

Person the third year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is dedicated, I entrust the hopes and desires expressed above. I commend you to Him through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his specially beloved daughter,

whose maternal protection I invoke upon the work of the professors, students and non-teaching personnel of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in this academic year of 1998/99, which I declare to be officially inaugurated.

Articles and Interviews

Studi Cattolici, Milan October, 1998

Complete text of the interview granted to the magazine "Studi Cattolici" of Milan, published under the title "Opus Dei: the First Seventy Years."

The interview was arranged for 5:15 p.m. on a Wednesday in September, at the central headquarters of Opus Dei on Bruno Buozzi street in Rome. It's a building that "seems to be built of stone, but is really built of love," as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá used to say, who urged forward its construction, day by day, over the course of many years. His presence in this house can still be sensed. The mortal remains of the Founder lie beneath the altar of the Prelatic Church of Our Lady of Peace. They are like the foundation, the main beam of the entire edifice.

The Prelate of Opus Dei receives me in the living room, where the get-together

after lunch and dinner is usually held. This is a typical family gathering, in which each one can express his opinions or recount the day's happenings.

It is easy to imagine Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, a quarter of a century ago, taking part in one of these family get-togethers. My interview with Bishop Javier Echevarría also takes on the atmosphere of a get-together:

The first thing I would like to ask you concerns the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of Opus Dei, which took place on October 2, 1928. Fourteen years later Blessed Josemaría asked Álvaro del Portillo, then a 28-year-old engineer, to go to Rome to seek juridical recognition for Opus Dei. When he returned he mentioned a remark he heard in one of the Curia offices: "Opus Dei has arrived a century too soon."

Don Álvaro was later ordained a priest and was, from 1975 to 1994, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's first successor and the first bishop-prelate of Opus Dei. And now when Opus Dei is celebrating its seventieth anniversary, when it is established as a personal prelature, can one

say that its message and task in the Church has truly been understood by everyone?

The story about "arriving a century too soon" is still quite relevant, since Opus Dei, in a certain sense, will always be "ahead of its time." I remember how in 1970, in Mexico, someone asked the Founder: "What void has Opus Dei come to fill in the life of the Church?" And our Father laughingly replied: "My son, don't reduce me to an empty space, don't put me in a hole!"

We are all the Church. We are all children of God. And despite our personal weaknesses, Opus Dei has not come "to fill any void." It will always be ahead of its time because it is an initiative of God; because it was wanted by God on October 2, 1928, to help sanctify human life, in one's daily circumstances, in work, in family life, in all human relationships.

For these reasons, Opus Dei will always be "up to date," as long as men and women have to work on this earth of ours. Opus Dei is a part of the Church, and the Church provides light for every corner of a Christian's life.

Does everyone understand the message of Opus Dei? Its message is understood to the extent that one understands that all Christians are called to sanctity, and that sanctity does not consist in doing extraordinary things. Unfortunately it is quite common to confuse sanctity with extraordinary phenomena, with what goes beyond normal life, when sanctity consists precisely in living one's

daily life with Christian heroism. This unites us to all men and women and offers us new perspectives for our everyday existence.

But there will always be misunderstandings. Opening up paths, both in the Church and in the world, is always hard. And there will always be some who seek to place obstacles in the way.

The spirit of Opus Dei hinges on the sanctification of work. In his recent encyclical "Dies Domini," the Pope spoke of the relationship of work with what we usually refer to as "free time." What can you tell us about this?

Blessed Josemaría always taught us that free time, time for relaxation, should not consist in doing nothing, but rather in dedicating ourselves to more agreeable activities, less fatiguing ones. We should be grateful that the Pope, with the clear vision given to him by his position as Vicar of Christ, reminds us that the meaning of feast days should enlighten a Christian's entire life. Sunday, the *Dies Domini*, is not only a time for rest, a parenthesis in our daily work, whether intellectual or manual. The "day of the Lord" should, before all else, help us to live our duties toward God more fully. At the same time, sanctification of ordinary work consists, according to the spirit of Opus Dei, in converting our working day into something truly "festive."

The Pope's expectations

On October 2nd, Opus Dei celebrates its seventieth anniversary, and on the 16th John Paul II celebrates his

20th anniversary as Pope. The recent history of Opus Dei is closely linked to this great Pope. What are the hopes of the Roman Pontiff with regard to the Work?

