

"These are times to be open to God's action"

Recent interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published by the Portuguese newspaper "Jornal de Notícias," by Rosa Ramos.

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I have spoken with some of your former students. They told me that you gave your Fundamental Theology classes from memory, without needing to refer to a

textbook, walking around the classroom. Is your memory that good?

Some years have passed since then and I don't remember many details. Certainly, although memory helps, when teaching Theology you are dealing with realities that are at the center of one's own life, and not only information to be remembered.

If I ask you about changes that could occur within the Prelature, is that a paradox? For sometimes people label you as conservatives, immovable, as if you were afraid of changing...

Institutions in the Church, including Opus Dei, have before them the challenge of being completely faithful to Jesus Christ in every moment in history, through the mission that they have received. With God's help, they strive to make Christ visible in a way that best fits

their circumstances of time and place. That's why in the Prelature, fidelity to what is essential, to the spirit and mission received, should coexist with the changes required by new circumstances, those that are seen as needed within the wide range of what is not essential. As Saint Josemaria said, over time ways of speaking and acting change, while the nucleus, the spirit needs to remain unchanged.

How do you view your mission and its requirements?

In first place, I see the need for full union with the Pope and with the other shepherds, which is essential for a task in the service of the Church. Naturally, I have to show fatherly concern and be close to people, above all those in Opus Dei, as they are the ones the Church has entrusted to me. I realize very well that the mission far surpasses my

personal capacity, but I also know that God will help me. I also count on the assistance of my vicars and advisors, and especially on the prayer of the faithful of Opus Dei and many friends.

You are the third successor of the founder of Opus Dei. Have there been changes in the Work since its beginning? What is the reality of Opus Dei today?

The general mission of the Church can be summarized as bringing the Gospel to the whole world, helping people to find Jesus in the Word and in the sacraments. The Prelature of Opus Dei shares in this mission, by reminding people of the universal call to sanctity and offering Christian formation directed especially towards sanctifying ordinary life: one's work, family life, social relations, etc. Since 1928, Opus Dei has spread to all the continents. It

has seen the variety of its faithful increase in terms of age, social conditions, nationalities; it has encouraged the start of numerous social and educational initiatives, etc. But the nucleus, the spirit and mission to which I referred, will continue to be the same, although as I mentioned before, at every moment we have to discover what this message offers to the changing challenges of society, of people, of epochs.

What is Opus Dei's situation in Portugal?

The Portuguese, with their trusting and calm faith, and with their openness, have brought the message of Saint Josemaria to many nations. Portugal was the first country where the founder brought Opus Dei outside of Spain, which he did personally in 1945, encouraged by Sor Lucia. There are about 1500

faithful of the Prelature there, the majority of them married. They are ordinary Catholics and secular priests, who strive to live the Gospel at work and in all aspects of their ordinary life. The Prelature of Opus Dei offers them Christian formation through spiritual retreats, theology classes, study groups, etc., besides the pastoral care provided by priests. These activities are open to everyone and, in fact, many people take part who are not in Opus Dei. Some Portuguese who are members of Opus Dei dedicate themselves to formative projects in the area of education and the family, to which the Prelature provides pastoral assistance in a way that is publicly known.

Do you know about Portugal's recent legislative changes? Some people want to include the topic of abortion, which has been legal for years now, in the school

curriculum. They are also debating the decriminalization of euthanasia. Portugal, a country with a long Catholic tradition, seems to be becoming less Christian, just as much in its customs as in its laws. How do you see the future of this country?

The rapid secularization of lifestyles, people growing accustomed to living as if God did not exist, and at times as if we did not have to die, is a cultural evolution that is affecting many countries of the so-called Christian West. Portugal is no exception, in spite of being a country that so greatly loves life, and where people are loved for who they are, independently of their physical or spiritual health. I do not know the Portuguese situation in depth, but you spoke to me about issues that are present in many places. In first place, there is a need to return to God, who is truly a good Father filled with

tenderness; from Him comes the light to know the truth and the strength to do the good. The world's future, including Portugal's, depends on this. It seems to me that here Fatima is like a great magnet for the Portuguese, and a source of security and optimism.

Europe is immersed in a humanitarian crisis, with political extremism lurking and upcoming elections. Is Opus Dei, sometimes labeled as being very conservative, in agreement with certain extreme positions?

Opus Dei has no other position than that of the Catholic Church, and so the members enjoy the freedom of any Catholic in all questions open to discussion. But, along with this, all of us Catholics face certain challenges that are ethical before being political. Europe finds itself before the challenge of welcoming and

integrating thousands of refugees forced to abandon their countries in search of a better future. For people in Opus Dei, as for all Christians, the needs and sufferings of these brothers and sisters are a constant invitation to service and prayer, since we recognize in them "the suffering body of Christ," as Pope Francis frequently reminds us.

