

THE POWER OF OPUS DEI

Mgr Javier Echevarría

The following is a translation of an interview with Bishop Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, published in the Italian newspaper, L'Avvenire, January 6, 1995.

What is most striking about his outlook is its optimism, both in the new countries where Opus Dei is starting his apostolic work, and in accepting contemporary society as it is, with its 'lights' and 'shadows', knowing that it is in this environment that Opus Dei members, and all Christians, are called to serve God.

On January 6 Pope John Paul II will confer episcopal ordination on you. How are you getting ready for this? How will this event affect Opus Dei?

Since my nomination I have been preparing myself spiritually. I have turned to the Holy Spirit for help, and asked for prayers from those around me, and through them, from other friends and acquaintances. Aware that the fullness of the priesthood is a gift of God, I shall receive episcopal ordination in a spirit of service. As a member of the episcopal college, I am indeed called to shoulder responsibility for Opus Dei, but also for the whole Church. Ever since the Holy Father appointed me I have been asking God for the graces I will need to do that.

Furthermore, I want to add that the Prelature of Opus Dei is a hierarchical institution of the Catholic Church whose mission is to transmit among Christians an awareness of the call to personal holiness in their own state in life. I was elected Prelate in April of

last year. As such, my duty is to direct and guide the Prelature's development. In the words of the Apostolic Constitution, *Ut sit*, which erected Opus Dei as a personal Prelature, the Prelate is its 'proper Ordinary', by virtue of his election and subsequent appointment by the Pope.

Because of Opus Dei's specific mission it is fitting that its Prelate be a bishop. Episcopal ordination helps to place the Work more firmly in the universal communion of the Catholic Church.

You have been entrusted with the task of leading Opus Dei toward the Third Millennium. What went through your mind when you were elected Prelate?

When I was appointed Prelate of Opus Dei, I had before my eyes and in my heart the living image of my predecessor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who had died a few weeks earlier and whom I had seen exhaust himself in a very faithful, quiet, humble, and cheer-

ful service over the course of many decades, first as an assistant to Blessed Josemaría, and afterwards as his first successor at the head of Opus Dei.

Two thoughts came to mind upon learning of my appointment as Prelate. First, the qualities I would need—I'm the successor of two real spiritual giants. Second, that this appointment was an expression of God's will and that, therefore, I could be sure of not lacking the spiritual help I needed. In a word, I have left myself in God's hands.

In this same spirit, I am preparing for the year 2000, which John Paul II has presented in such a thought-provoking and engaging manner. No one knows what the future holds, but one thing is certain: the new historical period we are entering will demand great creativity. The problems of humanity are increasingly universal and interdependent. Faith in Christ and the recognition of his victory over sin and death are, in this respect, very valuable incentives. What the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei try to achieve—each one on his or her own responsibility—is to spread the faith among people of every class and sector of society. We look upon this period of history optimistically, because God has placed it in our hands and, right now, with joy in our hearts, we are called to make all our talents bear fruit. In the final analysis, it is where God and men, our brothers and sisters, await us.

What is the situation of Opus Dei today?

As a portion of the People of God, Opus Dei is made up of about 75,000

lay people, men and women, and 1,500 priests, who live and work in all sectors of society, shoulder to shoulder with so many other people, and strive to improve a little each day, to be true and faithful Christians and to bring Christ to the world around them. We don't see ourselves as supermen or women. We are as fallible as everybody else, but also as able to fall madly in love with God, 'in the middle of the street', as Blessed Josemaría put it.

Certainly, our apostolate is not free of difficulties. Nonetheless, in contemporary society, the 'lights' are more abundant than the 'shadows', even in places where there are particularly acute difficulties. Let me give you an example. In March of last year we made a trip with Bishop del Portillo to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, the small number of faithful of the Prelature who live there gave us a great welcome. They moved to Israel a little over a year ago to work at their own jobs and, at the same time, to begin Opus Dei's activities in the Holy Land. It was consoling to see how, in some of their projects, Christians, Jews and Muslims are working together in a spirit of harmony. That's the Christian's ideal, and therefore also ours in Opus Dei.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Church has begun promoting and expanding its activities not only in Eastern Europe, but also in regions (Africa and the Middle East) where the division into two blocks had made evangelization practically impossible. What is Opus Dei doing in this area?

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This expansion is natural, since where freedom flourishes the fundamental questions about man become live issues. The Catholic Church comes to this moment well prepared, not only because of the role played by the Pope in bringing down the Wall (history will be the judge of that) but also on account of the attention given by the Magisterium to the problems of the contemporary world for such a long time.

As far as Opus Dei is concerned, during these years we've begun apostolic activities in many nations of Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Lithuania. We'll go to other countries, such as Cuba and Angola, as soon as possible. A few months ago we began our apostolates in the sub-continent of India. And in Africa, we have been working in five countries for quite some time now. As the Founder of Opus Dei taught us, apostolic work always begins by trying to imitate the virtues of the people of the countries where we start. We cannot forget all they've had to suffer to support all of us in the Church.

