

fears, they denounce the same injustices and have the same hopes. And amid these challenges, their daily meeting with Jesus, in the Eucharist and in prayer, spurs them to go out to share with everyone the joy and hope of the Gospel.

This effort is also shown in their Christian consistency even in quite small gestures, such as a simple smile or lending a hand to someone who is tired—and also when making important decisions that affect the good of many other people. Sometimes even small gestures, added to those of so many others, can help to spread joy and hope in the world.

## Interview Granted to *Tertio*, Belgium (November 8, 2017)

By Immanuel Van Lierde

*How did you meet Opus Dei? What led you to discover your vocation to Opus Dei and to the priesthood?*

I met Opus Dei through one of my brothers, whom I'm very thankful to. He invited me to take part in some formational classes organized in a center for young students. I liked the environment, the friendly and practical tone of

those classes. However, since in the Jesuit school where I was studying we already had enough religious formation classes, I didn't see the need to continue participating. Later, in 1961, during the summer before attending the university, I started going around to another center of Opus Dei. When during that summer the possibility was raised of my joining the Work, I thought about it a lot. I prayed and concluded that God was asking me for this, and I wrote a letter to the founder asking for admission. It was that simple.

Six years later, I accepted the invitation to move to Rome, to deepen my philosophical and theological studies. And that's where the possibility of serving others in a new way, through the priesthood, was opened to me. The founder himself, St. Josemaría Escrivá, was the one who asked me if I was willing to be ordained. Since it was something that was already in my mind, little was needed to decide. These are fundamental decisions that are made in prayer, in dialogue with Christ.

*You are the third successor of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, founder of Opus Dei. What was his specific charism and why did he found Opus Dei? Do you have personal memories of St. Josemaría?*

St. Josemaría said that Opus Dei was not his idea, but the result of an inspiration from God, which took place in Madrid on October

2, 1928. Neither the Christian context of the time, nor the reflections of young Josemaría based on his theological studies, nor his intense prayer life in the years prior to the foundation of the Work, explain the birth of Opus Dei, although logically they helped him to receive that foundational light with the appropriate dispositions.

His essential message is the need to seek God—our good and merciful Father—in our daily activities, especially in our professional work, and also in our family life and friendships. The mission of this prelature of the Catholic Church is to remind people that holiness is not a goal for the privileged, but something accessible to you, to me, to a young person or an elderly one, to the mother or father of a family, to the healthy or sick, the rich or the poor. In the words of the founder, its message is “as old as the Gospel, and like the Gospel new.”

I first met St. Josemaría when he came to see those of us who were attending a summer course at the University of Navarra, in the summer 1963. I was drawn by his human warmth, and his ability to speak with simplicity about deep realities. But it was above all in Rome, from October 1967 until his death in June 1975, that I had more contact with him in smaller groups, and sometimes in personal conversations.

What struck me, above all, was his love for God, for our Lady and for the Church; his love for freedom and his good humor. I remember him as a person with a very big heart, who made his own the needs of others and who knew how to bring us to God. I also remember him as a person who governed wisely—energetic and decisive when necessary.

*What are the priorities of Opus Dei in today's world? How is the original charism applicable to our day and age?*

The main objective is that every woman and man who takes part in Opus Dei's apostolic activities feels accompanied and helped to live Christianity in its fullness, sanctifying their professional work and all the other tasks and circumstances of ordinary life. For this to happen, the first thing needed is to contemplate Jesus Christ. Hence St. Josemaría's advice will always be valid: “May you seek Christ; may you find Christ; may you love Christ.” We need to enter more and more deeply into the paths of contemplation in the middle of the world, amid each one's profession, whether in the great buildings of Brussels or in the peripheries of the large metropolises such as Sao Paulo, Lagos, Mexico City, or Manila.

Opus Dei's General Congress, which took place in January 2017, highlighted as priorities, among other things, the work of evangelization in the field of the family, of

young people, and of the most needy. Today it is especially necessary to rediscover the beauty of matrimonial love. As regards young people, a key need is to help them find the answers to their yearnings, concerns, and ideals. As for the needy, both in body and in spirit, it is important to keep in mind that they are at the center of the Gospel and in Christ's heart. We need to continue fostering initiatives that help alleviate their specific needs in this wounded world of ours, through which one can transmit to them the consolation of God.

*Many lay people are members of Opus Dei. What is your opinion about the apostolate of the laity? How can they be witnesses to the faith in their jobs and secular tasks? How can one empower the laity in the Church and in society?*

The ministerial priesthood is essential in the Church. Without the sacraments—especially the Eucharist and Penance, which only the priest can administer—the apostolate of the laity would be completely inadequate. However, without the apostolate of the laity the ministerial priesthood would be extraordinarily limited. What could we priests do to educate the new generations in the faith without the assistance of fathers and mothers? How could the pastoral work of priests reach so many people from the world of science, economics, human rights, politics, art,

journalism, and so many other professions and jobs?

St. Josemaría said that the most specific way lay people contribute to sanctity and apostolate in the Church is by bringing the leaven of the Christian message to society, through their free and responsible action in temporal structures.

