

I truly appreciate the words of affection and closeness that have come to me from different parts of the great family of the Church, including from this beloved diocese of Malaga. Pope Francis wrote to me expressing his affection and prayer, and I often go back to his words. I have also received letters that have moved me from bishops, priests, communities of men and women religious. I remember now one from a young boy suffering from cancer, who sent me his support and prayer from the hospital. The countless messages that I received from the faithful of the Prelature have helped me a lot; they show a unity of prayer and intentions that moves me, and that without a doubt is a gift from God. I don't want to ever get used to these gestures of affection. True love makes any responsibility easier to bear. I ask God, and Our Lady of Victory, to help me carry out this service with the generosity Bishop Javier Echevarría showed.

## Interview granted to *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany (September 3, 2017)

*By Constanze Reuscher*

*You are the first person at the head of Opus Dei who has not had a personal relationship with the founder.*

*What does this mean for your work?*

I met the founder when I was 19 years old. Later on I was able to see him more often, during the last eight years of his life, since (although I didn't work closely with him) from 1967 to 1975 I had the good fortune to live in the same house that he lived in. I listened to his preaching and saw the fatherly affection with which he treated all of us. His teachings and example impressed me and have remained forever engraved on my memory. Now I entrust myself daily to St. Josemaría and ask him to intercede for me in my task.

Being the successor of a saint is a great responsibility, which brings with it the desire to be faithful. I ask God to help me give continuity to the spirit we have received, with the creativity required of every Christian, just as my predecessors did. Their fidelity was never rigidity, since historical circumstances and new challenges often demand new solutions.

*You were born in exile, in Paris, because your parents had been forced to flee from Franco's regime. Does this affect your work in the Prelature, since at times people claim that Opus Dei had ties to Franco and to South American dictatorships?*

My father had to flee from Spain in 1939 because of the Civil War, since he was in the military

and loyal to the Republic, and therefore opposed to the Franco regime. As soon as he could, he arranged to bring the whole family to France.

Exile forces one to confront the consequences of a lack of freedom, although in my case I was too young to understand what was happening. In the environment of an exiled family, I learned the value of personal freedom. Maybe this was one of the reasons why the spirit of Opus Dei attracted me so strongly; in the Prelature personal freedom and responsibility are strongly fostered. They are two sides of the same coin—for life in society as well as for the spiritual life.

Opus Dei, as such, is as completely independent of politics as is a diocese or a parish. Otherwise it would be violating its purely religious, spiritual purpose. But any person in Opus Dei—as any other Catholic—can have whatever political opinion they deem opportune, provided that it respects the rules of civil co-existence and is not opposed to the teachings of the Church.

The supposed tie to Franco that you mention is due to the historical fact that a small number of members of Opus Dei were ministers during the Francoist period. But keep in mind that all ministers in the Franco regime (more than one hundred among the various governments) were Catholics;

those who belonged to Opus Dei can be counted on one's fingers, and certainly they were not a "group." When St. Josemaría learned of their appointments he acted according to his normal way of acting: respecting their freedom, although he knew he would face some difficulties in terms of "public opinion." But at the same time, he also defended the freedom of other members of Opus Dei who thought just the opposite.

In post-war Spain, a great majority of Catholics sympathized with the Franco regime, especially after having experienced the fierce persecution against the Church in the months that preceded the war. Seeing the historical context helps one to understand decisions that today some may find incomprehensible. In Opus Dei there were also other people with strong anti-Francoist convictions. Some of them were subjected to defamation campaigns in the press by the official party of the regime (the Falange), such as Rafael Calvo Serer, a member of Opus Dei who had to live in exile for many years. I also knew a number of university students in Opus Dei who took part, along with many others of their age, in the first public movements against that regime.

However, I don't know the origins of that perception you mentioned about Latin America. The reality is that none of those dictatorships had any minister or person in a similar position who was a

member of the Prelature. Sometimes there is too much fantasy in the collective imagination, and one can only react with patience.

*Opus Dei is famous for continuing to be a conservative community that seeks to influence politics. Is that true?*

Dividing Christians into “conservatives” and “progressives” perhaps reveals, deep down, an attitude of exclusion, an attitude of marginalization towards those who think differently from oneself. I understand that it can be easier to explain the Church by reducing it to monolithic and opposed blocks, but in doing so we lose the variety of opinions that enrich it.

If one is speaking about “pre-serving” the essence of the Gospel, then yes, every Christian is a conservative; and if it’s a matter of applying the Gospel to one’s own life, then every Christian is a “progressive,” because he or she wants to grow and make progress.

In any case, I prefer to avoid categories of this sort, which I see as ill-suited.

As I said before, Opus Dei and politics are very different realities. It would be wrong to attribute to this institution of the Church the political choices of its members, choices that, thank God, are quite varied.

*Opus Dei is above all an organi-*

*zation of lay people, but it has a priest at the head. What is the relationship between its laity and clergy?*

In fact, 98 percent of the faithful of Opus Dei are lay people, from every social strata and, for the most part, married. The relationship with the remaining 2 percent (the priests) is typical of every part of the Church to which lay people and priests belong.

Opus Dei is neither an association of lay persons helped by priests, nor an organization of priests with which some lay people cooperate. From the beginning, Saint Josemaría wanted us to be an organic structure of lay people and priests, whose relationship is that which exists between the common priesthood (the priesthood that all the baptized share) and the ministerial priesthood (the ordained clergy), which is a constitutive relationship of the Church.

The canonical figure of the personal Prelature accords well with this theological and pastoral reality. The laity and the priests are enriched spiritually by their specific vocation and mutual interdependence.