The Pope is our common Father, and therefore he is interested in the Christian life of all of his children, wherever they may be, and whatever their way of "being Church" and of serving the Church. The Pope, in the homily he gave at our founder's beatification on May 17, 1992, told us what he expects from the faithful of Opus Dei: "With supernatural intuition, Blessed Josemaría untiringly preached the universal call to holiness and the apostolate. Christ calls everyone to become holy in all the circumstances and events of everyday life, for he is a son of God. Hence, work, too, is a means of personal holiness and apostolate when it is lived in union with Jesus Christ, for the Son of God, in the Incarnation, has united himself in a certain way with the whole reality of man and with the whole of creation."

I am moved to see how the Pope so forcefully insists that sanctity entails perennial demands that are still addressed to everyone. I think that what the Holy Father expects of the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei is precisely this: that they dedicate themselves to placing Christ at the summit of all human activities.

On March 23, 1994, John Paul II came here to pray before the body of Bishop Álvaro. First he recited the Hail Holy Queen and then the responsorial prayer for the dead. It was a sign of great affec-

tion and esteem. And many have asked: Are you considering opening the process of Don Álvaro's beatification?

I am deeply convinced that one day we will see him raised to the altars, if God so wills, following the stages established by the Church. Don Álvaro was completely dedicated to God's service. He was gifted with an extraordinary intellectual capacity. He had the benefit of a deep Christian education in his youth. And united to all these qualities was the constant formation he received for forty years, from 1935 till 1975, from Blessed Josemaría.

With his character, with his own specific way of being, so different from that of Blessed Josemaría, Don Álvaro also had a real "knack" for dealing with people. His university record was truly outstanding: a doctorate in civil engineering, a doctorate in history, a doctorate in canon law. He worked intensely during the Vatican Council and was a consultor for various departments of the Holy See right up to his death, at the same time as he was governing Opus Dei as Prelate. He put his great human and spiritual qualities at the service of God in Opus Dei, knowing that his service to the Church consisted first of all in helping the Founder.

He was profoundly humble. He knew perfectly well that the person chosen by God to open Opus Dei's path of sanctity in the Church was Blessed Josemaría. And he followed in his footsteps very faithfully, accompanying and helping him at every moment, but without putting

himself forward, with the refinement of one who can accomplish a lot while passing unnoticed, without attracting attention.

But precisely because of this, he did attract attention: by his simplicity, by his life of piety, by his great humility. When he was elected to succeed the Founder, he accentuated his fidelity to the foundational spirit to such a point that he even said that the one who had died on June 26 was Álvaro del Portillo, not Blessed Josemaría, because our Founder continued directing Opus Dei through his successor. Don Álvaro governed the portion of the Church that is Opus Dei with complete self-giving, like Blessed Josemaría. In what we might term a "relay race" in God's service, when "handing over the baton" from one to the other, there was no lessening in the pace, in the passionate determination to draw ever closer to God and to help others to do so.

An extraordinary normality

Opus Dei has the charism of normality. Nevertheless, in the life of the saints there has always been, how should I put it... "something extraordinary," such as that strange struggle with the devil in the holy Curé of Ars' life. Were there any episodes of this kind in the life of Blessed Josemaría?

I think I can answer your question fully because I lived close to the Founder in Rome from 1950 on and was especially close to him from 1953 to 1975. Blessed Josemaría so insisted on the need to sanctify ordinary life that, although we knew, and although

he did not deny, that there had been in his life some of the "extraordinary" events you refer to, we never asked him about them. And he himself did everything possible not to provoke our curiosity.

We always respected his very special intimacy with God and the extraordinary favors that our Lord granted him. On one occasion an official of the Holy See told him that he should recount some of these extraordinary events to the faithful of Opus Dei, so that they might know about the divine interventions that had taken place along our foundational journey. It was one of the few times that I heard him speak of these extraordinary graces. But he did so on very rare occasions, in order to draw us closer to God, and without going into details. He said that after telling us those things he was worried, because we might think that he was a saint when, he insisted, he was only a poor man...

However he spoke about this, I insist, on very rare occasions. He continually encouraged us to maintain a personal conversation with God in our daily circumstances. On October 2, 1968, the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of Opus Dei, during the get-together after lunch, he told us: "Thank you for not asking me about what happened on that day. I am very grateful to God because, if you had asked me anything, I might have succumbed and opened up my heart." Upon hearing that, we were about to ask him something, but we respected his wishes.

