

or a motive of drawing nearer to the Church, and, above all, a renewed interest in getting closer to that “God who is near us” who the Pope proclaims. There are many of us who feels ourselves enriched every day by this joyful proclamation of Benedict XVI, seasoned by the light of the faith, expressed with all the resources of intellect, in crystal-clear language, and with the testimony of his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. May God conserve him for us for many years as a guide for the Church, for the good of all mankind.

✠ Javier Echevarría
Prelate of Opus Dei

Interview granted to the magazine *Palabra*, Spain (June, 2010)

At the conclusion of the Year for Priests

1. *The Year for Priests convoked by the Holy Father on the anniversary of the Holy Curé of Ars’ death is about to end. You had the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to Ars recently. Since the Church points to him as a model for priests, what do you see as the most important features of the life of St. Jean Marie Vianney?*

His humility, his piety, his spirit of joyful penance, among many other things. But I think the most important feature of the life of the Holy Curé of Ars is his complete dedication to his ministry. This is why, at

the end of the Year for Priests, Benedict XVI proclaimed him as the patron of all priests (he had already been patron of confessors for some time). The figure of St. Jean Marie Vianney is a strong call for us to be priests through and through: for the good of souls we have to be ready to set aside anything that could hinder, even if only slightly, our pastoral service. As a holy pastor of our own day and age, St. Josemaría Escrivá, used to say graphically, we have to be *one hundred percent priests*.

2. *The work of priests is assisted by many good points in people: for example, the readiness of many young people to take part in volunteer work, and their openness to the faith. But at times it also meets with reasons for discouragement and resistance: religious ignorance, a secularist mentality, misunderstandings, etc. In spite of all this, can priests work with confidence today?*

We not only can but should carry out our priestly work with optimism and confidence. But we need to keep in mind that the effectiveness of our ministry does not come from ourselves—from our preparation, our qualities, etc., although we have to be diligent in all this in order to be better instruments—but from the action of Christ working through each priest. At the same time, we have to overcome any resistance, by spreading the truth with charity.

3. *The priestly life revolves, in great measure, around the liturgy. Its highest moment is the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sunday. Could you make some specific recommendations to priests, to help foster a fruitful celebration?*

The Eucharistic Sacrifice, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, is the “center and root of the whole life of the priest” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 14). For this to become a reality, it is good to prepare for Mass already from the night before, with acts of love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, with spiritual communions, with desires to accompany him in the tabernacle; and later, after Mass, to extend one’s act of thanksgiving for the Holy Sacrifice throughout the day. This is what I saw in the life of the Founder of Opus Dei, who was a priest deeply in love with Jesus Christ. For a fruitful celebration, it is especially useful to frequently meditate on the texts and liturgical rubrics, in order to penetrate deeply into their meaning. In any case, we have to foster a hunger to lend Christ our whole being in the sacramental actualization of the Sacrifice of Calvary.

4. *What makes preaching effective? Do you have any specific advice from your own experience on how to prepare it?*

There are many ways to prepare for preaching. As the Synod on the Eucharist explained, the homily has an exhortative and catechetical purpose (cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 46), and should not be confused with a conference or a class. It has to be the fruit of the priest’s own conversation with our Lord. Without interior life, without piety, persuasive words are of little value. St. Augustine counseled the one who preaches to do everything possible to make his words pleasant and agreeable. “But always remember,” he added, “that

any beneficial result will be due more to the piety of his prayers than to his oratorical gifts. Therefore, while praying for those he is speaking to, he should be more a man of prayer than of eloquence” (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4, 15, 32). This seems to me a very timely piece of advice.

5. *In your intervention at the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist, you referred to concelebrations. What is your experience? Is there a way to facilitate the pious participation of all the concelebrants, even though many priests are involved?*

In the Synod I spoke about a common experience: in more than a few cases, concelebrations—especially with many concelebrants—make it difficult for priests to participate piously, both during the Eucharistic celebration itself as well as in the necessary personal preparation. In those concelebrations with many priests, it is easy to lose the sense of adoration proper to the Eucharistic mystery, in part because there are so many opportunities for distraction.

Benedict XVI made reference to these difficulties in the Post Synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, when he stressed that these types of concelebrations should be something exceptional, while also saying it would be good to study adequate ways of assuring the decorum of the liturgy and safeguarding the full and real participation of the priests and faithful in the celebration (cf. SC 61), with the necessary order and distinction of functions proper to each.

6. *A treasure of the priesthood is the administration of divine forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance. You said recently that there is no real crisis of confession, but that, in any case, it would be more correct to speak of a crisis of confessors. To what were you referring?*

This is not a phrase of my own, but something that the Roman Pontiffs from Paul VI to Benedict XVI have been saying. This reality is also confirmed by experience. I know of many cases in which the administration of the sacrament of Reconciliation in its ordinary form has received a great spur simply from having confessors in the churches with clear schedules and at times that are favorable for the faithful. I recall, for example, that during the Holy Year of 2000, in Rome, we witnessed a “rediscovery” of confession among all sorts of people, especially the young, because this practice was carefully followed.