There, in society, lay people evangelize with their example—with their honesty, industriousness, justice, joy, loyalty, faith, and fraternity with everyone. Through friendship with their colleagues and the professional prestige their work gives them, they can help others personally to encounter the Gospel, despite the limitations we all have and our mistakes.

The Second Vatican Council reminded us that this is the main mission of the laity in the Church. This doesn't mean that some are not called, in addition, to positions of responsibility in the structure of the Church which don't require for their exercise having received the sacrament of Holy Orders. This is another example of generosity and service to others. But let's not forget that this is not what is essential to the lay person, and, as Pope Francis says, encouraging the role of lay people in the Church doesn't mean "clericalizing" them.

*Various prejudices and negative perceptions exist regarding Opus Dei. How can we counteract these perceptions and make it clear that people should not be afraid of Opus Dei?*

In the face of criticisms, from wherever they may come, the first thing we need to do is to examine our own conduct, to see if they are justified in any way because of our own behavior, our lack of correspondence to God's grace; and if so, we need to correct ourselves. We also need to be patient. Opus Dei is still quite young and new realities in the life of the Church and society have often met with difficulties.

I sincerely think that there is no reason to be "afraid" (to use the word that you did) of Opus Dei, inside or outside the Church. We don't seek to impose ourselves on others or to impose anything. We love—and not only respect—our own freedom and that of everyone, also the freedom of those who don't think or live like us. The only ambition of a Christian, whether in Opus Dei or not, is to show how Christian hope responds to the longing for happiness in each person's heart.

*Recently you said to the press that there is a warm relationship between Pope Francis and Opus Dei. How does Opus Dei support the priorities of this Pope: to be merciful, to reach out to the peripheries and the poor, to be a poor Church for the poor, to show others the joy of the Gospel, to provide assistance to families, to young people and to the elderly, to care for our "common home" ...?*

Like all Catholics, we know that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ in the universal Church. And that

Catholics need to strive to be united to the head, to bring—as St. Josemaría said—"Rome to the peripheries and the peripheries to Rome."

In the audience that he granted me after my appointment, the Pope was very affectionate and close, and expressed interest in the apostolic work of Opus Dei in a number of different countries. He gave me advice on how to respond, with fidelity to the charism received from the founder, to the changing circumstances of each time and place. Among other things, he encouraged us to make a special effort to evangelize the "periphery of the middle classes": to bring God's love to the immense world of the human professions. There was also an opportunity to speak about some of the initiatives that people of the Prelature and friends have begun, to try to alleviate pressing human needs in various countries, including the integration of refugees and immigrants in Germany, initiatives for palliative care in places of the so-called "first world," new projects to advance human dignity in poor neighborhoods of different cities, and activities for human and Christian formation in many countries of the world.

Of course, we try to support the priorities of Pope Francis with the means at our disposal and we would like to do much more.

*In 2018 there will be a Synod*

*dedicated to young people and vocations. Today, in many places, young people feel dejected, without ideals and often without hope. How can we give hope, faith and love to young people? What can the Church and Opus Dei offer them?*

We Christians have an answer to offer young people, although often it may not be heard because of so much noise on the social networks and discouragement in their hearts because of corruption and injustice.

The Christian challenge, as Benedict XVI and Francis have reminded us, is not only or mainly offering a body of teachings, let alone a series of hard-to-understand precepts, but a person: Jesus of Nazareth. We need to help each young person to find Christ; to face the God-man, who knows us and loves us personally.

From the Cross or from the consecrated Host, Jesus looks at each one of us. He tells us that he knows us by our name, and that he also knows our mistakes, discouragements and miseries. But despite everything he has decided to come into this world, to suffer the passion and die to attain happiness for us, both earthly and eternal. And that he only asks for our correspondence.

We Christians need to present this panorama to the current generation, especially to the many

young people who have already found Jesus and who can draw close to their friends more easily than adults. This apostolate has to be done, first of all, with prayer, then with our lives, and finally with our word.

*In Rome, Opus Dei is also responsible for the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. What are the strengths of this University? How does it serve the Church? What do you expect from the mission of this academic center?*

The University of the Holy Cross is one of the youngest pontifical universities. I must admit that I have a special place for it in my heart, because it has been desired by St. Josemaría, founded by his successor, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, and followed very closely by my predecessor, Bishop Javier Echevarría. Moreover, before becoming Grand Chancellor, I myself was a teacher of Fundamental Theology there for many years.

In its still short lifetime, it has produced some well-regarded publications and seeks to give a complete formation to its students—doctrinal, of course, but also pastoral and spiritual.

Thus it seeks to serve the Church, the bishops and religious superiors who send students there; and to cooperate with the other pontifical universities, some in existence for centuries now, in preparing clergy and a well-trained

laity, with a theological, juridical and philosophical training that is up to date, while also being faithful to the centuries-old tradition

of the Church. This is no small ambition. I ask for prayers from the readers of *Tertio* so that it can continue doing so.