Christian love is a concrete love that follows the model of Jesus: living continuously for the others, clothing them with dignity through works of service, accompanying them in their deepest pain and transmitting to them Christ's consolation. In the address the Pope gave at the end of 2014 in the European parliament, he offered suggestions for how to approach this dramatic situation. Hopefully those who govern will take them into account.

What do you think of Donald Trump's decision to raise up walls and close doors to immigrants, for example? Pope Francis has often said that we should take them in as our brothers and sisters, but complex questions are at play from a security point of view. How can we achieve the difficult balance between security and freedom?

The North American bishops are accompanying immigrants closely and share their concerns. They have also shown themselves open to collaboration with authorities, in order to exchange ideas and points of view. Attaining the right balance in specific solutions—particularly between security and freedom—is not easy and there is certainly room for a variety of approaches. This is an important responsibility for the political authorities. Politicians, regardless of their ideas, can count

on the prayers of believers, including when they don't think the same way. I pray that in all countries there is an atmosphere of welcoming people in need. Now, in particular, this involves immigrants and refugees, regardless of race, religion or social condition.

Recently I saw a study where Portugal appeared among the countries of Europe with the highest rate of divorce and a significant number of broken marriages. The Work insists a lot on the charism of the family, and on the family as the pillar of society and the spiritual life. Why do so many marriages fail today? What are the greatest threats for the family?

For a man and a woman to offer themselves to each other, for their whole life, with a commitment to exclusivity and until death, to grow

together and have children that are the continuity of that love, is a marvelous reality that is of concern to everyone, not just the Church. And the fact that this project shipwrecks and fails, besides wounding those involved, also has repercussions in society. Christ said that God views this union and respects it as definitive. And for Christians, marriage is a sacrament, through which God acts with his help and blessing for married people and their children.

Many people today are discouraged by the failures around them, by the strenuous rhythm of life, the lack of material means, of space and time, all of which affects families.

I think Pope Francis helps us to avoid this pessimism and to remember that marriage has to be grounded on the joy of love. I want to suggest here the attentive reading of what the Pope

calls the heart of *Amoris Laetitia*: the fourth chapter about love in marriage, and the fifth chapter about love that becomes fruitful. There you can find practical ideas and suggestions, all very accessible, that can strengthen families.

In your first message, you cited *Christ is Passing By*, saying that "every generation of Christians has to redeem and sanctify their own time..." How do you see the times in which we are called to live?

These are times of insecurity and also of a desire for change; of people distancing themselves from God and also longing for Him; of sadness and tiredness, but also of nostalgia for the good; of fear of conflicts, together with a great desire for peace. These are the times that we have to live in, and they are times to be open to God's action.

Some people in public opinion refer to Opus Dei as closed in, almost like a pressure group. When talking about Opus Dei in the public arena, frequent reference is made to money, influence, or wealth. Is Opus Dei really so influential? Does it have so much money or so many goods? Why are there so many important people in Opus Dei and from the upper classes (bankers, for example, in Portugal)? Are there more rich people than poor in the Prelature? Is that because Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven?

The reality is very different, and there is a lot of fiction in the collective imagination sometimes. Among those belonging to Opus Dei you can find all kinds of people: healthy and sick, young and old, poor

and those better off, people with stable work, people who are retired, and many unemployed who, in countries suffering from the crisis, suffer together with all those in the same circumstances. It seems important to me to come closer to the reality, to get to know the people. Opus Dei provides a service of Christian accompaniment to everyone, which goes beyond social or economic conditions, and without interfering in the broad area of professional, artistic, political and civil decisions. At the same time, our centers and apostolic works have their doors open to anyone who wants to get to know these realities at first hand. Many people in Opus Dei together with their friends carry out social and educational projects that are at the service of many people and tend not to be newsworthy. I'll give you an example of one that I learned about recently. Some faithful of Opus Dei in the

Ivory Coast have started the Wale Medical Center that offers medical assistance and free treatment to AIDS patients, in both Yamoussoukro and Toumbokro. I ask God that these initiatives, personal or collective, do not cease to multiply, including on Portuguese soil.

Do you agree with Saint Paul when he says that money is the root of all evil?

Saint Paul says that *love* of money is the root of all evil. It is the same warning that Pope Francis gives when he speaks of the idolatry of money. The Pope, in addition to alerting us to great social injustices, also helps us to improve even in the way we give alms: looking in the eyes of the person who is asking, and letting our hands touch the hands of those who receive from us.

In recent years, Opus Dei has received positions of influence in

the Curia and in the Holy See. The University of Santa Croce has also grown significantly. How do you explain this increase in prestige and in the tasks entrusted to Opus Dei?

There are actually very few people of Opus Dei working in the Vatican Curia. Their appointment is publicly acknowledged in the Prelature's official bulletin, *Romana*, where anyone can see it. These are people who have responded freely to those who have asked for their collaboration, and who will try to work with an attitude of service and of obedience to their superiors in the Curia. On the other hand, it seems to me crucial to understand that the work of administrative organisms in the Church is a service to the universal Church and not positions of prestige. In any case, I can assure you that the only thing that interests us is serving the Church as the

Church wants to be served. That's what Saint Josemaria taught us and that's what we hope to be doing.

