

There are people who understand Opus Dei, while others don't seem to understand it very well. How do you explain this?

It seems very normal to me. It would be strange if the contrary were to occur. I don't know of any institution, topic or project that garners unanimous support or condemnation. Opus Dei is well loved. I find it very satisfying to see the appreciation that so many people have for it. Of course, we are also criticized from time to time. Like other Catholics, we try to respect everyone, without discrimination. And I am happy to point out that we also try to learn from them.

Your predecessor, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, was the son of a Mexican mother. How did his Mexican blood come out in his way of acting and working?

Rather than showing any particular Mexican characteristic, I think he felt he was a Mexican. It was a legacy of which he was proud. Those who lived with him heard him tell Mexican stories, sing Mexican songs and pray Mexican prayers. Personally, I think his cheerfulness and affability were very Mexican. One had a great time at his side. An interesting point is that when he visited Mexico he would recall Mexican idioms and spontaneously use them during his visit.

The last question. One can see that you are happy. Why did you join Opus Dei? What has your experience been?

Your question calls to mind so many things, things which are perhaps too personal. So you will excuse me if I don't answer at length. I joined

Opus Dei because I understood that it was the path that God had prepared for me, my personal way of living the Christian vocation. As for my experience, it seems impossible to summarize it. In a word, I think that there is nothing better than dedicating one's life to the service of God and others, following the path that God has chosen for each one. I also think that a life is not enough time to repay God for all that he gives to each of his children.

Tertium Millennium, Rome June, 1999

Translation from the original Italian of the article "The Parable of the Prodigal Son, Icon of all Hope," published in Tertium Millennium, (the periodical of the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000).

Only a few months remain before the opening of the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Peter. Jubilee celebrations are a reminder to us of basic truths of our faith. Pope John Paul II invites us particularly to meditate on and put into practice one of the most demanding teachings of the Our Father: we have to ask God for forgiveness, while forgiving with all our heart anyone who has caused us harm. To learn to forgive and to ask for forgiveness both stem from a Christian's hope and joy, and reinforce these two virtues, forming a patrimony that all men and women can attain.

Within the framework of the immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee, the year 1999 is dedicated to God the Father. In his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, centered on the fatherhood of God, Pope John Paul II offered a thought-provoking meditation on the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). This Gospel passage is particularly relevant for our day. It confirms our immense dignity as children of God and, above all, God the Father's immense love for us.

The parable of the prodigal son has a universal message. But to apply it to our own life we have to recognize that both the tone and the outcome of the story, ending with the father's embrace and the feast, exclude any reading that emphasizes the feeling of guilt as a key to its understanding. The parable of the prodigal son is a parable of hope, not of defeat. The father's behavior impresses on us the certainty that love is always stronger than evil, and that mercy does not permit any resentment in God. The parable of the prodigal son is a parable of peace.

A Christian will be a worker of peace in this world of ours only if he or she deeply assimilates the extraordinary implications of this truth: God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), and therefore, mercy, compassion, forgiveness. Only in this way can we give witness to the truth that forgiveness is the most effective remedy for evil.

Forgiveness is linked to our hope of being able to change and overcome the evil both in ourselves and in the world. Forgiveness is certainly the first point of contact between love for God and love for our neighbor.

The two sons

It is easy to recognize ourselves in the figure of the son who returns home, because if our Lord were to let go of our hand, we would be capable of falling into every mistake. "The parable," the Pope writes, "indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin" (*Dives in Misericordia*, Nov. 30, 1980, no. 5). These mistakes include the small infidelities into which we fall simply through weakness, even though we want to follow Jesus closely, and which "in a Christian's life are as frequent as the ticking of a clock" (Blessed Josemaria Escriva). Only if we let ourselves be conquered by despair will these small or large faults prevent us from making our own the decision of the repentant son: I will arise and go to my father (Lk 15:18).

The younger son knew how to ask for forgiveness. For this reason, and for this reason alone, he came back to life, to the joy of realizing that his father had never ceased loving him. It is a very clear lesson for each of us.