The example of the Curé of Ars is eloquent. A priest with the care of souls cannot remain tranquil if he does not dedicate all the time required for this ministry, if he does not love the confessional and await souls there. And the others priests (I am thinking of those who work in curia offices, in teaching positions, etc.) can also help out in such an important pastoral task, dedicating some time to hearing confessions on feast days, weekends, etc.

7. *Ignorance in religious matters is so evident in many places. What importance does catechetical and formative work have here? How can this*

work be combined with a priest's other occupations?

Giving formation to the faithful is of capital importance, and is absolutely essential nowadays. Formerly, in many places, education in the family and the schools guaranteed that children and young people knew the basic truths of the faith, the fundamental Christian prayers, the difference between good and evil. Today, in many countries, this is no longer the case, and priests need to remedy this lack by making a greater effort, especially if they have been entrusted with the care of souls in parishes, chaplaincies, associations, etc.

If we don't do all we can to teach the younger generations the faith and morality of Christ, everything else that we do, even though good, will be insufficient. Religious instruction is a task that the priest cannot delegate, although naturally he can and should seek people who can assist him. What a great work has been and is being done through catechism classes in so many places.

How to combine this greater dedication with other priestly activities depends on each specific case. Often it is enough to organize very well the classes of preparation for First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and Matrimony, stressing what is truly essential. It can also be useful to have a program that can be developed in the Sunday homilies, with the goal of explaining the fundamental topics of the faith, morality, and the liturgy, following the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as the

Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist advised (cf. SC 46).

8. *Scripture says that a brother helped by another is like a "walled city." St. Josemaría Escrivá, the Founder of Opus Dei, liked that expression. We priests always need, and owe to others, that strength. Can you speak about fraternity among priests, and the union of each with the bishop?*

We can start with the fact that we are all weak. St. Josemaría illustrated the meaning of priestly fraternity—and, more generally, of Christian fraternity—with an image taken from ordinary life. We all recall the houses of cards that we probably built when we were children. The Founder of Opus Dei pointed out that Christians, by supporting one another through charity, are able to build those houses. "If you live that blessed fraternal spirit your mutual weakness will also be a support to keep you upright in the fulfillment of duty: just as in a house of cards, one card supports another" (*The Way*, no. 462).

Just as the first duty of bishops is to care for their priests, so one of the first duties of priests is to help their brother priests to be faithful ministers of our Lord. To do so, we need to pray for one another, and never leave anyone alone in their spiritual or material needs; we need to visit the sick, and offer cheerfully to help anyone who has an excessive workload, etc. In this regard, the Church recommends priestly associations approved by the legitimate authority that offer this attention to the deacons and priests.

Regarding the union of each priest with his bishop, we can recall here that by its very nature the priesthood, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, exists to collaborate with the episcopate in all that refers to the priestly ministry (LG 28, PO 4). Moreover, union with one's own bishop is very important. This union should be wholehearted and involve more than just hierarchical subordination; together with obedience and ministerial availability, it should lead every priest to keep his bishop very present in his prayer and sacrifice.

9. *What can be done to awaken many new priestly vocations?*

The first step, as always, is to pray to the Lord of the harvest. But we must truly pray, without tiring, explaining to the other faithful in the Church that everyone has the duty to foster vocations to the priesthood. Then, at the same time, we need to examine specific actions we can undertake to foster God's call among young men. It would not be good to leave this responsibility exclusively to the person or persons in charge of pastoral vocations in the diocese: we all need to feel the responsibility of leaving at least one successor, who can take our place when we are old, or when God calls us into his presence.

Many priests know by personal experience that it is very effective to dedicate special attention to the altar boys and other young fellows who help out in the parishes, fostering Eucharistic piety in them, teaching them to pray, to serve others, etc. The same can be said of religion

teachers, who can find among their students those who have the human qualities suitable for our Lord to sow in them a priestly vocation. And a privileged place is the confessional, to carry out spiritual direction, and to accompany those who show they have the qualities needed for the priesthood.

10. *You preside over the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which is intrinsically united to the Prelature of Opus Dei. What is the purpose of this association of priests?*

To foster at every moment the full communion of each priest with his bishop and with the presbyterate of the diocese. The members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross strive to live the spirit of Opus Dei, and thus they seek their own sanctification in the exercise of their ministry and in the secular environment proper to their vocation. For this, they are offered—as are many other priests who so desire—the means to improve their doctrinal, ascetic, and spiritual formation by means of periodical gatherings, personal accompaniment, courses of permanent formation, etc.

11. *As Prelate of Opus Dei, your role has been to be the successor—after Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, whose reputation for sanctity is widespread—to St. Josemaría, at the head of the Work. What aspect of his life would you like to highlight this year?*

Both St. Josemaría and his first successor, the Servant of God Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, were priests one hundred percent. They

dedicated themselves to the fulfillment of the mission they had received and carried it out with exemplary fidelity and intense pastoral charity. Both were noted for an ardent love for the Eucharist, shown in many specific details, and a zeal for souls that spurred them to forget about themselves and think only about the good of others. I won't go into specific details here, which would go beyond the limits of this interview and can be found in their published biographies.

