

Bogota

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Interview published in the Colombian magazine Pensamiento y Cultura after his visit to that country

How is your visit to Colombia going?

I am very happy to be here, and feel at home here. I have been wanting to come here for a long time, and, thanks be to God, this wish has become a reality. I would have liked to stay longer and visit other cities as well such as Barranquilla, Cartagena, Manizales and Bucaramanga. I hope that our Lord will grant me the opportunity to go to these places on another occasion.

I often recall Blessed Josemaria, who on his second catechetical trip to the Americas, in 1974, because of ill-health, was unable even to leave the plane at the Bogota airport. He had so looked forward to seeing many people here, but it wasn't possible. He offered that sacrifice to our Lord for all the Colombian people, and later had a chance to be with some of them in Venezuela. I am sure that he is now helping Colombia from heaven.

You visited the University of La Sabana in 1983, accompanying Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who was then Prelate of Opus Dei, on his visit to Colombia. What advice do you have for the faculty and administration after 18 years and in quite different circumstances.

Don Alvaro, the first Chancellor of this University, prayed a lot for La

Sabana and encouraged your efforts to obtain this wonderful campus. His help deserves our filial gratitude.

As usually happens in the case of apostolic works promoted by the faithful and cooperators of the Opus Dei Prelature, this university was born with very few financial resources. It has been growing little by little over the years, but the University of La Sabana still has to reach much further in the educational service it renders to society.

The future of Colombia is in the hands of the Colombians. And the university has to courageously collaborate in that future. All of you, from those who are responsible for the physical maintenance of these buildings up to the Rector, are making it possible for this university to turn out people with a spirit of solidarity, who do not shut themselves up in their own interests or turn their backs on the real problems of their fellow men and women, who strive to be well prepared in order to serve their country and the whole world.

Before leaving Rome, I had the opportunity to tell the Pope that I was going to make this trip. His Holiness sent his blessing to everyone I would see and to all the apostolic works that I would visit. The Pope has dedicated himself body and soul to the mission of bringing Christ to all human environments, including the university. May his blessing help you to be loyal workers, to respect one another and to work as a team. May you have a true family spirit, with each department supporting the efforts of all the others, striving to serve Colombia, and from Colombia, many other places.

Our students are bright and enthusiastic young people, and our graduates have attained important positions in the life of the nation and even internationally. But we professors sometimes wish that they were more dedicated to study, more concerned about others, with a clearer focus for their cheerful use of free time, which is also very necessary at this stage in their life.

For these noble ideals to become reality, in the first place one has to turn to God. I recommend that you pray frequently for the students as you walk across the campus. Think of them, seeing them in their future roles, knowing that they are the hope of the world and, if Catholics, the hope of the Church.

Be friends of the students. Blessed Josemaria counseled both parents and teachers that, without losing the required authority and responsibility, they should become friends of young people. Then, in your classes and personal meetings, you will be able to help them grasp the importance of developing good study habits and being concerned about the needs of others.

We know that you follow very closely the news of events in Colombia. The great majority of Colombians are Catholic, and we realize that we have an obligation to contribute to building a just society. What advice do you have for trying to solve the serious conflicts our country is undergoing?

I know that the situation here causes you to suffer, and that everyone in one way or another is suffering the consequences. But at the same time,

unconsciously, there may be a bit of resignation. We have to flee from passivity in the face of problems and search untiringly, with hope and a sense of responsibility, for solutions to conflicts. Each person, in his or her own job and place in society, has to find ways to help construct peace. Because peace is like a large river, made up out of a multitude of small streams and tributaries. And each of them is important.

There is a great need for an apostolic sowing of peace, based on prayer, understanding and the collaboration of everyone. When in Rome, I share in your sufferings, and even more so during these days I am spending in Colombia. It's not just Colombia's problem, but the whole world's problem. I am constantly asking our Lady to obtain peace for this country. The prelatial church of Opus Dei in Rome is dedicated to Our Lady of Peace. At the end of the nave there is a votive candelabra, with candles lit to our heavenly Mother asking that she win from our Lord peace for each one of us and peace for all humanity. I have decided that one of the candles should burn permanently in petition for peace in Colombia. I also advise that you seek out the intercession of Blessed Josemaria, a great friend and promoter of peace, who loved your country so much. I would like many people to ask him to help obtain peace for this wonderful country.

How do you see the role of the University of La Sabana, and of the university in general, in this troubled society?