You have mentioned those “fights with the devil” in the life of the holy Curé of Ars and of so many saints. On one occasion he told us that on December 15, 1931, when he was praying as he walked along a street in Madrid, he saw three young men approaching. One of them, with a sinister face, raised his arm to strike him. But then one of the other young men ordered, “Don’t touch him!” and going up to him he whispered in his ear: “*Burrito, Burrito!*”

“*Burrito*” [Little donkey] was one of the names he used for himself in his personal dialogue with God. Only his confessor knew about this. Blessed Josemaría attributed that attack to the devil and his defense to his guardian angel.

A “private” faith?

I know that to join Opus Dei is not like joining a club to play soccer. But isn’t the spiritual formation that Opus Dei gives its faithful something exclusively individual? The fact that the faithful of the Prelature don’t act as a team, with the same uniform... Couldn’t this be interpreted as a “personalistic” way of living one’s faith?

Let me tell you something I remember from my youth. I was impressed, when I met Opus Dei, that they explained to me and emphasized strongly that I was completely free and responsible for my actions before God, and that in Opus Dei I should act in that way, with full freedom, in conformity with a rightly formed conscience, and in conformity with the Gospel, with the faith.

As you know, the faithful of Opus Dei do not rely on each other’s help to “get ahead in their career” or to “rise” professionally. They enjoy the same freedom as any Catholic in opinionable matters, and they strive to be consistent with their faith, following the guidance of the Pope and the bishops.

But this does not mean that belonging to Opus Dei is something “strictly personal or private.” One’s response to a divine call to sanctify oneself in the midst of the world, with a specific spirit or charism, has to be shown in deeds, since it affects every dimension of one’s life. It should show itself in the effort to work well, in the way one acts with one’s family, with one’s friends, in one’s life of piety... It would be absurd if a Christian life lived to the full would pass completely unnoticed in the eyes of others!

The Prelature of Opus Dei gives its faithful a personal formation. But not in order to foster a “personalistic” approach to their faith, but to help them transmit this Christian formation to their own surroundings, adapting it to the circumstances in which they live, to its mentality, its language... To use a metaphor taken from soccer, it helps one to overcome one’s selfishness, to “pass the ball” to someone else, helping others to excel in this great game of sanctity. Therefore none of the faithful should consider himself or herself better than anyone else, or have a “star” mentality. We are ordinary persons, normal people who want to serve God in spite of our defects, so that we can proclaim—by our effort to draw

close to God, our ascetical struggle, our apostolic words—that it is possible to struggle for sanctity in work, in family life, in social life, each in his or her own way, collaborating with other citizens who share the same ideals of making society more human.

Love for the Vicar of Christ

Blessed Josemaría knew several Popes. Did he talk about them?

On quite a few occasions I accompanied him on his audiences with the Holy Father. I was always surprised, and it still surprises me, how, even though our Father was a person who could calmly confront any situation when speaking with those whom we usually refer to as “powerful” on this earth, he felt himself filially overwhelmed when he went to visit the Pope. He felt the most profound veneration for the Vicar of Christ, and one could see his joy at being able to be with him.

I still remember his emotion on November 21, 1965, when Pope Paul VI inaugurated the Centro Elis, an initiative for the professional formation of young people on the edge of Rome, with a parish church attached that was entrusted to Opus Dei by the Holy See. Blessed Josemaría was so moved that his hands trembled, and he was not able to read his prepared talk.

As far as each of the Popes is concerned, he was very united to Pope Pius XII because of the suffering that Pope went through during the Second World War. And he was also very

grateful, because it was under his Pontificate that there opened up what then seemed impossible: the first “crack,” if we may use that term, in the canonical legislation of the Church. Thanks to this, Opus Dei was recognized as a path of sanctification in the midst of the world.

In 1958, during the period of *sede vacante*, he impressed us very much by his insistence that we pray and get others to pray for the future Pope, whoever he might be. He admired the goodness of Pope John XXIII, and was very happy to see his ecumenical openness. And his feelings were reciprocated. Pope John XXIII mentioned to those alongside him that he was always happy to receive our Founder because he expanded his heart.

As regards Pope Paul VI, our Father always said that Msgr. Montini was the first friendly hand he encountered when he came to Rome for the first time in 1946. He was always very grateful for his fraternal charity. And he never forgot that Pope Paul VI, who knew he was searching for an adequate juridical configuration for Opus Dei, encouraged him to study the matter and to propose a solution best in keeping with its foundational charism.

