

Rome (October 30, 1997)

Address presented at the symposium in memory of Cardinal Höffner, organized by the Pontifical Atheneum of the Holy Cross.

Reverend Fathers, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

St. Thomas Aquinas' definition of the virtue of friendship is well known. "Not every love has the character of friendship, but only a love that includes good will, that is to say, when we love someone in such a way that we desire the good for him."¹ The good that Joseph Cardinal Höffner and Blessed Josemaría Escrivá shared, and that made possible a deep friendship between them, was a passionate love for Christ and his Mystical Body. Therefore they also loved and defended the Catholic faith received from and transmitted by the Church in an unbroken line from the time of the apostles, under the guidance of the magisterium.

It is with great joy that I speak in this commemorative act, sponsored by the Pontifical Atheneum of the Holy Cross, in honor of the late Archbishop of Cologne on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his death. I am moved in the first place by feelings of gratitude toward one who was a most worthy cardinal of the Roman Church, an eminent professor and student of theology and the social

sciences, and above all a pastor of souls.

In addition, as Prelate of this portion of the People of God that is Opus Dei, I feel a particular debt of gratitude to Cardinal Höffner, because he always blessed and supported, with a true Catholic spirit, the apostolic work of the Prelature's faithful in his diocese. He thus followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, the unforgettable Cardinal Frings, who back in the 1950s granted the *venia* for Opus Dei's first centers in Cologne.

These sentiments were shared by my predecessor at the head of Opus Dei, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, who, like Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, was a profoundly grateful man. I remember his sadness on hearing the news of the death of Cardinal Höffner, to whom he was united by bonds of friendship and mutual esteem, and his immediate decision to attend the solemn funeral in the Cathedral of Cologne on October 24, 1987. He did so despite the fact that he was then closely involved in the work of the Seventh Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to which he had been appointed by the Pope.

The topic suggested to me for this symposium is a very rich one. I have been asked to talk about how the friendship that united Joseph Cardinal Höffner and Blessed Josemaría Escrivá bore fruit in service to the Church. I would go even further and say that their friendship was forged precisely by the love they shared for

1. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

the Spouse of Christ. For true friendship, which Sacred Scripture praises so highly,² only springs up among those who share the same goods. "A strong friendship," explains St. Leo the Great, "is possible only among those united by like habits."³

Right from their first meeting in 1971, the Archbishop of Cologne and the founder of Opus Dei found their mutual esteem and shared values quickly transformed into a sincere friendship. Specific historical events were partly the cause. These were the years immediately following the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. It was a time of great hope for renewal in the Church, from which so much fruit was expected. But there was also the danger that the wave of secularization—then so prevalent in civil society—could affect the Church if these reforms were not carried through with supernatural prudence, in filial union to the Roman Pontiff. The winds of renewal stirred up by the Holy Spirit ran the danger of being transformed into a storm, hampering the great work, begun by Pope Paul VI in living continuity with the Church's tradition, of implementing the Second Vatican Council.

It was easy back then to get carried away by a feeling of euphoria, fueled by a strong campaign of public opinion, and demand a radical rupture with the past. The Pope denounced this danger in many public statements, but his words were not always heeded. Only those with farsighted vision, sharpened by their

love for the Church, were able to discern and combat the symptoms of the crisis breaking over the Church with special force in the decade of the seventies. Among these were Joseph Cardinal Höffner and Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, whose shared concern deepened the friendship between them.

Their first meeting, to which I referred above, took place in October 1971. The Third Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was then being held in Rome. The two main topics on the agenda were "The Priestly Ministry" and "Justice in the World." These were burning questions widely debated at the time, when strong secularist pressures were trying to distort the image of the priest and his mission in the world. Especially in dispute were the supernatural character of the priesthood and priestly celibacy. Few saw clearly the danger involved in concessions on points that were so crucial for the life and ministry of priests.