12. *It seems that the moment is near for the beatification of the Venerable Servant of God, John Paul II. What memories do you have of his priestly example and personality? Could you mention any specific encounter with Pope Wojtyła?*

He was a holy priest and an untiring servant of the Church, concerned only for the good of souls. We all await eagerly the moment when he will be elevated to the altars, because it will be a great good for the whole world.

I bear deeply engraved on my memory an event that shows the generous dedication of John Paul II to his mission as successor of St. Peter. On one occasion I accompanied Bishop Álvaro del Portillo to the Pope's apartment. It was late in the evening. As we awaited the arrival of the Pope, we heard someone approaching along a passageway as though he was dragging his feet. It was the Holy Father; whom we could see was very tired. Don Álvaro, moved by filial affection, exclaimed: "Your Holiness, how tired

you are.” The Pope looked at him and, in a firm voice, answered: “If I was not tired at this hour of the evening, it would be a sign that I had not fulfilled my duty.”

I also can never forget that John Paul II was the instrument God made use of to canonize St. Josemaría, holding him up a model to the whole Church, and to grant Opus Dei its definitive juridical configuration, in full fidelity to its foundational charism, as a personal prelature, organically structured by the Prelate, its presbyterium, and its lay faithful. We are very thankful to him for this as well.

13. *Twenty-five years ago the World Youth Days began. We are now approaching the one that will be held in 2011, in Madrid. How do you view these gatherings, and do you see any way to make them more fruitful?*

The spiritual fruit of these gatherings is clear to everyone. It is not up to me to suggest innovations. My role is to pray—now, for the World Youth Day that will be held in Madrid—and encourage the faithful and cooperators of the Prelature to pray and to help out personally, to the extent that each one can, in making this event a moment of grace in the Church. As Benedict XVI said at the beginning of his Pontificate, the Church is always young and beautiful, and assists young people in confronting the challenges of the future.

14. *In the face of some sad news recently, some people have begun once again to question celibacy. So this could be a good occasion to explain once more*

the reasons for priestly celibacy and the fruit that should be derived from it.

There are serious scientific studies—including some by non-Catholic specialists—showing that the discipline of priestly celibacy has nothing to do with those lamentable cases that have been recently revealed. Even more, when it is lived as it truly is, as a divine gift, out of love for God and all mankind (although one sometimes has to struggle to faithfully preserve it), celibacy places the priest at the diametrically opposite pole from such deviant behavior.

Yes, at the present moment it is particularly opportune to look once again at and go more deeply into the reasons—which are more than simply practical ones—that closely link the priesthood and celibacy, a double and very great gift of God.

15. *The Holy Father has received many signs of affection from people, to try to compensate for the recent attacks against him. With a broader perspective than just the present moment, how can priests live unity with the Pope, and foster it among the faithful?*

The best way to support the Holy Father, now as always, is summed up in praying and getting others to pray for him and for his intentions. We also need to read, meditate on, spread and put into practice his teachings, and pray for those who assist him in governing the Church, so that their service to the universal mission of the Roman Pontiff may be very effective.

16. *It seems clear that the immense*

work of the Church for the good of souls is not sufficiently well known and understood. What needs to be done here?

Besides praying—excuse my insistence, but praying with faith is the essential thing—it would be opportune to have well-prepared professionals competent in the communications media at the level of the Bishops' Conferences, and also in each diocese. "Good will" is not enough to inform adequately about the Church. One needs to know the methods of institutional communication, crisis management, etc., which are especially needed in the context of the globalization that marks today's society. In this regard, I am happy to note that the courses in the School of Institutional Communication at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross are very popular. These courses are meant specifically for people who occupy communication posts in the press offices of dioceses, bishops' conferences and other institutions of the Church.

17. *Once the Year for Priests is over, what should we retain from this celebration?*

In priests, a deep personal renewal, with specific and daily interior conversions, aimed at living their ministry with a more refined fidelity, and a greater daily love for the celebration of the Eucharist and the administration of the sacrament of Penance. And in the other faithful, a greater awareness—not only with words, but with deeds—that we all make up the Church. The future depends on them as well: on how they fulfill their Christian du-

ties; on how they pray for the Pope, for the bishops, and for priests; on how they raise their children; on how they exercise their priestly soul also in their work, in times of rest; on how diligently they ask our Lord to send many holy laborers into his vineyard.

Interview granted to the weekly *Paraula*, Valencia, Spain (June 20-26, 2010)

(by Francisco Pastor)

Benedict XVI convoked the Year for Priests that we are now celebrating. What are the great challenges faced by the priesthood in our time? How does the Prelature of Opus Dei view this event?

I think the most important challenge, and the key to all the others, is the need for priests to struggle to be holy: to let God act in us and through our ministry. Benedict XVI, in proclaiming the Year for Priests, exhorted us to a deep interior renewal that will help spread the *mag-nalia Dei*, the divine marvels, to all humanity, by our words and deeds.

The message of St. Josemaría invites priests to sanctify themselves in the exercise of their ministry, which is at the service of the common priesthood of all the faithful. Among the many challenges this involves is that of learning each day to celebrate Holy Mass well. We priests need to