

imbued with Christian values.

We don't hear you spoken of very much. Perhaps you have chosen to remain in the background, working quietly. Are there men and women who still knock at the door of Opus Dei, who want to embrace the ideal of life presented by St. Josemaría Escrivá?

Those who come to the Work do so because they are seeking God. Opus Dei has no other goal than to help ordinary faithful to raise the spiritual temperature in their lives, so that they grow in faith and in love for the Church.

John Paul II erected the Work as a "Prelature," and Opus Dei reflected the ideal of the great Pope, who is now gone, of a Catholic Church in solidarity with all men and women, and an undisputed teacher of the truth. Is this atmosphere kept alive with Pope Benedict XVI?

The union of the faithful with the Roman Pontiff is an essential characteristic of the Church, and therefore of the Work. When St. Josemaría arrived in Rome, he spent a whole night in prayer while looking at the window of the Pope's apartment. And he taught us, his children, to have a filial devotion towards the Pope. Benedict XVI, in full continuity with John Paul II, is an exemplary pastor. For all Catholics he is an example of authentic Christianity.

November 28 was the 25th anniversary of the establishment of Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature. How did you celebrate this anniversary?

It was an opportunity to rediscover a great truth that St. Josemaría expressed in this way: many great things depend—don't forget it—on whether you and I live our lives as God wants.

Venezuela November 2008

You have been the Bishop Prelate of Opus Dei since 1994 and before that you lived for many years close to the Founder, St. Josemaría... Can you tell us what the message of Opus Dei is? What panorama does Opus Dei offer people today?

The core of Opus Dei's message is the universal call to holiness. God wants us all to be holy, every one of us: men and women, single and married, young and not so young, healthy and sick, intellectuals and manual workers, we are all called to the fullness of Christian life in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of our life. On October 2, 1928, St. Josemaría "saw" (this was how he always put it) that God was asking him to remind all people of the reality of this call. This is how God wanted the Work to be born, this "little portion" of the Church, which tries to remind people of that vocation.

St. Josemaría used to say that the message of the Work is as old and as new as the Gospel. This means that it is always up to date.

We have to find and stay close to God in the midst of the most diverse

situations of daily life, because he is present there, and he awaits our response, our effort to bring the world to God and, in a phrase of St. Josemaría, to “put Christ at the summit of all human activities” (*The Forge*, no. 685), thus helping to further the Church’s mission.

In the service that Opus Dei provides to the Church, do you put stress on social work and initiatives for the poor? Or is the emphasis rather on intellectual development and the Christian formation of people?

These two services are present in the Prelature of Opus Dei’s activity, and in the life of each of its faithful and of the people who participate in its formative activities. These aspects don’t contradict each other but are mutually related. It is impossible to give what one doesn’t have. The Church invites us to transmit God’s love with specific acts of service to all: to each according to his or her needs. But we have to be “well equipped” above all with God’s love. Therefore, Catholics need a deep Christian formation, with a knowledge of doctrine and a life of close friendship with Jesus Christ, through prayer and the sacraments.

Opus Dei helps men and women to behave in conformity with their Christian faith in their daily activities. And it offers them the required spiritual attention and formation. The principal apostolate of Opus Dei is that which each of its faithful carries out, acting in their own environment with personal initiative, with freedom and responsibility.

There are, in addition, many social works in which Opus Dei, as an institution, guarantees the Christian orientation. These are always not-for-profit undertakings, which offer educational services or social development. But there are many other activities that provide service to others, as a fruit, among other things, of the impetus that their promoters receive from being reminded, in the warmth of the spirit of Opus Dei, of their call to be saints.

There are many examples of this also in Venezuela. I had the opportunity to get to know some of these initiatives personally when I was there in 2001. I recall for example the work for the advancement of women carried out by the Kasanay Institute, on the outskirts of Maracaibo. I was also able to visit Monteávila University, in Caracas, which at that time was taking its first steps and which, like all work at a university, is trying to carry out a very important service to society. I also followed closely all the work that is being done from the parish of the Holy Family of Nazareth and St. Josemaría Escrivá. For example, the summary of the Catechism that they distributed recently in honor of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of Opus Dei. I am filled with deep joy and give thanks to God, together with the bishops and faithful of Venezuela, for initiatives such as these, which reach even small villages in the Andes or on the plains, and provide the opportunity to come to know Jesus Christ and his Church better.

Can you give us some ideas on how to be faithful to the Church's teachings in a world where values have been relativized in such an alarming way?

The spread of Christ's message always encounters a line of resistance, but what may be impossible for man is possible for God, and for a Christian assisted by divine grace. What is required is our struggle waged day by day, with well-done work, offered to God, being true friends of those around us, in the small opportunities to serve that are presented to us continually throughout the day. All of this is possible through the strength received in the Eucharist, in sacramental confession, and in the effort to persevere in prayer. St. Josemaría continually taught us the need for the Eucharist, which he defined as the center and root of the interior life.