Under these circumstances, Cardinal Höffner and Blessed Josemaría found themselves united by common bonds: their fidelity to Catholic doctrine, their close union with the See of Peter, their clear perception that the doctrine of the Church provided the solutions to social problems most in keeping with man's dignity without falling prey to materialistic ideologies. There was a friendship that fulfilled St. John Chrysostom's moving words: "A love that is based on Christ is firm, unbreakable and indestruc-

2. Cf. *Sir* 6.

3. ST. LEO THE GREAT, *Homily* 12, 1.

tible. Nothing is able to undermine it: neither calumnies, nor dangers, nor even death itself.”⁴

In 1971 Cardinal Höffner was invited to give a talk in the auditorium of the Residenza Universitaria Internazionale, an apostolic work run by faithful of Opus Dei in Rome. His talk was to be part of a conference being held there on “The Crisis of a Permissive Society.” Also giving lectures at this conference were Professor Jerome Lejeune, Professor of Genetics at the University of Paris, and Professor Augusto del Noce, Professor of the History of Political Thought at the University of Rome. Cardinal Höffner spoke on “The Priest in a Permissive Society.” Msgr. Escrivá invited him to lunch afterward at the central offices of Opus Dei, and in the course of their extended conversation they realized how much their views coincided regarding the great issues facing the Church.

Permit me to add a personal recollection from that first meeting. On finishing lunch, Blessed Josemaría and his guest made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the oratory of the General Council of Opus Dei. After those brief moments of Eucharistic adoration, he drew his guest’s attention to some windows representing various scenes from the New Testament and some bas-reliefs with angels. Then he pointed to the inscription engraved on the lintel above the door, which is taken from the Acts of the Apostles: *omnes perseverantes unanimiter in oratione* (cf. Acts 1:14). And he said: “Your emi-

nence, this is the secret and power of Opus Dei: the prayers of everyone.” Cardinal Höffner agreed, convinced of its truth.

Years later, the Cardinal of Cologne kept a clear recollection of that first meeting, as he recalled in the letter sent to the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Germany on the occasion of the founder’s death. “I was personally acquainted with the one who has now gone to join our Lord,” he wrote on July 3, 1975. “From the first moment I met him, I admired his affectionate, natural, warm and cheerful manner, profoundly based on love for Christ. In my conversations with him, I felt the security of being with a man whose life was grounded on faith, and who loved Christ and his Church with all his heart. Our conversation had only one theme: Christ and the mission to spread his Good News, drawing souls closer to his Church. In the face of growing religious uncertainty in recent years, your founder strengthened countless persons in the faith. His filial love for the Church and the Holy Father were passed on to others.”

There also comes to mind the first time, after Msgr. Escrivá went to heaven, that Cardinal Höffner returned to the site of their first conversation. He told us that he had given thanks to God for his friendship with the founder of Opus Dei, and that his death had caused him deep sadness. They had a standing agreement that whenever they could spend some time together they would continue speaking about their concerns

4. ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Matthæum Homiliæ*, 60, 3.

and possible solutions to the problems confronting the Church. He added that he realized that Msgr. Escrivá wanted to talk to him about all the concerns that weighed on his heart, and that he himself was always eager to continue these conversations, since they did him so much good as a shepherd of souls. "And now," Cardinal Höffner concluded, "I ask him to continue helping me from heaven."

As for Blessed Josemaría, he found in the Cardinal from Cologne a deeply Christian soul, firmly in love with Christ and his Church. I heard him say on more than one occasion that Cardinal Höffner's friendship, his union with the Pope and strong faith, were for him an injection of supernatural optimism in the midst of the upheaval in the Church back in the 70's. Allow me to read a few paragraphs from a letter that Blessed Josemaría, as Chancellor of the University of Navarra, addressed on March 4, 1974, to Cardinal Höffner, as President of the German Bishops' Conference. He was hoping to confer a doctorate *honoris causa* on Bishop Hengsbach, then bishop of Essen, who was later made a cardinal.

