
A WITNESS OF LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

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June 26, 1985 marked the tenth anniversary of the departure for his definitive homeland of the Founder of Opus Dei, Monsignor Josemaria Escriva. For us, time is a measure in which the virtues of our personalities are moulded, and the light and shade in our characters become clear. But for saints, time does not exist; eternity lifts up and gives fulness to all their earthly existence. These lines of mine are a brief summary of that sense of Church which filled the saintly soul of Monsignor Escriva.

We are old like the gospel, and as new as the gospel, the Founder of the Work used to say. That short sentence summarises my own experience, having lived close to the Church's first personal Prelature. The novelty of the message was dazzling, and it continues to sparkle brightly with a deep theological and pastoral content in the life of the Church. At the same time, the steadiness and maturity of the Prelature acts as a firm support, at a time of great changes, for millions of people who find in the shade of this noble and well established oaktree the energies they need to revitalise the divine paths of the earth.

When *Lumen Gentium* pointed out that 'it is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk in life are called to the fulness of Christian life and the perfection of love', it was stating a great reality which had been preached by the Founder of Opus Dei since 1928. I myself heard him say it in Lima, when I had the great joy, perhaps one of the greatest joys of my life, of meeting him.

The Council also reminded us in the Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* that 'in fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well'. In my close friendship with members of Opus Dei I have always experienced this sense of apostolic responsibility which urges them to be deeply involved in the sanctification of temporal realities. They carry out this task through their work, their duties, their family, their colleagues, their friends. This marvellous family of Opus Dei was born in the 20th century as a preparation offered to us by God as we face the 21st. Here we find men and women from all social backgrounds, of very different ages, and from more than 87 countries, who serve

the Church as the Church wishes to be served.

But in giving testimony, I should tell the whole story. I first heard talk of this Work of God with some suspicion and a certain curiosity. I could have retained that attitude and passed it on to others. But, thank God, the integrity imbued in me as a child at home led me to find out more for myself. I came closer, I got the facts, I read the literature and confronted the issues, and I must now profess clearly that I found it to be truly a Work of God. This spirit, and the members who incarnate it, are worthy of the gospel phrase 'by their fruits you shall know them'. In justice, I have to make that clarification. There are still some who, carried away by the 'eye wash' of totalitarian prejudice, are unable to respect the plurality and theological richness of the Gospel. I would advise them to do what I did.

On the eve of the 5th Centenary of the beginning of the evangelisation of South America, from the centre of the Inca Empire, the imperial city of Cuzco, I, as its Archbishop, must acknowledge that in this period of the new evangelisation inaugurated by Pope John Paul II on his recent visit to Peru, the personal Prelature of Opus Dei takes its place, with all its evangelical energy, at the forefront of the dynamism of our Church.

Opus Dei is made for all times because it is fully in tune with the times. It is made for all social classes because among its members are people of all social backgrounds. It is made for every state in life because single people and married people and priests all belong to it. This is no empty praise. The response to great evils has to be great good, and great responsibilities.

Finally, and here I have greater experience. I am a neighbour to the dioceses of Abancay and Huancavelica; in the first of these I spent my first years as a bishop. I have a close friendship with many priests of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, the Association of priests intrinsically united to the personal Prelature of Opus Dei. I am convinced that the flourishing of priestly vocations in Peru comes from the good work of those priests, who either perched on the heights of our Andes mountains sheltering on cold ridges, or in many towns along the coast and sierras, encouraged by the spirit of Monsignor Escriva in this Priestly Society, work to promote social and human well-being and to foster priestly vocations, with great generosity. This work is indeed a clear option for the poorest, though not an exclusive or excluding one. Their silent and discreet work is carried out far away, and so is not widely known. But I certainly know, see, and admire it, and proclaim it in honour of their

POSITION PAPER 145

Founder. They are faithful sons of a great Father.

Let me not finish without a brief dedication to my friend, the present Prelate, Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo. At the request of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, he had a most important part to play in the Second Vatican Council. More recently, John Paul II has called on him to continue to help in many affairs of the Church. An article in praise of the Founder should not finish without acknowledging that one of his greatest achievements was to recognise and guide the qualities of his son and now his successor, Monsignor del Portillo.

Monsignor del Portillo himself, referring to the founder, said 'he offered his entire life for the Spouse of Christ, for his Vicar on Earth, for all men.' Time will bear witness. His process of beatification is well advanced. The Servant of God is in heaven, and, here on earth, we contemplate and follow the panorama which his saintly soul opened for us as we seek holiness in everyday life.