

How does one find God amid the noise of social media?

One can learn to communicate with God in many ways. For example, going to the chapel or spending some time every day praying with the Gospel. A necessary mode of “access” is the sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist. With the power of God’s grace, we work and live in the company of the Lord amidst the noise of the factory, the classroom, the streets or the countryside.

Saint Josemaría loved working with the disadvantaged and marginalized in society. What insights would you give to those working on projects in community outreach, in order to be more effective? What role does the University play in assisting the development of the economy of our country?

Opus Dei first grew, Saint Josemaría often said, in the poor neighborhoods of Madrid, because he found God’s strength in those who were sick or suffering. The priority of the individual spurs Christians to take an interest in each person. The Pope recalled – for example in the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* – the need to live with understanding, affection, and true concern for those around us, inviting them to live the teaching found at the end of chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. It is about seeing Christ in others. The initiatives to help the needy promoted in Strathmore

are a concrete way of trying to live like this.

Looking ahead to the future with the foundational years behind us, what is the most important contribution you expect Strathmore to make in this region and in Africa?

A university of Christian inspiration contains the potential remedy that society needs: human values, the will to contribute to the needs of the country and to culture, training the professionals of the future. And, above and beyond that, a place where, within the personal limitations of each one, an effort is made to try to give every student, every person who works here, the opportunity to feel very free and very responsible. Many great things depend on their lives and on the good they actually do around them, for others and for God.

An Interview Granted to *The Times*, London (June 9, 2018)

Interview by Tom Kingdon

What have you achieved in your first year and what are your plans for upcoming years?

I think that having completed this first year has been quite an

achievement in itself! I have felt strongly supported by the prayers of so many people, especially those in Opus Dei. But I am very aware that I am the first Prelate who has not worked closely with our founder, and that can be a bit overwhelming. However, I think we have established some clear priorities: supporting the family as an institution, trying to help young people more effectively, and reaching more needy people. These are goals that we set in the congress that elected me in January 2017.

In what parts of the world is the number of members growing and what kind of people are joining?

Its growth is similar to that of the Church as a whole throughout the world. For example, in recent years the number of Catholics in several African and Asian countries has increased somewhat, as has the number of those who wish to be part of Opus Dei. In other more secularized parts of the world, we experience the same difficulties as many other institutions in the Church, and strive to react with peace and hope. Regardless of the statistics, I like to consider it is almost a miracle that there are so many millions of people in the Church who, with God's grace, respond freely each day to their Christian call to love and service. And among them are also many thousands of men and women of Opus Dei, or people who take part in the Work's activities.

Those who join Opus Dei are lay people, both women and men, who are legally adults and who feel a special vocation or call to seek God and transmit the Gospel through their ordinary life: in professional work, in the family, in social and professional relationships. From a sociological point of view, they are mostly married people (some 70%), workers and middle-class people, who have to struggle to make ends meet each month.

How do people view Opus Dei now?

I think we are being increasingly accepted. The support and encouragement we have received from all the Popes over the years, including Pope Francis now, and from so many bishops in so many places, has helped people realize that we are simply one more institution in the Church. We do not want to be considered special, either positively or negatively. Indeed, the fact that some don't seem to accept us is a challenge, but it is the same struggle that every Christian individual and institution has. In other words, Christians are called to be the salt of the earth, and salt should never lose its flavor. Our goal is not to be accepted, but to bear witness to Christ in the heart of society. And to do that, sometimes you have to stand out and not conform to what others are doing.

Opus Dei has been accused of being an elitist group that attracts

people from the highest levels of society, and of having quite aggressive recruitment technique for young people. Is there any truth to this?

You point to two specific accusations. Let's consider them one by one.

In fact, there are many members of Opus Dei who are poor, especially in less developed countries, and members of Opus Dei organize many initiatives in the service of the poor. That is a fact. I would say that the members of Opus Dei come from the same levels of society as the other Catholics in their country. In Britain, and in most countries, that means the middle class. Pope Francis recently encouraged members of Opus Dei to continue evangelizing “the peripheries of the middle classes” in the countries where they live and work.

Opus Dei is interested in helping every type of person—whether rich, middle class, or poor—to draw closer to Christ. However, I don't think we reach that many people in the highest spheres of society. I wish we could reach more, as I also wish we could reach many more poor people. We are trying to get underway more projects for the poor and for immigrants, and we have some wonderful initiatives, such as the Baytree Center in Brixton, in London; Braval, in Barcelona; and activities for Syrian refugees in a parish in Cologne, Germany. But I pray that we may

do more in this regard. However, I would say, and this is a key point, that the essence of the spirit of Opus Dei is not so much what we do as an institution, as what its individual members—most of whom are lay people—do through carrying out their daily work. So although the specific activities of Opus Dei will always be limited, I hope that the people of Opus Dei will take seriously the evangelical call to serve the poor in their family and work life.

As for “aggressive techniques for recruiting young people,” although I think the accusation somewhat unfair, I would say we have learned it is very necessary that those who wish to join the Prelature seek the opinion of as many people as they wish, and do not take a step forward without great conviction. Together with the whole Church, we increasingly love the value of freedom. If you allow me a personal reference, I refer you to a pastoral letter that I wrote about freedom, dated January 9 of this year, which is available on the Opus Dei website.

Opus Dei attracted more members after the Da Vinci Code. Why?

