

THE TRUE FACE OF OPUS DEI

Most Rev Dr Javier Echevarría

On July 29, 2007, Włodzimierz Redzioch interviewed Opus Dei's Prelate, Bishop Javier Echevarría, for a Polish weekly newspaper. They discussed Opus Dei's structure and spirit, its mild response to *The Da Vinci Code*, and plans for its upcoming 80th anniversary.

Włodzimierz Redzioch: Your Excellency, you are the head of an organization of the Catholic Church which has captured the attention of the media throughout the world. Unfortunately, as a rule they show a distorted picture of the organization. Could you tell us what Opus Dei is?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: St Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer often repeated that Opus Dei is "God's way for Christians who want to live as true Christians." The aim of Opus Dei members is not to do spectacular things. They are ordinary Christians who try to seek sanctity in their daily lives. Since the Prelature, a Church institution, consists of priests and laymen, that is, ordinary people, we feel comfortable in the world, among people, at work, in our families... I will say even more: not only do we feel at ease in the world but we love the world, we love daily life with its thousands of obligations and tasks. One cannot be a Christian only in church, but one must be a Christian in the ordinary and prosaic affairs of daily life. One should lead a life of faith in God, of hope and love for all people – as the first Christians did – and then every day becomes a holyday. This idea of the "greatness" of daily life is the core of St Josemaría's message, an ideal that, thanks to God, is

shared by many people, including those who do not belong to Opus Dei.

Concerning the media's interest in the Prelature, I think that it results from the fact that there are so many persons who, through Opus Dei, are passionate about seeking a transcendent meaning in the reality in which we live. In a word, we are dealing with something that still 'draws' people to Christianity, as Benedict XVI has stressed on various occasions.

W. Redzioch: Opus Dei is what is known as a personal prelature. We know well what religious congregations or institutes of consecrated life are, but most Catholics have no idea what "personal prelature" means. Could you explain this term to us?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: A personal prelature is different from a religious congregation and from an institute of consecrated life. It is a structure of the Catholic Church to which both priests and laity can belong and whose head is a prelate...

W. Redzioch: So we can say that this structure is similar to the structure of a diocese with believers all over the world...

Bishop Javier Echevarría: Not really, because a prelature does not pretend to be a particular or local Church. A

much better comparison would be to a military ordinariate.

W. Redziach: You worked closely with the Founder of Opus Dei for many years. What are your recollections of St. Josemaría?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: Of course I have very many recollections, but what most struck me about St Josemaría was his joy, his faithfulness to the Church and his love for people. Whenever I have to do something, I consider what St Josemaría would do in a given situation. He was able to create out of nothing this marvellous reality within the Church, extended throughout the world, which is Opus Dei today – not only the lay persons and priests who belong to the Prelature, but also the millions of persons who cooperate with it. Of course, the Prelature wouldn't exist without the action of God's grace, but neither would it be possible without the response of one person – St Josemaría – to God's call.

W. Redziach: St Josemaría collected his spiritual maxims in a book entitled The Way, which is a true spiritual guide for members of Opus Dei. How can one describe your spirituality?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: One important aspect of daily life, which I mentioned a moment ago, is undoubtedly one's work. Besides encouraging regular prayer and a profound sacramental life, the message of Opus Dei focuses on work, which, if done conscientiously and seen as an offering to God and a service to one's neighbour, can become a means of sanctification and

an encounter with Christ. In the book which you mentioned, St Josemaría writes: "For a modern apostle, an hour of study is an hour of prayer."

Another aspect of the spirituality of Opus Dei is the awareness of the divine filiation of every Christian. God is a Father, our Father, and this fact, if we fully understand it, changes everything radically; it allows us to face all the challenges of daily life in a positive way. I should also mention freedom, which in St Josemaría's message plays a central role and is presented as a stimulus to a Christian commitment at the same time as it is inseparable from personal responsibility.

W. Redziach: What were the relationships between Popes John XXII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Opus Dei?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: The relationships between Opus Dei and the above-mentioned Popes were close and deep. Naturally, we should also mention Pius XII, John Paul I and Benedict XVI. As for John Paul II, I can say that he was like a father to Opus Dei. He was the Pope who established Opus Dei as a personal prelature in 1982, after years of preparation, beginning at the time of the Second Vatican Council and carried on simultaneously with the preparation of the new Code of Canon Law. It was also John Paul II who canonized St Josemaría in 2002, calling him "the saint of daily life". One particular gesture of John Paul II made a deep impression on me: at the death of my predecessor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, he came person-

ally to the church of the Prelature to pray before the remains of the deceased. Earlier, in 1984, John Paul II had given Don Alvaro a copy of the image of Our Lady of Czestochowa. Today this image occupies a place of honour in the curia of the Prelature in Rome. Every time I see the icon I feel united with all Catholics in Poland. It also reminds me of my numerous pilgrimages to Czestochowa. The first one was with Bishop del Portillo in 1979 and the last one I made, as the prelate of Opus Dei, was on the feast of Our Lady of Jasna Gora, August 26, 2005. I am convinced that John Paul II has given a lot to the world and to the Church. Without any doubt, he gave a lot to Opus Dei, thanks to his spiritual fatherhood.

W. Redzioch: Many people were surprised that the Prelature's response to the slanders contained in Dan Brown's book, while unequivocal, was also tempered: you did not initiate a lawsuit against him or seek any compensation. Why did the Prelature react in this way?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: I would like to point out that the most unfortunate aspect of Brown's book is not what he says about Opus Dei but the falsified image of Christ and his Church that he presents to his readers. Opus Dei, which is a part of the Church, is a young, vibrant and beautiful reality. A writer's inventions can obscure this beauty, and this is unfortunate. However, we realize that the beauty of the Church, which includes Opus Dei, is

revealed in its fullness when we show the love of Christ and do not yield to hurt feelings. In this perspective love is the best way to present the figure of Jesus Christ and the reality of the Church. This is why our reaction, which was decisive but also courteous, was a manifestation of our sense of responsibility. Let us not forget that love is Christ's commandment and in fact his most important commandment.

I'll repeat once again: what is most painful about *The Da Vinci Code* is the way in which the author attempts to trivialize the Person of Christ. It is good to see that Pope Benedict XVI's new book has placed the historical, human and divine reality, of Jesus Christ at the centre of cultural dialogue. This is a wonderful occasion for Christians and all people to get to know Jesus and deepen their relationship with the Son of God who became man.

W. Redzioch: The 80th anniversary of Opus Dei falls next year. How are you preparing for this event?

Bishop Javier Echevarría: First of all, each of us is preparing for it through a personal conversion. We must ask ourselves before God: How are we serving the Church, the Pope and others? As far as the Prelature is concerned it will be an opportunity to explain what Opus Dei is. Just now, as our 80th anniversary Opus Dei draws near, Opus Dei is beginning its work in Russia, and soon we will also be present in Romania.