The Church knows she is the bearer of a message of salvation, which she has received from God to spread to the ends of the earth. "Christianity, Catholicism is not a list of prohibitions, but a positive option . . . One has heard so much about what is not permitted that now it is necessary to say: in reality we have a positive idea to propose," Benedict XVI said on one occasion (Interview, August 13, 2006). In the face of relativism, Christians know they are anchored in Jesus Christ, who is never out of date, who has a perennial youthfulness, and who alone can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. We have to open wide the doors to Christ, as Pope John Paul II invited us to do, and let him enter our life, our family, our work, our world. We Christians,

I repeat, have to stay close to God in prayer and in the sacraments, so that our work too will be turned into prayer.

Opus Dei has come to remind everyone of the universal call to holiness and the sanctifying value of work. Could you explain to us in a practical way how it is possible for an ordinary person, through their daily work, to become holy? Isn't this somewhat Utopian?

St. Josemaría explained that "there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it" (*Conversations*, no. 114).

God created man, we read in the Book of Genesis, in order to work. And Christ himself gave us an example with his years of work in St. Joseph's carpenter shop, with his daily life in Nazareth.

All of this reflects a reality in the life of many Christians, who struggle each day to do their work well, to offer it all to God, the successes and the failures, what is easy and what is more difficult. How many people, in Venezuela and all over the world, get up early to take care of their family, or to leave for work; and they commend themselves to God from the first moment, and continue praying as they leave home; they ask him for patience in the face of obstacles or setback, and pray for their parents, for priests, and for all mankind, striving to finish their daily tasks well. All of this, which can seem so normal and ordinary, also opens for us the path of holiness.

For most people, their family holds first place among their duties of each day. Nevertheless, with so many sad experiences and marriage breakdowns, some people now have a real fear of marrying, and even more so when it's in the Church. What is the most important thing to enable married people to live united "until parted by death" and to be fully happy? Isn't it perhaps simply a "question of luck" that for some couples their married life "goes well"?

The vital importance that marriage and the family have for the Church and for society is clear. Marriage was raised by Christ to a Sacrament of the New Covenant. As Christ loved his Church, thus a man has to love his wife, ready to give his life for her. And so must the wife be faithful to her husband and make use of all of her ability and dedication to create a "bright and cheerful home," as St. Josemaría used to say. In contrast, when people seek to satisfy their own selfishness, when they think more about themselves than about the others, difficulties and crises will necessarily arise in marriage and family life.

As this holy priest also pointed out, "You need a heart which is in love, not an easy life, to achieve happiness" (*Furrow*, 795). And love is shown in sacrifice, in the capacity to forget about oneself and give oneself to one's neighbor. Husband and wife, created for one another, have to discover their vocation to love; and they need to understand that, if they want to fulfill their high calling well, they have to prepare themselves and pray a lot. Marital happiness is built up each day, through details of serv-

ice and affection, learning to forgive and to ask forgiveness, to understand, to love.

In Venezuela, as well as everywhere, there are many exemplary marriages, spouses who live for one another, and who have built up, with a lot of love and more than a few sacrifices, families that are welcoming, congenial, and cheerful. I invite young Venezuelans to look to these examples, to not let themselves be persuaded by the false models that so often are set before us, and to know they are pioneers, because each has to struggle, with God's help, to respond with love to his or her vocation.

In the face of the panorama presented by today's world, many people lament how evil has prospered and how widespread the "weeds" are. St. Josemaría used to say that we have to "drown evil in an abundance of good." We have also heard you say that the times we live in are marvelous times. Could you explain these ideas better? How is it possible to drown evil with good and what are the reasons for Christian optimism?

Actually these are marvelous times in which we have been called to live, and in which God has called us to know and love him, to carry him everywhere. We are seeing great technological, scientific and medical developments, and also in the area of communication. We are confronting, in different ways in different countries, more than a few problems with the advance of moral relativism, the spread of drugs, the instability of families, the irresponsibility

of parents in raising their children, etc. The Church, however, knows that the answer to the great questions and challenges is found in a Person, Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us and who communicates to us, through the power of his resurrection, hope [that] does not disappoint us (*Rom 5:5*).

Jesus has conquered death, sin and the devil. He accompanies us in the Eucharist. He seeks us and listens to us at every moment. With the Father, he sends us the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts and to infuse his own divine life into us. Don't we have deep reasons to be filled with hope?

Certainly, our personal effort is needed, our struggle, because God wants to count on our response to help make this world of ours more human. "These world crises are crises of saints," wrote St. Josemaría (*The Way*, no. 301). The response to the proliferation of evil should, therefore, be a humble and resolute effort to live our vocation to holiness.

You were in Venezuela in 1974 and 1975, accompanying St. Josemaría

during his catechetical trips to our country; and also seven years ago, in August of 2001. Could you share some memories of these trips with our readers at the end of this interview?

St. Josemaría had great affection for Venezuela and its people. I can say that I do too. I recall, for example, what our Founder said in a meeting with a large group of people in 1975, a few months before his death. Someone asked him what he hoped for from Venezuela, and he answered: "I hope for this nation which is so great, so great, that you have a beautiful present, and a future filled with God's blessings, that you be more Christian every day. More Christian in people's minds, in their faith and customs, in their way of living and working and loving one another, contributing to peace in the world." I ask God that this desire and hope of St. Josemaría becomes a reality. I direct myself to Our Lady of Coromot, so that she continue protecting this land of hers, and fill with blessings her Church on pilgrimage in Venezuela, and all men and women, whether Catholics or not, in this great country.