

to shoulder with so many people of good will, a joyful sowing of holiness and apostolate, just as he smilingly encouraged us on that day back in 1948, a day that seems so recent in my memory, when I first met him.

La Vanguardia October 6, 2002

"A saint who loved the world," an article published in Barcelona.

People from all walks of life have come to Rome to be with Pope John Paul II during the canonization of Josemaría Escrivá. I must confess that I find this very moving. During these weeks I have heard many stories of generosity, of service, of help offered to those who are sick or poor. I have heard of indigenous people from Cañete, in Peru, farmers from Nigeria and Cameroon, non-Christian families from Hong Kong; people of all social levels and from all parts of the world, who have felt personally called to come to Rome. Their number and diversity, reflecting those who could not come, show that this priest, whom the Pope has now decided to solemnly proclaim a saint, is a living and active model of holiness. He is one of the gifts granted by the Spirit to the Church in our time.

I met Saint Josemaría on November 2, 1948, in Madrid. I was sixteen years old at the time. We were in a family get-together, and he invited me and two others to accompany him by car to visit a conference and retreat house that was

being renovated, near Segovia. The trip was a joyful and pleasant conversation with him. He told us that we should always be joyful, since we are sons of God. I was surprised by his cheerfulness and naturalness. At one point, I got car-sick. He came to my assistance as though we had known each other for a long time, like a father who is not repelled by something that happens to one of his children.

Later God willed that I should live and work at his side for twenty-five years, from 1950 until his death in 1975. I am very thankful for this great gift. His daily life taught me that being close to God fills one's soul with joy. From the first moment, I realized that he truly loved God at every moment, without waiting for special occasions. I was surprised at how his love seemed to grow each day. I saw in his reactions (and his life contained abundant suffering, sickness and misunderstanding) that he found God's mercy at every moment. I think God wanted to make use of Saint Josemaría to remind the world with new emphasis of this consoling truth of the Christian faith: that God is our Father. This conviction, which fills one's soul and leads it along paths of peace and interior freedom, was the foundation of his daily life, lived minute by minute. He strove, and at times it cost him real effort, to have a constant dealing with God that was filled with tenderness. This direct and simple relationship is the exact opposite of the false idea, as common today as in the past, of an abstract, distant God. His constant concern was that everyone might freely experience the joy of God's fatherly

embrace, and in a special way in the sacrament of forgiveness. Every week I saw him kneeling before his confessor, Father Alvaro del Portillo, filled with compunction.

At the beginning of this year I was asked to give an address on "The Greatness of Ordinary Life" at the international congress held in Rome to mark the centennial of the birth of the then Blessed Josemaría. I decided to center it on his "human and supernatural profile." His strong personality was evident in living alongside him. His parents had passed on to him an open and realistic approach to life that strengthened his lively temperament. (By the way, I recall that he once told Don Alvaro and myself that, as a young child, he would entertain himself at home by reading *La Vanguardia* and *ABC*, the newspapers that his father, José Escrivá, subscribed to before his financial setbacks.)

From October 2, 1928 on, with the foundation of Opus Dei, our Lord let him see that the full meaning of his life was to spread throughout the whole world the call to holiness in ordinary life. Saint Teresa wrote that God was also to be found among the cooking pots. Saint Josemaría, who loved this saint a lot, used to speak of "a Christian materialism." God is not far off, "where the stars are shining." We can find him in our ordinary life, our daily family and professional life, if we seek him. For this holy priest, Christianity is not a sum of external duties that are added on to our ordinary human life and that restrict it. It is just the opposite. God's grace heals, restores and elevates human nature.

When I contemplate such a great diversity of men and women here in Rome for his canonization, I understand the extraordinary efficacy of his trust in human freedom. His greatest ambition was to help God's light to reach every man and woman, the light of the Gospel, the light of God's saving grace. That was the heart of his mission. He loved the capacity each person has to freely commit oneself, and he had a great respect for each one's spontaneity, which he always saw as a great force for good. I spent many hours of my life at his side and I can assure you that he not only respected but truly loved pluralism in so many of its manifestations, the majority of them where differences are perfectly legitimate among Christians. And he hoped everyone would share this outlook, since it brings people closer to one another.

His respect for the legitimate autonomy of temporal realities had its roots in the dedication of his whole life to his mission of being a priest and only a priest, putting himself at the service of everyone. From the time of his priestly ordination, he was always aware of his obligation to make Christ present among men. He was especially aware of his union with Christ when he celebrated the Eucharist. It was impossible to get used to being with him at the altar. One sensed that each day the Mass meant something different for his soul. But it was always an ardent and loving conversation with the Holy Trinity. Each day he freely renewed his self-giving; the only meaning of his life was to be Christ on the Cross, with his arms open wide to embrace all mankind. He never spoke about pol-

itics and he showed great respect for people's opinions. He often said that he was an "anticlerical" priest, precisely because of his love for the priesthood, because he rejected every undue meddling—and I emphasize the word *undue*—of the priest in political questions. Thus he defended people's legitimate autonomy in temporal matters, but also the very high mission of the priest, the dispenser of God's extraordinary nearness to every man and woman.

During these days, seeing so many people here in Rome from all over the globe, I can only give thanks to God for the fruitfulness of this holy priest. This gift is a call to all of us, reminding us that sanctity is not something for a privileged few, that Jesus wants everyone to love him. "Everyone," these are words of Saint Josemaría, "whatever his personal situation, his social position, his work... Ordinary life is something of great value. All the ways of the earth can be an opportunity to meet Christ, who calls us to identify ourselves with him and carry out his divine mission—right where he finds us" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 110).

ABC

October 6, 2002

Interview granted to Juan Vicente Boo, the newspaper's Rome correspondent

Bishop Echevarría, what are your feelings now that the Church is about to render homage to the founder of Opus

Dei and ratify his message?

I am very happy, because of my love for the one I still call "Father." At the same time I know he never liked to call attention to himself, to be in the limelight. "To hide and disappear, so that only Jesus shines forth," was his constant motto. Now, from heaven, he continues telling us: "all the glory for God."

In any case, tomorrow he won't be able to hide.

That's true, but canonizations are not an act of homage. They represent, certainly, the confirmation of an exemplary life, and they give testimony, above all, to the recognition of the action of divine grace in a soul. In addition, they are an opportunity for us to renew our desires for conversion, to be faithful to Christ. This desire for a daily conversion, which should continue after October 6, has been my most ardent concern since learning the date of the canonization.

World interest is enormous. Does Opus Dei consider this a moment of triumph?

Absolutely not. That would only diminish Opus Dei, and each of us personally as well. Look, a Christian is not on this earth to triumph but to work, using his professional prestige to serve the Church, society and souls. Our founder used to say that the glory of Opus Dei is to have no human glory; its only glory is to serve all souls, without discrimination of any kind. The canonization of the founder is not a moment for triumph but for humility.