

Her forgiveness was the expression of a charity that only God can infuse. Thus her life became, to return to the Pope's image, an expression of what is most truly beautiful in this world.

The entire Bishops' Conference of the Sudan will be present at Bakhita's canonization. The bishops, with the daring of faith, point to the message that emanates from her life: a strong message of hope and forgiveness to the Catholics of Sudan, who at this very moment are the object of a cruel persecution that deprives them of even their most basic rights. It is a message for the conscience of all of us, who so often cover over with silence the injustice that crushes those who have no voice to make themselves heard.

In Bakhita we also see the personification of the Christian paradox of freedom. When she finally had the possibility of freely deciding on her own life, she gave herself to another "Master" (as she called God) and handed over to him even the beating of her heart and all of her thoughts. Thus while she carried out the humblest tasks with joy, she spread love to all around her with great simplicity. Bakhita served our Lord for almost fifty years. To renew one's own Yes to our Lord each day is to point oneself towards eternity. For her, looking to the future did not mean forgetting the past, but rather transfiguring it, redeeming it with the freedom of love.

Bakhita, at the end of her life, expressed in these simple words, hidden behind a smile, the journey of her life: "I travel slowly, one step at a time, because I am carrying two big suitcases.

One of them contains my sins, and in the other, which is much heavier, are the infinite merits of Jesus. When I reach heaven I will open the suitcases and say to God: Eternal Father, now you can judge. And to St. Peter: Close the door, because I'm staying."

La Madre "Moretta," as the people of Schio called her, was beatified together with Blessed Josemaria, the founder of Opus Dei, on May 17, 1992. For all of us this was an unforgettable experience. Ever since that day we have felt very close to her. And therefore today is a day of great joy for me. The heroic example of Bakhita, of the Chinese martyrs, of Katherine Drexel and of Maria Josefa of the Heart of Jesus shows to mankind the glorious countenance of Christ, who triumphs in charity. Every canonization is the celebration of the Church's holiness, of the continuous miracle of the supreme beauty that Christ's Spouse radiates to the world. And it is always a feast for the whole Church.

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The presence of the Prelate of Opus Dei in Fatima for the beatification of the two little shepherd children requires no explanation. He is present with many other Christians and Catholic institutions who are joyfully accompanying Pope John Paul II in this historic mo-

ment. We know that the founder of Opus Dei had a lot of devotion to Fatima...

My presence here is due to the kind invitation of my good friend, Bishop Serafím Ferreira e Silva of Leiria-Fatima, and also to my great desire to accompany the Holy Father at this historic ceremony, which, as you say, is a motive of joy for all Christians.

Blessed Josemaría's devotion to our Lady profoundly influenced his own spiritual personality, as has been the case with all the saints, and also the life and spirit of Opus Dei. Any image, invocation or shrine dedicated to our Lady was for him an opportunity to demonstrate this devotion. And Fatima was no exception. Whenever he came to Portugal, and he often came here, Fatima was part of his itinerary; and on more than one occasion, as in 1970, he made that long trip exclusively to place all of his concerns for the Church and for the Work at the feet of Our Lady of Fatima.

In 1944, even before his first visit to Portugal, he had already asked some members of Opus Dei who were studying at Coimbra to go to the Cova da Iria to present his filial love and his intentions to our Lady. Blessed Josemaría always recalled with great affection that his first visit to this beloved country, on February 5, 1945, was owed to Sor Lucia, who asked him to come to Portugal and helped obtain the permits to allow him to cross the border. His friendship with Sor Lucia grew over the years. He went to see her on several occasions at the Carmel of Coimbra.

It would take me too long to recount all the beautiful events that took place on those trips to Fatima. He was greatly moved at seeing the pilgrims walking alongside the roads leading to Fatima. He would bless them and try to learn from them how to love our Lady more.

On his visit in 1970, which I mentioned above, he wanted to imitate the many persons that he saw walking there barefooted. He took off his shoes at the north rotunda and walked barefoot on the path that led to the Capelinha, not an easy thing to do for someone not used to it. We feel very honored to know that our beloved founder was the first pilgrim to Fatima who has been raised to the altars.

One aspect that characterizes Opus Dei is the sanctification of professional work. How is this to be understood? Isn't there a danger of going overboard in dedication to one's work?

Yes, that danger exists. Unfortunately, in today's world there are people who cannot find work and, at the same time, many others who are perhaps working more hours than is good for them. They do this either to survive or out of an excessive desire for personal success. It is painful to see that there are people who neglect their family obligations and put in a workday of twelve or fourteen hours.

Work is not an end, but a means. The end is God. Therefore, sanctifying one's work doesn't mean being successful, but rather coming closer to God by means of work, whether this is humble or outstanding.

God has put us in the world to work, as we read in the Book of Genesis. To sanctify one's work is, in first place, to work with love, that is, to work to give glory to God and to serve others. Work that is done selfishly, no matter how technically perfect it may be and how many hours of effort it might require, is not work that can be sanctified.

You mentioned attention to one's family. Do you think it's more difficult today to maintain a Christian spirit in one's family than it was in former times?

There are certainly new difficulties, but this doesn't mean that difficulties didn't exist in earlier times. In any case, I don't like to speak of difficulties, but of challenges. And challenges should be met in a constructive way.

Educating children is not just a matter of shielding them from dangers and resisting harmful influences in the environment. Rather it means carrying out an exciting, positive task, which our Lord has put into the hands of fathers and mothers.

It is, of course, a difficult task, but God's help, which is the most important factor, is never lacking to anyone who asks for it in prayer. How often it has been precisely the spur of their responsibility for the education of their children that has led parents to draw closer to God!

Returning to Fatima, how do you view the beatification of the two little shepherd children?

No one can fail to see its great pastoral and theological importance. Besides the recognition that sanctity is accessible and necessary for everyone, of every age and condition, the beatification of Francisco and Jacinta confirms the importance of the Fatima message especially for our times: the need for conversion, for prayer and penance, with complete adherence to the faith of the Church, to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, and to Christian morality.

What are your major concerns in regard to the Church and the world as we begin this new millennium?

More than concerns, I have great hope in God's mercy and providence, shown in a thousand different ways in our times, beginning with the apparitions at Fatima. But I think the problems presented by culture and the family are fundamental for the re-Christianization and peace of the world, just as priestly formation is fundamental for the rejuvenation of the Church and for evangelization.

Are you satisfied with the expansion of Opus Dei in Portugal and in the world?

How could I fail to be? But even so, it all seems very little to me in relation to the current needs of the Church and the world.