There comes to mind how Blessed Josemaria responded to a similar question, also in an interview. He said that the university is not foreign to

any human problem. The university, he said, is where one can acquire the preparation needed to later contribute to solving society's great problems and to defending the fundamental rights of the person, always remembering that there is never only one answer to social questions. There are many legitimate proposals on how to solve each specific case. To fulfill its role in society, the university community must foster and respect this freedom.

Pope John Paul II told a group of university students some years ago that "the Church does not promote specific programs for the university or for society, but rather a program for man, for a new man, reborn through grace" (Homily to university faculty and students, June 5, 1979). Therefore the university has to try to ensure that its students receive an integral formation, and that they understand the greatness of this program, that of the new man regenerated through grace. They need to grasp this reality in a vital way, freely undertaking—as we all must do—the path of spiritual renewal, with the always necessary help of the sacraments. For as you well know, science and faith should walk hand in hand. The faith that you profess illuminates your intellectual work. And the science that you teach helps you to go more deeply into the faith.

Sanctification of work holds a central place in what Blessed Josemaria Escrivá taught about the call to holiness that is addressed to everyone. How can we convince our children, and our students, that work gives dignity to man, and that man's end is not to enrich himself or climb the social ladder but rather to serve others generously?

We all learn above all by example. Students learn to serve when they see their teachers working with a noble intention. Through your classes you can pass on the ideal of serving others joyfully. For at the center of all the arts and sciences, at the heart of all the professions, one always finds man, with his material and spiritual needs. And in the heart of man and of work we discover the presence of God, Creator of the universe and final end of all creatures.

Today's culture is the culture of contemporary man, with his technological advances and ease of communication, but also with his many problems. The pluralism of our society at times overwhelms us. How can we construct our future with faith and reason as recommended by John Paul II. How can we be Christians of the 21st century?

Cultural pluralism is not a problem for Christians, but a reality that we take for granted, as ordinary citizens. The Pope has repeatedly urged us to carry out a new evangelization, of culture as well. We have no right to be afraid. In his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the Holy Father said that "in the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace" (no. 55). John Paul II also said recently that globalization "is not *a priori* either good or bad. It is what people make of it. No system is an end in itself, and it is necessary to insist that globalization, like any other system, should be at the service of the human person, of solidarity" (Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, April 27, 2001, no. 2).

The real problem is a selfish individualism. The Pope invites us to confront this deviation forcefully. "Now is the time for a new 'creativity' in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer" (Apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 50). Therefore what is needed in today's world, with the help of science, technology, and the ease of communication, is the "globalization" of charity. And we will not achieve global solidarity without personal solidarity.

Today's society seems to give importance only to one's image, to appearances, while the truth is seen as something secondary and even out of date. Nevertheless, it's clear that without truth our life loses coherence. What can we do to foster truth and to live in accord with it?

You, as university people, have a commitment to search for and transmit the truth. A consistent Christian refuses to compromise with lies and superficiality. Therefore Christians are a spur for people's conscience in a world where only power, money and the trappings of wealth count for anything. Everyone harbors deep in his heart a "nostalgia" for the truth, for the clarity and beauty of truth, for the splendor of truth we could say, making use of the title of one of the Pope's encyclicals.

Don't we all enjoy being with a sincere friend who speaks the truth clearly and selflessly, who helps and corrects if needed? "To speak the truth with charity" is a Christian motto that can satisfy the burning thirst of this world of ours.

Your book Pathways of Christian Life, which was recently published, has had a great success in terms of sales. To what do you attribute this fact, in a society like today's, which sometimes seems so far from ideals? What were the main points you wanted to stress in your book?

The women and men of today are thirsting for God. The Pope has expressed this beautifully, saying that we are beginning a new Christian springtime. We have just celebrated the great Jubilee of the year 2000, a year of thanksgiving for the incarnation of the Son of God. Christ is, as always, the permanent "newness" towards which all our efforts are aimed, also those of the 21st century, striving to imbue ordinary life with Christian meaning. This is the core of Blessed Josemaria's message. *Pathways of Christian Life* draws heavily on my personal experience of daily life alongside Opus Dei's Founder, from 1950 to 1975: twenty-five years of seeing Blessed Josemaria seek, find and love our Lord Jesus Christ. With this book, I have tried to contribute to the rediscovery of the face of Christ, a goal Pope John Paul II set for us during the Jubilee.

Thank you for your words of encouragement and for sharing your time with us here at the University of La Sabana.

Many thanks to you for your warm welcome. This university is a family, and as I said before, I feel at home here. I ask you to pray for me. I will certainly pray for you, especially at Holy Mass.