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25 years of the Opus Dei Prelature

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The pontifical act by which the Opus Dei prelature was established on November 28, 1982, with the Papal Bull executed on March 19, 1983, was simply the realization of what St Josemaría, together with countless people from all environments, and in a special way in the early years the poor and the sick, had for so long been beseeching from the Blessed Trinity. He was seeking to ensure the effectiveness of the pastoral and apostolic service that Opus Dei, by divine will, was called to carry out in the Church. This fact was emphasized by the Roman Pontiff when he began the text of the Apostolic Constitution with the words *Ut sit* (that it may be), words that the Founder of Opus Dei over the course of many years addressed daily to our Lady: “*Domina, ut sit!* My Lady, that it may be!”

In the early moments of the life of Opus Dei, St Josemaría was in no hurry to request from the Church authorities a canonical status for the new organization that God had brought to birth in his soul on October 2, 1928. Certainly, from the first moment he had the blessing of the bishop of Madrid, whom our founder kept constantly informed of the development of his apostolic work. At the same time, however, our Founder's keen juridical sense led him to see that none of the existing canonical forms would fit Opus Dei properly. He preferred to wait, filling the years of waiting with prayer, expiation and work.

This way of acting is shown clearly by words he spoke to us during a family gathering in Rome in October 1966. A few months earlier, Pope Paul VI had promulgated the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*, which, implementing some of the decrees of

the Second Vatican Council, established the juridical figure of personal prelatures *ad peculiaria opera pastoralia perficienda* (to carry out special pastoral work). These had been envisaged in the Decrees *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 10, and *Ad Gentes*, no. 20. Msgr. Escrivá observed, “First comes life; afterwards the norm.” And he added, referring expressly to the canonical path of Opus Dei: “I did not sit in a corner thinking out *a priori* what clothes to provide for Opus Dei.

When the child was born, we dressed it; like Jesus, who began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1), first he did and then he taught. We found ourselves with the water, and then we designed the channel. Never for a moment did we think of opening up a channel before the water arrived. In Opus Dei, life has always preceded the canonical form. Therefore the canonical form has to be like a suit made to measure” (St Josemaría Escrivá,

speaking in a family gathering, October 24, 1966).

Seventeen years after he spoke these words, this made-to-measure suit arrived, by God's mercy and the intercession of our Blessed Lady, with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Ut Sit*. But as far back as 1935, when the growth of the apostolic work brought a yearning to reach other cities and countries, St Josemaría was convinced that an adequate canonical solution for the ecclesial reality of Opus Dei would be found in the ambit of personal jurisdiction.

The canonical path was a long one. The journey had to traverse unexplored territory, since there was no road fully suited to the charism Opus Dei's founder had received. How surprised he was by the comment of a high member of the Curia in Rome, when Fr. Alvaro del

Portillo arrived there in 1946 to at the founder's request, to help speed up Opus Dei's pontifical approval. "You have come a century too early," Fr. Alvaro was told. But it was impossible to wait any longer. Years later, recalling those moments, St Josemaría wrote: "The Work seemed, to the Church and to the world, to be a novelty. The canonical solution that it sought seemed impossible. But, my daughters and sons, I couldn't wait until things were possible... I had to attempt the impossible. I was urged on by the thousands of souls who had given themselves to God in his Work, with the fullness of our dedication, seeking to do apostolate in the midst of the world" (St Josemaría Escrivá, in a letter dated January 25, 1961).

As the fruit of St Josemaría's priestly activity, thousands of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, without changing their state in life, felt called

by God to live out the Christian vocation in all its radical demands. They saw themselves called to seek identification with Jesus and to spread the universal call to holiness and apostolate among people of all social classes. And they were to do so with a specific spirit, which God had communicated to the founder of Opus Dei on October 2, 1928; a spirit that teaches people to seek Christ, to find him, to build up a personal relationship with him, and to make him known in the common circumstances of daily life, specifically in their everyday work and in the fulfilment of their ordinary duties.

Today, the conviction that all the faithful are called to the perfection of charity has come to the fore in the Church's consciousness. But back in the 1930s and 1940s this was not clearly understood. The message of Opus Dei's founder encountered

obstacles in the canonical teaching then current, which reflected the prevailing mindset. The days of the Second Vatican Council were still far off. But the supernatural intuition of St Josemaría was grounded in the Church's authentic tradition, because it was embodied in the Gospel. It came to tell the ordinary faithful, the laity and secular priests: there, in your place, without leaving your environment, God is calling you to live out the Christian vocation fully. By your ordinary work, by fulfilling the duties of your state in life, you are helping to fill all of society with the light and fragrance of Christ. An ordinary life, offered to God, always bears fruit.

St Josemaría's spirit and message are today, and have been for some years, a living reality in the Church and in the lives of many Christians, who through their efforts to spread it and

put it into practice are contributing to the evangelization of society.

I feel a filial debt to express, in the name of all the Prelature's faithful as well as in my own, our profound gratitude to the Holy Father Pope John Paul II for his understanding and vigilant care as good shepherd, which has made possible a proper institutional solution for Opus Dei.

In this commemoration it is right that we also remember the successor to St Josemaría, the Prelate of Opus Dei Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who had the happiness and responsibility, *onus et honor*, of bringing the desires of our founder to a happy conclusion in the form of a canonical figure especially suited to its charism and original inspiration. As the Holy Father pointed out in the Apostolic Constitution *Ut Sit*, "From the time when the Second Vatican Council introduced into the legislation of the

Church... the figure of the personal prelatures, to carry out specific pastoral activities, it was seen clearly that this juridical figure was perfectly suited to Opus Dei as an apostolic organism made up of priests and laity, both men and women, which is at the same time organic and undivided – that is to say, as an institution endowed with a unity of spirit, of aims, of government, and of formation” (John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution Ut Sit, 28 November 1982, AAS 75 [1983] 423).

We don't have time now to go into details that show the fidelity with which Fr. Alvaro carried out the founder's instructions and wishes, the fortitude with which he defended the specific nature of Opus Dei, the constancy and patience he showed in carrying out such a difficult task.

To conclude, let me once again invoke the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of Opus Dei. We ask our Lady to keep protecting with her intercession this portion of the People of God... Thus the Church's hope will not be deceived. As we read in the preamble to the Apostolic Constitution *Ut Sit*, the Church "directs its attention and maternal care to Opus Dei... so that it may always be an apt and effective instrument for the salvific mission which the Church carries out for the life of the world."

Address by the Prelate of Opus Dei to the academic congress on the Apostolic Constitution Ut Sit, in the Pontifical Athenaeum of the Holy Cross, Rome, April 1, 1998, published in Romanano. 26. Italian version online:https://www.romana.org/art/26_3.5_2

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