

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

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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.

Why humility?

Because it is a good moment to compare our own lives with the ideal that he taught us and, above all, that he incarnated in his own life. The distance will be even clearer when, with the passage of time, his own greatness is better understood. We have to be very humble. Josemaría Escrivá tried to hide and disappear so that that the Work would be more clearly seen to be God's. He considered himself "an inept and deaf instrument." Thus we learn that the greatness of the human person is in letting God work in one's own soul, and in cooperating responsibly.

Msr. Escrivá "democratized" holiness, and now the Pope holds him up as an example for the whole Church. But how can a priest be imitated by ordinary men and women whose life is very different and who confront very distinct problems?

Blessed Josemaría repeated with great insistence that he was not a model for anyone to imitate. The only model is Christ and the sculptor is the Holy Spirit, he used to say. In this case, as in every canonization, the Church invites us not so much to imitate the personality of a particular saint, as to learn, by looking at that saint, to imitate Christ. And Blessed Josemaría, a secular priest who loved the world and secularity, invites us to imitate Christ at every moment and in every place, in all the circumstances of ordinary life.

I am convinced that Saint Josemaría's life will always be very relevant to each day and age. The best

answer to your question will be St. Peter's Square tomorrow during the canonization ceremony. Tens of thousands of ordinary people will be present there, people who never appear in the newspapers, who find it hard to make their income stretch to the end of the month, whose happiness stems from striving to be close to Christ every day. They have wanted to come to Rome to thank God for the gift of this saint, who has helped them discover the greatness of their Christian vocation.

Could you describe the battle Josemaría Escrivá had to fight to get the Holy See to accept the idea of allowing non-Catholics and even non-Christians to become cooperators of Opus Dei?

I think the word "battle" in this context is not very appropriate. The request that he made, in the forties, to have non-Catholic Christians and even non-Christians admitted as cooperators of Opus Dei was very new in the Church. Therefore it was not accepted right away. But our founder refused to get discouraged and persevered in his request. The struggle was a respectful one that in no way lessened the reciprocal esteem between the founder of Opus Dei and those he was speaking with. Finally, in 1950, the Holy See accepted Josemaría Escrivá's demand, seeing in it his openness, his bigness of heart, and his respect for the freedom of people's consciences.

So, it was "respectful," but a struggle...

This episode seems significant for me, because it sums up Blessed

Josemaría's basic attitude in the whole foundational process, and at the same time reflects the wise prudence of the Holy See. Msgr. Escrivá realized he was raising questions that were new in the Church. But he always wanted to act in accord with the Pope and the bishops, with love and respect for the Church's authority.

During the international congress last January on the occasion of the centennial, the vice-president of the World Council of Synagogues, Rabbi Angel Kreiman, pointed out that the founder of Opus Dei had set forth, in practical terms, a theology God's creation and its perfecting by man, a theology that lies at the core of the Old Testament. Could the sanctification of work be a meeting place with our "elder brothers and sisters"?

I remember with great pleasure my meeting with Rabbi Kreiman. I assured him of my affection for the Jewish people, while I also had the opportunity to greet Hindu and Muslim participants in the congress.

Christians share with the Jewish people faith in the true God and in creation, and an appreciation for work. The founder of Opus Dei often stressed the importance of some words from Genesis, which is the first book in the Old Testament: God placed man on earth so he could subdue it through his work and make it bear fruit for his benefit and that of others. So there are many reason for reciprocal esteem and for collaboration.

The biography written by Andrés Vázquez de Prada cites some notes from the personal journal of Josemaría Escrivá where he recounts his vivid realization of

his divine filiation on October 16, 1931. This happened while he was traveling on a Madrid trolley car, reading the ABC newspaper. Could this "very elevated prayer," as he described it in his notes, have been occasioned by some of the news of that day? Did he remember it for the rest of his life?

Indeed, the note indicates that he was reading the *ABC*, but it doesn't say anything more than that. The notes don't say anything about whether his prayer was connected with what he had just read there or not. He often recalled his prayer that day. He assured us that he grasped with new light the fundamental Christian truth of God's fatherly love. God is never indifferent to the fate of men and women. He is a Father who, in a phrase from *The Way*, loves each of us more than all the mothers in the world love their children.

You must have experienced other moments of great spiritual intensity living alongside the founder. What is your most vivid memory?

Although he never hid the state of his soul, he didn't like to speak in detail about the relationship with God that filled his days. I recall one day in November 1973 when he told us something that had happened to him the evening before. During his prayer, he felt moved to write some words in Latin: *Tenui eum, nec dimittam*, "I've caught hold of him and I'll never let him go." These words gave expression to his immense love, his desire to be united with God and to be faithful until death. And he told us: "This refrain was gnawing at me for two days. These aren't locutions from God. They

are a restlessness that He places in the soul, which finds itself uneasy until they are brought to light.”

And what about more personal memories? What was it like living beside the founder of Opus Dei?

I met him in 1948. Msgr. Escrivá was spending a few days in Madrid, and I went with other members of Opus Dei to a get-together with him. He spoke to us very forcefully about fidelity to the Christian vocation we had received from God. Afterwards he invited three of us to accompany him on a quick trip to Segovia, where he had some matters to look after. I remember it very well: he was singing, joking, laughing, and also making very supernatural remarks. That day it became very clear to me that Opus Dei is a family, and its founder a father to all of us.

Josemaría Escrivá liked to bless the last stones of buildings rather than the first ones. Is the canonization his last stone? Do you consider it a point of arrival or a point of departure?

It all depends on your perspective. In a certain sense, the lives of the saints are extended throughout the history of the Church, through their intercession and example. For the faithful of the Prelature, the canonization is a new point of departure, a hope-filled new beginning, a call to conversion. The point of arrival that all of us should be seeking is the Kingdom of Heaven.

A collection is being taken up, among those who have come to the

canonization, to promote educational programs in Africa, the continent of affliction. Does Opus Dei have a predilection for Africa?

Blessed Josemaría never had an opportunity to visit Africa, but he showed a great regard for it. I was impressed by the ardor with which he urged forward the apostolic work of Opus Dei on that continent, and his great interest in the news that arrived from there. I have had the opportunity to go to Africa on various occasions, accompanying Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, the first successor of Msgr. Escrivá, and later as Prelate of Opus Dei. Together with the obvious difficulties the continent is undergoing, I have always experienced the deep joy of meeting so many people filled with faith and with the desire to help construct the future of their people. There is a lot we can give Africa, but also a lot to learn and to receive from Africa.

The Harambee 2002 project seeks to be a grain of sand in this endeavor. At this joyful moment of the canonization, it is a way of remembering with deeds those who are in need. The word *harambee* in Swahili expresses a reality and a hope: that all united together we can overcome the obstacles. It is perhaps for this reason that Africa holds a special place in the hearts of all Catholics and of many other people of good will.

People who lived alongside Msgr. Escrivá have told me that, while they are very happy, these days are bringing back memories and a certain nostalgia,

that they are "homesick," so to speak.

The physical separation, back in 1975, was very hard for all of us. But for me, at least, I am happy about the joy that he has received, the prize of contemplating the presence of God. I feel "homesick" only in the sense that, although he continues helping us with his intercession from heaven, at important moments I would like to

have the security of his explicit advice. But we must also take into account that he never wanted to be indispensable. And when he told us that the moment would come when we would have to take his place, he said this with great sincerity. This is why he wanted us to realize that we are responsible, through our own lives, not only for *doing* Opus Dei, but for *being* Opus Dei.