In terms of size, can you compare Opus Dei with the Jesuits? Would you say that Opus Dei today is equally or more important than the Jesuits?

In the Church we all want to respond to Christ's missionary mandate, and we all collaborate in this great mission of evangelization. Each one carries this out according to his or her own charism and, even taken altogether, we are few to be helping so many people. That's why we feel united to each other, and there is no room for comparisons. The service to humanity that the Company of Jesus has provided and continues to provide is remarkable, with the dedication and self-giving of so many men who unite prayer, study and a very real service in dramatic human

situations. I myself studied at a Jesuit school in Madrid as an adolescent, and I am very grateful for what I received both academically and on the level of human and spiritual formation.

Have you seen the movie *Silence*? What did you think about it? If you haven't seen it yet, what have others told you about it?

I read something about the movie, that it shows how the price for being loyal to God can be very high in some situations. Although we don't want to be tested in that way, we trust that God will help us, in every moment, so that we do not fail to do what is just and good.

What is it like to interact with a Jesuit Pope? I know that you will respond that the Pope is Pope for the whole Church. Obviously one wouldn't doubt his infallibility. However there are Popes that one

can like more than others, for one reason or another. Francis has experienced certain opposition for some positions that conservatives consider a little lax. Is there a worry in the Work that there might be doctrinal changes?

In a good son or daughter of the Church, one should not find the kind of misgivings you describe.

Furthermore, with the current Pope it is very easy to have human affection, to have friendship.

Personally I am impressed by his life of prayer and his openness to every person, showing a love of predilection towards the sick. We are talking about a Pope with a great pastoral sense, and who wants an evangelizing Church. This past March 3rd, I was in a private audience with the Pope. Francis was very affectionate, grateful for and interested in the apostolic work of Opus Dei throughout the world. I

often recall a motto that Saint Josemaria gave us: *Omnes cum Petro, ad Iesum per Mariam*: all, with Peter, to Jesus through Mary.

What can you tell me about the topics discussed in the synod on the family: the access to the sacraments—in some cases—of divorced people who have contracted a new marriage; or certain other declarations—not very conservative—of the Holy Father about not judging homosexuals and instead welcoming them?

The Pope invites the whole Church to accompany, discern, and integrate all men and women, whatever their personal situation might be. It is a new pastoral impulse that calls for concrete responses within the continuity of the doctrine of the Magisterium. In his document on the family, while reminding people that

the doctrine of the Church cannot change, the Holy Father encourages us to look for ways to help people who want to get married, or who want to grow in their conjugal love, or those who encounter difficulties. Therefore, there is a great need for more spiritual directors and counselors to be available and well prepared.

What do you think of the group of cardinals that wrote Pope Francis indicating a certain disagreement with aspects of his post-synodal exhortation? Do you agree that there has been, perhaps, a mistaken interpretation or erroneous explanation of some points? Which ones?

You will understand that it is not my role to go into detail here on this topic. In any case, there is clearly a diversity of opinions on important

questions, which is why we need to pray for unity.

Does it make sense for the Church to have so many different movements? Couldn't the diversity of movements and charisms lead to a more divided Church?

The Church is a People, the People of God, which is made up of many peoples. It is a great and expansive house, which Christ constructs in order to welcome all people, and where everyone can find the place where they feel at home. Unity and diversity are not in opposition; the opposite of unity is division. If there is union with Christ, through Peter, there is no risk of division. Unity in diversity is what we mean by communion, which brings with it notable enrichment for the Church.

How would you explain Opus Dei to today's world?

The founder, Saint Josemaria Escrivá, used to say that Opus Dei is a great catechesis. It is a very graphic image: each person in Opus Dei, with the naturalness of their Christian life and friendship, in spite of their own limitations and defects, strives to share the joy of the Gospel among their family members, friends, work colleagues, neighbors... and to build up the Church right in these professional, familiar, and social peripheries. Our world is full of wounds and is thirsting for hope. The witness of a Christian life in the most ordinary daily events can help many people to get to know and encounter Christ, and by discovering his Love, to have a deep joy in their lives.

What expectations do you have about the visit of Pope Francis to Portugal? He has preferred to visit Fatima instead of going to the Sanctuary of Aparecida in Brazil. What does the Prelate of Opus Dei

expect of Pope Francis' visit to Portugal in May?

The Pope's deep and living devotion to our Lady is very moving. He will go to Fatima drawn by God through Mary. The theme of the trip is important: "With Mary, pilgrim in hope and peace." In Fatima, the little shepherds learned to passionately love God, who dazzled them. Hopefully, alongside the Pope, we can all discover or rediscover, with Mary's maternal help, God's immense love for each of us.

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