The figure of the elder son in the parable is not foreign to us either. His protest, when his father welcomes the younger brother home, shows a falsifying of reality, because a right whose defense entails the rejection of mercy is really an abuse, a false right. Apparently he is free of guilt. But the Gospel story implies that it is not enough to faithfully fulfill one's own duties to be justified. Justice alone is not enough. When separated from love, justice is fatally mixed with resentment. Instead of healing, it only

makes matters worse. "Justice," writes the Pope, "can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions" (*Dives in Misericordia*, no. 12). The elder brother cannot cease comparing his own sacrifices with his brother's recklessness. He heart has become hard. We can imagine him a sad person, because mercy's first effect, in one who has learned how to forgive, is a deep joy.

We all need to offer clear gestures of pardon to anyone who has hurt us in any way. "Let no one in this Jubilee year wish to exclude himself from the Father's embrace. Let no one behave like the elder brother in the Gospel parable who refuses to enter the house to celebrate (cf. *Lk* 15:25-30). May the joy of forgiveness be stronger and greater than any resentment" (Bull *Incarnationis Mysteriorum*, no. 11).

Many souls have given heroic witness on earth to Christ's love. I am thinking now of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, to whom I was so close—a fact that I view as an immense gift from God—for so many years. I remember some words of his that opened up to me broad supernatural and human horizons: "The greatest thing, the most beautiful thing, because it is divine, is to forgive. . . . But truly, without any resentment. Forgiveness is something divine. We men would not know how to if Jesus had not taught us."

Forgiveness of Sins

The need to ask for forgiveness and to forgive embraces one's entire

daily existence. But this is possible only if each one is leading a life in accord with the unbreakable dictates of moral conscience. The celebration of the Jubilee once more directs the eyes of all Christians towards a fundamental truth: our personal responsibility for good and for evil. The Holy Father admonishes us: "Sin, in the proper sense, is always a personal act, since it is an act of freedom on the part of an individual person and not properly of a group or community. . . . This truth cannot be disregarded in order to place the blame for individuals' sins on external factors such as structures, systems or other people. . . . At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people" (Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*, Dec. 2, 1984, no. 16).

In the same document, a little further on, we read some words that are particularly relevant to our present age: "So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural and institutional aspects by the force of law or—as unfortunately more often happens—by the law of force, the change in fact proves to be incomplete, of short duration and ultimately vain and ineffective, not to say counterproductive, if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted" (*Ibid*).

Social relationships will not change unless people change for the better, unless each of us undergoes a conversion. Everyone stands in need of conversion, of "a real change of life, a progressive elimination of interior

evil" (Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium*, no. 9). The Church affirms that God's omnipotence is shown in the highest degree by forgiving sins (collect prayer for the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 30, a. 4).

Some Fathers of the Church even exalt this attribute of God above the very wonder of the Word's incarnation: "What is more astonishing, that God gives himself to the earth or that he gives us heaven? That he unites himself to our flesh or that he introduces us into the communion of his divinity? . . . Yes, what causes the greatest astonishment is to see the earth turned into heaven, man transformed by divinity, the servant given the right to his lord's inheritance. And, nevertheless, this is just what has happened." (St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon 67*). In the sacrament of Penance, the Christian experiences in his own life the omnipotence of God's mercy. He relives in a tangible way the parable of the prodigal son as a parable of joy.

The Queen of Peace

In tragic contrast to the aspirations aroused in our heart by Christ's words, the images of the suffering that has devastated the people in the Balkans continue to shock our conscience. The Church never tires of praying for peace, because she believes firmly in the power of prayer. Let us go to the intercession of our Lady, Queen of Peace and Mother of Mercy, and ask our Lord to pour down plentifully on all peoples the divine ointment of forgiveness.

We Christians are called to make the merciful face of God the Father present to the world. Therefore we have to be the first to give example of our commitment to forgive. Let us overcome false prudence, asking for forgiveness immediately whenever we make a mistake and offend someone. Let us forgive small or great affronts right away, the material or moral damage that others do to us. Thus we will make visible in society the face of our heavenly Father, the God of hope and joy, of love and pardon.