*Can you explain the three principal aims of the Prelature?*

The Prelature offers Christian formation and spiritual assistance to its faithful and those who approach it with the desire to grow in

their own spiritual life and in charity towards others. It seeks to remind people of the universal call to holiness: we are all called to our Merciful Father God's embrace in heaven, whatever our situation.

It seeks to bring Christ and the Church everywhere, spreading the hope offered by the Gospel. It seeks to remind the businessman, the doctor, the street sweeper, the journalist, the cook, in short, everyone, that God is not far off, but can be found in ordinary life, especially in work that is well done in service of others, in daily life made up of prayer, setbacks, and joys.

After being named Prelate by Pope Francis, I pointed to three main goals that are especially urgent for all Catholics: accompanying young people on their path of faith, serving the sick and those most in need (they are at the heart of the Gospel), and helping families that are starting to build their future, since they are the hope of society and suffer in a special way from the evils that afflict it.

*Opus Dei is also in Germany. Is there any activity of special interest for public opinion?*

Opus Dei has been present in Germany since 1952, and since then many activities have been carried out in the field of Christian formation and catechesis.

There are some very visible re-

alities, so to speak, such as the parish of St. Pantaleon, in Cologne, entrusted to priests of the Prelature; but at the same time, there are many people of Opus Dei who assist the parish and diocesan organizations of the places where they live.

Other better known activities include, for example, the International College Campus Müngersdorf, a women's residence in Cologne where, since the 60s, both Catholics and non-Catholics have found a home during their university years; the center for university encounters *MaxTor95* in Munich, which is currently building a new site, closer to the university; and many others.

In addition to these and other initiatives, I like to think about the many faithful of Opus Dei who, spurred by their personal encounter with Christ, help organize service activities that rarely receive headlines. Specifically, not only young people but also the elderly are making the effort to assist refugees: in soup kitchens, in the struggle to get official documents from municipal and health authorities, dealing with landlords, etc.

I remember, for example, the efforts of a high school teacher in the Ruhr area to help Syrian refugees to integrate successfully in the German education system. Also, this week, some university students at the Campus Müngersdorf are carrying out a project to

assist boys and girls who have been traumatized by their experience as refugees. And I could mention many other examples, such as an “integrated residence” where elderly people co-exist with young people, which was begun by a woman of the Work, or the family orientation courses and preparation for marriage initiatives that take place in the various centers.

Since 1994, more than 150 young Germans have participated actively in the *Schule statt Straße* (school instead of the street), organizing work camps in isolated villages of Uganda and Kenya, where they help construct primary schools under the direction of local workers. This is an initiative of two men of Opus Dei.

*In Rome there are a number of pontifical universities. What is the specific role and special nature of yours?*

The University of the Holy Cross seeks to delve deeply into the intellectual and anthropological riches of the faith, opening up a dialogue with the challenges of contemporary culture.

The work that is carried out there strives to respond to the special situation of today’s world, with its light and shadows, helping to form men and women of faith, capable of dialoging with the modern world and offering people in a convincing way the light of Christ.

Without going into the specifics of each of its departments, I would say that —following the heritage of St. Josemaría— a special effort is made to harmonize professional and intellectual training with spiritual and theological formation.

Obviously these are challenges that we share with the rest of the universities and centers of study in Rome, with whom we want to collaborate and from whom we want to learn.

*What is your opinion of the image that is transmitted about Opus Dei by certain books and popular films, such as that of the American writer Dan Brown?*

I think sometimes there is no other remedy than to respond to these types of things with a smile and work so that the reality eventually emerges.

The main problem with that book was the frivolous and superficial way it depicted the Person of Christ. As a result, many Christians sought to take advantage of that outpouring of public interest, that need to carry out a widespread catechesis on the true figure of Jesus and on the reality of the Church.

The caricature of Opus Dei was so far removed from reality that it was almost comical, even grotesque. Looking at all this with some perspective now, I can say that it may have helped to

provide experience on how to make oneself better known to a much wider audience. And I give thanks to God for the thousands of people who have come closer to the Church through this apparent setback.

From the perspective of faith, criticisms and attacks have always spurred Christians to pray more, to be humble, and to seek to share with others the joy of a life lived in accord with the Gospel. The founder of Opus Dei used to say that these attacks and blows led to the seed of the Christian faith spreading throughout the whole world. Something similar happened with the misunderstandings and confusions generated by this book, although obviously I wouldn't want anyone to have to go through a similar situation, which consumes so much time and energy to make the truth known.

## Interview Granted to *Alfa y Omega*, Spain (September 14, 2017)

He tends to fold his arms and then his face broadens into a smile as he speaks softly, but with gentle humor. At 72, he still has a good backhand at tennis. His sober expression is lightened by a deep but affable look.

*After your election as the Prelate*

*of Opus Dei, I don't know whether to congratulate you or give my condolences for the burden that has fallen on your shoulders. How does it feel to be the spiritual father of thousands of people all over the world?*

Though I am certainly aware of my great responsibility, I am not troubled by it. Above all, it helps me to know that God, when he gives someone a mission, a job to do, also gives the necessary graces to carry it out.

It also comforts me that the Holy Father has shown me his closeness and affection in a very tangible way, both when I was first named Prelate and afterwards when I had the occasion of seeing him. I also feel supported by the prayer and affection of so many people. I remember a letter I received from a young boy in a hospital who said he was offering his sufferings for me; and the letters of support from so many members of Opus Dei and other people. That's how I explain the serenity I have had during these past months.

*After you were elected Prelate, did your opponents let you win in your tennis games?*

I hope not; I would realize it right away and the game would lose interest.

*Recently you made your first pastoral trip to Spain to visit the faithful and friends of Opus Dei. What message did you want to transmit in so*