Yes, in fact the *Da Vinci Code* had the opposite effect from what you might have expected. This was due mainly to God's grace, which turns each cross into a blessing. The lies about us—about the Catholic Church in general and about Opus Dei in particular—

were so outrageous and brazen that they forced many Catholics to try to explain the truth about themselves. Many Opus Dei members had opportunities to give talks and speak with the media, or just with their friends. Suddenly, everyone wanted to learn about us. And the fact that the book was filled with ridiculous and unfounded falsehoods helped other Catholics value us more and overcome any misgivings they might have had. Seeing all the absurdities in the book about the Church helped many Catholics to realize that what was said there about Opus Dei was also false. For example, as you know, in the book the main villain is Silas, an “assassin monk of Opus Dei,” when in reality there are no monks in Opus Dei nor can there be, because, as wonderful as the monks are, we are a Prelature only for lay people and secular priests. Errors like this were ridiculous, but God allowed them to bring about good; whenever he allows evil it is to draw good from it.

Are you worried about the growing number of conservative critics of Pope Francis?

Is it really a growing number? Whatever their number, I experience sorrow and pain over every criticism of the Pope. The lips of a son or daughter of the Church should never utter a destructive criticism of anyone, let alone of the one who is our common father and a source of unity in the Church. I like to think about

the challenge that the founder of Opus Dei set before us: to express, in every circumstance, a love for the Holy Father that is both heartfelt and shown in deeds.

Pope Francis is calling us especially to evangelize and to live the virtue of mercy by reaching the marginalized in society. As was often the case with his predecessors, Francis’ call to social action and the defense of the poor is uncomfortable—because he is rightly criticizing so much injustice in our world—and we should all be challenged by it.

What is your position in the debate on the granting of communion to divorced people who have remarried?

I suppose you are referring here to the issues raised in 2016 by Pope Francis’ document on marriage, *Amoris Laetitia*. Pope Francis once said that he understands the stir this caused, especially in regard to the eighth chapter, where he refers specifically to divorced and remarried Catholic faithful. There, the Pope urges us to draw close to people who are in difficult situations, such as the one just mentioned, and to do so with greater availability and with great mercy. But Francis himself expressly states that doctrine does not change. It is, in my opinion, mainly about getting priests to dedicate more time to people who are going through difficulties, accompanying them in a process—sometimes a long one—that helps

them to understand their personal situation and overcome it with God's grace. We have to help them take the necessary steps so that one day they will be able to receive the Eucharist.

You visited London in December to meet with Opus Dei members. What were your impressions from that visit?

I loved it! It was great to see the energy and enthusiasm of the Opus Dei members in the United Kingdom and all their friends. They are really trying to do beautiful things to serve society: wonderful schools with a truly Catholic vision, great initiatives to help families, projects for the needy, and much more, including above all their personal testimony. It was refreshing.

I saw many people who are true friends of their friends, as our founder wanted. I had a chance to speak, for example, with Peter, a young student suffering from cancer, who would die a few weeks later and who left us a great example of trust in God, friendship and joy. The large number of people who have been moved by his death has led me to reflect on how God makes use of human friendship to reach many people with his love.

In recent years, special emphasis has been placed in Opus Dei on setting up reasonably priced primary and secondary schools, open to everyone, that have proven to be very popular among non-Catholic parents due

to their academic standards. Will more schools be started?

We would certainly like to. The Catholic educational effort is very beautiful. We want to share this with as many people as possible. Already back in the sixties, St. Josemaría saw that parents, who are the first educators, should be more involved in the creation and management of schools. This is a dream, by the way, that Cardinal Newman also had a hundred years before, although at that time the Catholic laity did not have as much access to good formation. The schools you refer to have been started by groups of parents who want to be very involved in their children's education, which includes not only teaching the faith, but also character development and an individual mentoring program that tries to pinpoint the best approach for each student.

What else would you like to see the British members of Opus Dei accomplish?

Many things, but we are relatively few people in Britain and I know that my spiritual children are doing the best they can. I hope there will be more members so that they can start more apostolic initiatives in the United Kingdom, both for the poor and needy and in the field of education, in addition to what they are already doing. Above all, the members, cooperators and friends of Opus Dei need to continue carrying out the task of

evangelization among their companions, colleagues, neighbors and families, so that we help bring it about that Christ's message reaches everyone in the United Kingdom and the whole world. I would like the faithful of Opus Dei in England to be sowers of peace and joy in their social and professional milieu.

How do you relax?

Although I don't see this as of much interest, I like being with people, and I relax with reading, classical music (especially Beethoven), and with tennis—but not at the level of Wimbledon!

An Interview Granted to *Avvenire*, Milan, Italy (June 27, 2018)

Interviewed by Francesco Ognibene

Ninety years have gone by since the day that St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer “saw” Opus Dei. Can you say that this “vision” has been fulfilled?

That inspiration regarding the sanctification of ordinary life and the role of the laity is today increasingly present in the heart of the Church, although it is not “exclusive” to anyone. The Work is

carried out through the generous response of each one in every moment of history. Since 1928 it has spread to every continent, and the diversity of its faithful has increased, both in age and in backgrounds, nationalities, etc. But that vision needs to become a reality in the life of each person, and to be present in the changing circumstances of every epoch.

What does it mean for a lay person today to seek holiness in a digital society, which is experiencing unprecedented changes, both in behavior and in culture?

Among other things, it requires sowing friendship in this digital world, thus overcoming the risk of depersonalization. Each person is important, because Christ died and rose for each one of us. Authentic relationships begin when we are able to see specific people at the center of each interaction, although often, in digital conversations, we don't have them in front of us. Also it means sharing with others beneficial content, without reducing culture merely to information. And to do so one needs to study, reflect, pray, listen. Christians should, among other things, instill serenity into the rapid flow of the digital world. Finally, it requires living consistently, with a unity of life, without being “two-faced.” One cannot claim to be a model citizen and a good “offline” Christian and then act “online” in an unbridled way, with actions that