Opus Dei anticipated the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in many respects. It is enough to call to mind the Council's teaching on the laity or on ecumenism. Nevertheless, the cliché 'traditionalism', in the worst sense of the term, continues to be part of the 'black legend' surrounding Opus Dei. What do you say to this?

The word 'traditionalist' is often used with political overtones, and thus unjustly distorts the truth. Many other Church bodies have not escaped this

accusation either. But time helps to clarify things. A few years ago it was said that Opus Dei was too innovative, because it opened its doors to non-Catholics, pagans and even atheists. Mgr Escrivá laughed at the thought, because he knew Opus Dei to be neither traditionalist nor progressivist. The only thing it strives for is the holiness of people living amid the human endeavours of our time; and it does so through the strength of the Gospel which is, and always will be, up-to-date.

Insofar as Opus Dei is a part of the Church, it is traditional but not traditionalist. It is based on one Word, that of Christ—the Gospel, which reaches us through tradition and history. Moreover, Opus Dei loves today's world, and launches itself daringly into the future, since what we should sanctify is the present, and what we should build is the future.

Our Popes have always held Opus Dei in high esteem. For its part, Opus Dei has shown fidelity to the Vicar of Christ at all times. This fidelity has been so pure, in fact, that some, in perhaps a simplistic but eloquent fashion, have defined Opus Dei as 'the Pope's modern-day army'. Do you believe this is a correct image?

No, it is not. The Pope's army is the whole Church, inasmuch as all Christians are equally responsible for her mission, as the Second Vatican Council proclaimed. Besides, great caution is required with metaphors drawn from military life. One can compare the Church to an army, but it's essential to specify that it's an army committed to a war 'of peace and joy', in keeping

with an expression of Blessed Josemaría. The only weapons the Church has are truth and love. The faithful of the Prelature try to be at the service of this truth and love, in complete loyalty to the Vicar of Christ and in union with the whole Church.

The word 'powerful' is often applied to Opus Dei. The enormous gathering of people in St Peter's Square for the beatification of your Founder, and more recently, the mobilization of people in Rome for the International Conference on the Family, have been interpreted as a 'demonstration of power'. What is Opus Dei's real 'power'?

From the tone of your question, I deduce that you already know the answer. I can assure you that Opus Dei's true power lies in prayer. The crowd which gathered together in St Peter's Square to attend the beatification of Josemaría Escrivá was not a mass 'mobilization'. All those people came because of their faith: they wanted to pray with the Pope, and give thanks to God for the gift of a holy man, whose example was a great help to millions of people in their daily lives.

This is Opus Dei's only power: prayer and daily work turned into prayer by countless ordinary Christians. This power continues to contribute to the universal treasury of prayer in the Church.

Some people do highlight the fact that a few members of Opus Dei are rich or influential. More numerous, though much less visible, are the members who are poor and even destitute—a cross-section of the Prelature's faithful reflects the social strata to be

found in the Church and in society. Opus Dei's members are very ordinary people; some are poor; most have jobs but, unfortunately, nowadays, many are unemployed. All are asked to be generous and detached from earthly goods in a Christian way, and to use their initiative in temporal matters. How would it be possible, otherwise, for them to sanctify themselves in the midst of the world?

You were at the Founder of Opus Dei's side for a long time. How do you remember him?

As a great priest and a great saint. And also as a man whom I greatly admired and appreciated. The reason for this lies in his faith and holiness, even more than in his charm, intelligence or deep affection for others. This is what transformed my life, what taught me, in a practical way, the meaning of loving Jesus and loving all souls in him, without exceptions of any kind.

Blessed Josemaría was conscious of being the Founder and of having an enormous mission to carry out, but he was never cold or distant. Indeed he was the first to pay attention to the small everyday details of affection and courtesy—which are the touchstone of love—in treating people well, in work and in prayer.

Two of his characteristic attitudes stand out in a special way: firstly, he was very frank and friendly; he liked to call things by their name, and wanted people to come straight to the point with him; secondly, he was quick to correct himself and to apologize when he realized he was mistaken. In

a man of his stature this was quite striking.

What would Josemaría Escrivá say to you today?

It's not what he *would* say, but what he *does* say every day, through his example and spiritual legacy. He says one thing: fidelity, loving fidelity. To love Christ, and thus, to be faithful to the mission received from God. Blessed Josemaría never considered Opus Dei as his own. He always said he would have liked to ask to join the Work as just any other member, and serve God and neighbour with a total,

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unassuming and hidden dedication. Much less can I consider Opus Dei as my own. I will have to render to God an account for the inheritance I have received. It is enough to look around to see that there's a lot to be done. There resound in my soul the words of our Founder, words which summarize, as a plan for life, our mission as Christians on earth: 'To know Jesus Christ, to make him known, and to bring him everywhere.' This is the plan I would like to follow, with the help of our Lady.