After pointing out "Bishop Hengsbach's many personal merits in promoting and defending rights and values in the life of the Church," the Chancellor of the University of Navarra listed a basic reason for granting this honor: "To honor German Catholicism in its pastors for the great and generous

help rendered to the universal Church in many parts of the world." And he added: "Amid this sorrowful night of trial that the Church is undergoing, it is very consoling to see shepherds of souls such as your Eminence and Bishop Hengsbach, who are striving so firmly and courageously to sustain the faith and morals of the Catholic faithful, encouraging them to lovingly embrace their responsibilities as Christians in the middle of the world. I remember you every day with great affection in Holy Mass and in my prayers."

These texts serve to illustrate, as I said at the beginning, that the friendship uniting these two great men was founded on their shared love for Christ and the Church. And since their friendship was always aimed at unconditional service to the Spouse of Christ, it attained the stability and firmness proper to those who are united *in radice caritatis*, by the root of the same supernatural charity. For as St. Augustine teaches, "there is no true friendship except between those whom you, O Lord, unite by the charity poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."⁵

From the shared values and mutual esteem of these true "*viri ecclesiastici*," there arose a mutual personal enrichment that necessarily redounded to the good of the Church and souls. Msgr. Escrivá appreciated, as we have seen, the Archbishop of Cologne's doctrinal fidelity and union with the Pope. The example of this

5. ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 4, 4, 7.

outstanding pastor of souls—as that of so many other prelates that he had occasion to come to know and esteem—undoubtedly helped him in turn to remain firm in the faith and completely dedicated to the *bonum animarum* [good of souls] of the *pusillus grex* [little flock] that God had entrusted to him.

In turn, Cardinal Höffner benefited from some essential points of the spirit of Opus Dei, transmitted to him by the founder through his conversations and writings. He was especially impressed by Blessed Josemaría's strong defense of the truth that God's grace does not destroy human values, but rather reinforces and strengthens them. Cardinal Höffner acknowledged this publicly in the homily he gave on September 19, 1984, when dedicating the altar in Maarhof University Residence, which had been established in his diocese by faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

On that occasion, he underlined Blessed Josemaría's optimism regarding everything that comes from God's hands, and specifically the respect with which he spoke of the human body, which together with the soul bears the image of God. At the same time, Cardinal Höffner emphasized the importance of keeping the body subject to the soul through a prudent practice of mortification. He stated this publicly at a time when some people

in his country were pharisaically scandalized by Christians who, following a centuries-old tradition in the Church, tried to follow St. Paul's advice in this matter.⁶ "Today," said Cardinal Höffner, "when we see so many men and women destroying and profaning their body by giving it over to drink and drugs, this teaching seems more important to me than ever."⁷

Another point on which they agreed was that of the cooperation of priests and laity in the Church's common mission. When voices were raised in some quarters claiming for the laity functions that belonged to the ordained ministry, and priests were urged to set aside their sacramental ministry to dedicate themselves to secular tasks, both the founder of Opus Dei and the archbishop of Cologne clearly proclaimed the Church's doctrine. "Believers," said Cardinal Höffner, "don't want a 'modern' priest who is constantly involved in their affairs and entangled in their lives, a priest who adapts himself to the world, but rather a servant of Christ, a 'witness and dispenser of a life other than that of this earth' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3). "Priestly service," he continued, "cannot be considered as a purely humanitarian and social activity, as if the Church were some kind of Christian Red Cross. It is not part of the mission of the priest or the priestly ministry to act directly on social structures or to modify the

6. "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:27). "Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10).

7. These same ideas were developed more extensively by Cardinal Höffner in an interview granted to the German news agency KNA, on August 23, 1984.

structures and social relations in this world."⁸

Blessed Josemaría, for his part, wrote a letter that same year to a group of faithful of Opus Dei who were to receive priestly ordination: "You are each coming to the priesthood after having worked and lived as laymen in your native countries. Now you have to be priests, fully priests, dedicated with all your energy to your new ministry." And he added: "We priests should only speak about God. We should not speak about politics, nor about sociology, nor about anything foreign to our priestly task. And thus we will bring others to love the Holy Church and the Roman Pontiff."⁹

