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Sanctity in the world, the path of the laity

An interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarria

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There is an air of expectation in Opus Dei. In a few months, on January 9, 2002, the hundredth anniversary of the birth of its Founder, Blessed Josemaria Escriva, will be celebrated. He was a pioneer of the sanctification of the laity in their

ordinary life, in their work, their family life, their friendships and cultural activities. Opus Dei's spirit is based on prayer, constant Christian formation, and personal responsibility and apostolate, all lived and carried out with naturalness.

With the centennial approaching, Bishop Javier Echevarria, second successor to Msgr. Escriva as head of what since 1982 has been a personal prelature, granted this exclusive interview to Avvenire at its central headquarters in Rome on the Viale Bruno Buozzi, where the mortal remains of Msgr. Escriva are interred. In the interview he spoke about Opus Dei and its activities in Italy and throughout the world.

Bishop Echevarria, what does the memory of Blessed Josemaria mean to Opus Dei?

This centennial is not a simple commemoration, but rather an invitation to reflect on the teachings of Opus Dei's founder and to discover new ways to make them ever more effective in one's ordinary life.

Blessed Josemaria frequently insisted: "Christ is the one we must speak about, not ourselves." Opus Dei's founder spent all of his days proclaiming Jesus Christ, reminding us that one can be a loyal disciple of Christ in the midst of the world. This centennial has to echo this radical Christian truth, which fills one's life with meaning and joy.

What does it mean in today's world for a lay Christian to strive to be a saint, as Msgr. Escriva preached? Isn't imperfection something inherent to the human condition?

It is precisely because we are imperfect that we need to seek holiness, that is, identification with

Jesus Christ. He himself asked us to be holy, and he does not ask for impossible things. Sins and human weaknesses are always with us, but they don't condemn us to mediocrity. Rather they are an opportunity to be converted to God. Christ has redeemed us. With his grace and our humility, we can follow and imitate him. As children of God who are aware of what the reality of their divine filiation means, we know that Christian life is a path of liberation, an invitation to happiness, not a mass of lifeless rules or restrictions. For lay people, to aspire to holiness means, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, "to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will."

Where is the Prelature expanding?

Thanks be to God, the apostolic work of the Opus Dei Prelature is growing.

In countries with a majority of Catholics (Honduras or Poland, for example, to cite two where we have begun more recently), a large number of people come to activities of Christian formation. In other countries, where the baptized are a minority (such as in the Holy Land, Singapore or Kazakhstan), meeting the Prelature often represents for many people their first contact with the Church through the link of friendship with a Catholic colleague.

What is Opus Dei's “style”?

The emphasis is on personal Christian formation, not on activities or structures. The faith implies a personal discovery and also a personal response to God who is seeking us. Opus Dei always grows one by one. And “each one,” to the extent that he or she is identified with Christ, gives light, a new light, to many others.

Msgr. Escriva said that Opus Dei “is a great catechesis.” If this is the case, why do some people claim that it is a spiritual and social elite that fosters secrecy?

I invite anyone who considers himself poorly informed about the Prelature to call one of the faithful or a center of the Prelature. You can find the number in the telephone book or the website of the Opus Dei Information Office.

The founder of Opus Dei used to say that to communicate well you need “good explainers” and “good understanders.” The faithful of the Prelature can always improve in their ability to speak clearly. On the other hand, to understand Opus Dei one only has to understand the naturalness of freedom and ordinary Christian life. Not wearing distinctive badges, or publishing joint declarations, or organizing massive

meetings, is not the same as being secretive.

What does being in the Prelature mean then?

It means living as ordinary Christians who act the same as any other citizen, personally responsible for their own decisions in the spiritual, social, economic, and cultural spheres. A Christian vocation in Opus Dei requires a call from God. But it is also a choice on the part of each faithful who freely decides to undertake it, without forming part of a closed group, being open to the whole Church.

In the context of the Jubilee, is there a “*mea culpa*” from Opus Dei?

I think that the contrition to which all have been urged by the Pope's petition for forgiveness on March 12, 2000 consists above all in the humility of each one recognizing his

own personal sins and failings. Each member of Opus Dei always ends the day, after a personal examination of conscience, by begging God for forgiveness. In Opus Dei, each one strives to convert anew each day, and to ask for pardon from God and from anyone else he may have hurt or offended. Learning to ask for pardon every day is a good resolution from the Jubilee.

