see, and I would even say, actually feel what a great thing it is to have 'the task of curing', 'the art of caring'.

Blessed Josemaría pointed this out to us because he had a profound sense of justice (he would rebel against injustice wherever he encountered it) and not because he was looking for human efficiency. Now experts in work efficiency in the more developed countries are coming to the same conclusions: genuine quality of life depends on such things, which are apparently trivial, but they are the things that make this world of ours a place worth living in.

Enhancing the Gospel

6. *When Opus Dei preaches perfectionism in daily work in material matters, in the outward form, couldn't this distort the meaning of the Gospel or on the contrary does it strengthen it?*

'Perfectionism', that is, seeking perfection in work as an end in itself, is

undoubtedly an impoverishment of the meaning of the Gospel. Such 'perfectionism' is a defect, a limitation. In the spirit of Opus Dei, work is not our final goal, nor is material perfection. Our final goal is God, and we see work as a way that leads us to God, provided it is honest work, done as a service to others, and carried out in union with Jesus Christ who, I repeat, came to serve and, in his plan of redemption, undertook to do human work.

What do we mean when we say we must work properly, given that we don't mean becoming perfectionists? Well, men or women working professionally make use of their intelligence, their will, and their creativity. Many virtues develop through work, virtues such as justice, charity, prudence, a spirit of service, and so on. Through work, a person shapes his or her character and is integrated into society. These tasks modify and transform the created world, and are the driving force behind progress. God has so arranged things that at the very heart of that process, he himself is present and has a principal place: God the Creator who, out of nothing, made this world in which we carry out our activities; God the Redeemer who wished to be a worker, like us; God the Sanctifier who, with his grace, prompts us to raise all our actions to the supernatural level. While we work, we raise our eyes to God, as a son or daughter looks up to his or her father, and so God becomes present in a new way in everything we do.

One message for all

7. If you don't mind my keeping to the economic tack, how is it possible that

an institution of the Church can propose the same way of holiness to a banker as to a farm worker?

From the word go, the Gospel spread to people of all social and cultural backgrounds, without discrimination. To discriminate is unchristian. As I said at the beginning, here too Opus Dei is no exception in the Church. Besides, the way we offer is the same precisely because it consists in helping each one to sanctify his work and the other ordinary things in his life. If you look at Christ you find he made friends with all kinds of people, rich and poor, healthy and sick, old and young, and he called all of them to become saints and to spread the Gospel.

The Church's social teaching

8. The Work gives undeniable importance to economics. When the regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed the liberal system won. Now, liberal economics stresses private initiative and is criticized for opening the door to individualism which is at the heart of liberalism. Which do you think is to correct path, bearing in mind that there is empirical proof that without the ingredient of private initiative economic development is slow or even nil?

I would not be so sure that liberalism has conquered communism. Rather than the result of a battle between two contestants, or a surrender in the face of the merits of the other side, the fall of the Berlin Wall—apart from the fundamental fact of the prayer of many people—could be seen as the crum-

bling of a system which in itself had broken down on the inside.

Be that as it may, Opus Dei does not have any social doctrine of its own, much less an economic theory. In this sense, corporatively, we neither give importance to, nor take it away from, economics. As Catholics, we know that it is necessary to overcome a false opposition erected between freedom and social justice. In human activity in general, and in economic activity in particular, it is wrong to defend either a freedom which is seen only as opposed to solidarity, or a justice which seeks to impose itself by curtailing personal freedom. The negative consequences of attempting such courses are evident: it was the hunger for freedom—rather than the liberal economic system—which brought the Wall down, and it is the yearning for justice—rather than the collectivist system—which questions the value of liberalism.

And forgive me if I go back to something obvious. This linking up of freedom and justice is at the heart of the Church's social teaching; it is not a private theory of Opus Dei.

Opus Dei and Eastern Europe

9. Is it true that the Work has a significant presence in the countries of Eastern Europe. In what countries are you working and with what results?

Opus Dei is present in some countries of Eastern Europe. This goes back to 1989. In Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania there are Centres of the Prelature, and in other countries a lot of people have come to know about the Work. For example, recently some writings of

Blessed Josemaría have been published in Russian. In those lands we are learning a lot from the Catholics and non-Catholics, who have suffered all those years of enforced isolation, and sometimes persecution and martyrdom. God alone knows the immense value of their meritorious deeds.

A feature of the spirit of Opus Dei is precisely the sanctification of work. For many it has been a marvellous discovery, which helps give meaning to a central aspect of their lives that had at times been little valued. Apostolic work is going ahead in all those countries and we hope to be able to start in others, to which we are being called both by the bishops and by other members of the Catholic faithful and Co-operators of the Work, including persons who are not Catholics.

The fall of the Berlin Wall

10. The Berlin Wall has fallen and the ideologies went behind it into crisis; nevertheless further ghosts—nationalism, consumerism, integrism, abject poverty—began in a forceful way to fill the gap left by these ideologies. How do you see the future of society and of the Church?

Your words remind me of a recent message of the Pope to the United Nations, when he invited us not to be afraid of the future, to trust that men and women—made in God's image—are possessed of sufficient wisdom and virtue not to give up hope. With God's grace we can together build a new civilization, built in accordance with the dignity of persons, where the universal brotherhood of the sons of God may truly come to be.