At the conference in Rome that I mentioned earlier, Cardinal Höffner referred to other moments of crisis in the Church's history, in particular that of the sixteenth century, especially in central Europe. He said that those difficult moments had been overcome partly thanks to small groups of "laity and priests who worked together, supporting one another, encouraging one another, reinforcing one another," who "prayed and worked with a true missionary spirit in their own environment." He predicted that the same would happen today: "the formation of cells of people with the same objectives, who seek to give new life to the Church and not wound her by their destructive criticism."¹⁰

It is well known that the founder of Opus Dei, inspired by God, dedicated his whole life to fostering among ordinary Christians in all sectors of society the awareness of the call to holiness in one's professional work and ordinary daily circumstances. Thanks be to God these yearnings are now, and have been for many years, a fruitful reality in the service of the Church. The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei fosters in priests and laity the urgency of fully responding to the demands of their baptismal vocation. It offers them the doctrinal, ascetical, and apostolic formation needed so that, cooperating closely with one another and in communion with the Pope and the bishops, they become a leaven of Christian life in all social environments.

Joseph Cardinal Höffner was able to appreciate this spirit, and gave thanks to God, from whom all graces flow.¹¹ "The Work," he said with joy in his letter written in 1975 after Msgr. Escrivá's death, "has spread throughout the whole world. During my visit to Japan a few years ago, I was able to see a portion of Opus Dei's universal apostolate. In its founder there burned the fire that our Lord longed to see enkindled on earth (cf. *Lk* 12:49). Msgr. Escrivá was very attentive to the new paths being opened up by the spirit of God. Our Lord will reward him for all that he has done for the Church since 1928."

8. CARDINAL JOSEPH HÖFFNER, *Il sacerdote nella società permissiva*, a conference given in a symposium organized by the CRIS, Rome, October 24, 1971, in "Documenti CRIS," no. 3, November 1971.

9. BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Letter to the new priests*, July 1971.

10. CARDINAL HÖFFNER, *Op. Cit.*

11. Cf. *James* 1:17.

This is my hope for Joseph Cardinal Höffner as well, as we commemorate the tenth anniversary of his death. May God reward him abundantly for all the good he accomplished for the Church and souls in his long and fruitful life.

Rome (December 15, 1997)

An academic convocation was held at the Pontifical Athenaeum of the Holy Cross on the occasion of the presentation of the Italian translation of the first biographical sketch of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo. Bishop Javier Echevarría gave the following address.

We wished to dedicate this gathering to the memory of Bishop Álvaro del Portillo; to commemorate him in the fullest sense of the word. We want to honor the memory of the founder and first chancellor of the Pontifical Athenaeum of the Holy Cross. But above all, we want to nourish in ourselves the bonds of gratitude and affection by which we feel united to that pastor who loved us with a paternal love and who watched over with such solicitude this institution of learning and those who form part of it.

Non est vir fortis. . .

While they were constructing the central headquarters of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría had a statue placed in one of the interior courtyards that depicted a magis-

trate of ancient Rome, dressed in a toga. It is sculptured in the classic style, projecting composure, serenity, conviction. The impression is paradoxical, because that statue lacks a head and hands. A Latin inscription on the pedestal underlines the paradox: *Non est vir fortis pro Deo laborans cui non crescit animus in ipsa rerum difficultate, etiam si aliquando corpus dilanietur.* This text was composed by Blessed Josemaría, during a night of prayer and work, in the early 1950s. It was inspired by a text of St. Bernard. He wanted to express an idea that was born of the same experience: that difficulties which proceed from our personal weakness, as well as external obstacles to apostolic work are never insuperable if one acts with the virtue of fortitude shaped by charity.

Thinking of Bishop del Portillo, that inscription illustrates a characteristic that many admired in him, namely, his serenity in the face of contradictions, the fortitude he showed in fulfilling God's will, his magnanimity—his greatness of heart!—at the moment of carrying out any enterprise for the glory of God and the service of the Church. Truly this inscription provides a sketch of the personality of the first Prelate of Opus Dei: *The strong man who works for God increases in fervor amid difficulties, even if at some point his body lies shattered.*

Fortitude is a virtue indispensable for a Christian. We all have to be strong, if we want to be good sons and daughters of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, with his usual precision, teaches that this virtue has as its