Is it true, as some say, that in countries such as Italy, Opus Dei gives priority to intellectuals and those in managerial positions?

Blessed Josemaria, while fostering a very specific concern for the needy, always reminded us that apostolic work with intellectuals is a very important evangelical task. Intellectuals mold society and culture. If Christ has not been proclaimed to them, the consequences for society are

obvious. This apostolate will always be important for Opus Dei, always keeping in mind that both priorities are complementary, because material poverty is now paralleled by a great intellectual and cultural poverty in the religious sphere.

In Italy many schools have been started by parents connected with Opus Dei. How do you evaluate this initiative?

It is a great adventure. These schools are based on the principle that parents are the ones primarily responsible for the education of their children. But certainly, as in all adventures, many obstacles exist, among other reasons because the laws do not facilitate these efforts of families in education. The Italian Bishops' Conference has recently spoken about this. In any case, I think it is worthwhile to risk taking on the exciting task of providing a

Christian education for one's children and the friends of one's children. This is the most important mission of Christian parents.

Opus Dei has a reputation of being a conservative institution. Why is that?

Opus Dei has no dogmas or morality of its own, nor does it form a “school” of thought. It follows the teaching of the Church in everything. If that means being conservative, you and your readers must judge. The mistake being made here is to apply to the Church political categories that are inappropriate in matters of faith. All Christians, if they are consistent, have in their hearts a great love for their history. At the same time, they cultivate a desire to have a positive influence on the world: to make it more just, more human; to free it of all the burdens that ideologies have imposed over the centuries. These range, for example, from racism to a

lack of “global” concern for the causes of poverty. Blessed Josemaria used to say: “If we Christians took our faith seriously, the greatest revolution in history would take place.” This is a revolution that is still pending, and it is not exactly a conservative one.

We seem to be witnessing a new interest in religion today. What response does the Work offer to this rediscovered interior thirst?

Opus Dei offers a path of formation based on the sacraments—confession, the Eucharist—meditation on Scripture and the magisterium of the Church, the study of Catholic doctrine and professional morality. The Prelature offers means of Christian formation that are always compatible with ordinary life, without leaving one's work or profession behind. It encourages people to discover the relationship

that exists between contemplation and work. One can maintain a profound union with God while one is cooking a dish of pasta, taking care of a sick person, playing a game of soccer, or while doing scientific research. Union with God takes place in the depths of a free heart. It's a question of love.

Speak to us about belonging to Opus Dei as a married person or in celibacy. Could you explain how it differs from belonging to a group or an association?

I prefer to explain the Prelature, rather than point out differences. Incorporation in Opus Dei is, in the first place, a personal and free response to a divine call, to God who is calling. Anyone being incorporated into the Prelature makes a commitment to two things: to seek identification with Jesus Christ in accordance with the spirit of Opus

Dei, a spirit which does not take anyone out of his place or out of the position he occupies; and to remain under the jurisdiction of the Prelate in those aspects of the life of union with Christ and of apostolate which affect the apostolic mission of the Prelature. There is no difference between faithful of the Prelature and others who don't have a vocation to Opus Dei.

What plans do you have in Italy?

We would like to make it possible for any Italian interested in Opus Dei to be able to have a center nearby. At present there are centers in some twenty-five cities. That leaves a lot to be done.

When will Msgr. Escriva be canonized?

I don't know. We are not in a hurry. It will happen at the best moment, when God wants. The causes of

beatification and canonization for lay faithful of Opus Dei in Guatemala, Switzerland and Spain have been opened. And the opening of the cause of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, first successor of the Founder, is being prepared.

You lived close to Msgr. Escriva for twenty-five years. Do you have any memory of him that is particularly united to Italy?

Blessed Josemaria moved to Rome in 1946, and immediately adapted himself to the life and the customs of this country, towards which he felt a deep gratitude. He died here and his remains repose here. He asked us that if he died outside of Rome we should bring his body back to this country, because for him the word “Roman” was synonymous with “universal.”

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