Apostolate with intellectuals

Opus Dei's statutes state that it does apostolate with people of all social classes, but puts a special emphasis on apostolate with intellectuals. When you were named Prelate in 1994 you said that the evangelization of cultural milieus would be one of your priori-

ties, together with attention to the family and apostolic work with young people...

Apostolate with intellectuals is of fundamental importance for the progress of society. Our Founder always reminded them that they could never shirk their duty to seek the truth in their work, nor selfishly turn their back on the needs of mankind. Precisely because they are the ones especially prepared to solve society's problems and help make it more just, they could not live only for themselves. The fact of being at "the head" of society required them to actively promote the common good; and Catholics had to prepare themselves especially to carry out this function in society.

Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, following the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, encouraged the beginning of a number of universities and many scientific and cultural initiatives, reminding people that science, faith, and culture are at the service of society.

In connection with this, the Roman Atheneum of the Holy Cross has recently become the sixth Pontifical University in Rome. Since Opus Dei does not have a theological school of its own, what kind of teaching is given in the universities in which Opus Dei guarantees doctrinal orthodoxy?

One of the major concerns of Blessed Josemaría was always that of giving doctrine—in this case, theological formation. The theological, moral, spiritual, etc. teachings that are given in the University of the

Holy Cross or in any of the universities promoted by faithful of Opus Dei, together with other people, are always in full conformity with the Church's magisterium. Each professor, naturally, teaches with his or her own style and method, with the freedom and pluralism that the Church encourages in the very broad area of what is open to opinion. But if one's personal view ever fails to accord with the perennial teachings of the magisterium, then one should admit he is mistaken and restudy the question

What can you tell us about young people, who are so close to the Pope's heart?

Thank God that, in spiritual matters, we are all young! Blessed Josemaría always saw young people as the hope of the Church and of society. He was very affectionate toward them, but also very demanding. He gave them the grounding they needed to free themselves from the errors that one sees today in many sectors of culture, art, entertainment... And he warned that those who confuse pleasure with love, and consumerism with well-being, end up corrupting young people, who can be so generous when presented with high ideals.

Naturally this has to start with the family...

Certainly, because the family, which is the basic cell of society, is today undergoing violent attacks. Therefore, we must not forget that if marriage is denigrated, if the value of life-long fidelity is lost, the family will suffer terribly, both psychologically

and socially. And it will fail to fulfill the educational role that is central in advancing from one generation to the next.

This Advent we will begin the third year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the year dedicated to God the Father.

Yes, and this gives me great joy, because one of the central teachings of Blessed Josemaría was the importance of divine filiation in Christian life, and, in a special way, in the spirit of Opus Dei. The certainty that one is a child of God was not something purely theoretical for him, but a deep personal discovery. This led him to lovingly contemplate and ardently correspond to the Love that God the Father has for us. I think that all of us in Opus Dei feel ourselves in a special way to be "children" of our parents, thanks to the fact that our Founder has taught us to live as beloved children of our Father God. A God who watches over us, who loves us, who knows that we are not sinless creatures, but rather small children in need of tenderness and help. God is not an "inspector" who looks down on us from on high; he is a Father who seeks first of all our happiness. To see God as he is, as a loving Father, fills our existence with a special meaning.

You have just returned from a trip to the Far East. What are your impres-

sions of the growth of Opus Dei in these countries so far from Italy?

In the first place, I have to say that I tried to go there with our Founder's attitude, seeking to learn more than to teach. It's impressive to touch with one's own hands, so to speak, how the Gospel, in this case with the specific charism of Opus Dei, adapts itself and takes on flesh in every culture. I was impressed, for example, that in New Zealand a Maori woman, who is justly proud of her ethnic background and culture, told me that she felt called by God to spread the Christian spirit of Opus Dei among her people, the Maories. We are truly all equal, all children of God. As Blessed Josemaría used to say, there is only one race: the race of the children of God.

One final question, a personal one: what books have you read recently?

The one by Cardinal Ratzinger on the liturgy, *Cantate al Signore un Canto Nuovo* [*Sing a New Song to the Lord*]; an informative study about China written in a journalistic style, *A Single Tear*, by Wu Ningkum; *Liberdade Religiosa* [*Religious Freedom*], by a Portuguese, Hugo de Azevedo. I also like novels. Oh yes, I thought the book by Vittorio Messori and Michele Brambilla, *Qualche Ragione per Credere*, [*A Reason to Believe*] was very interesting.