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Interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei

Bishop Javier Echevarría was interviewed on October 3 by a Rome newspaper, "La Repubblica," on the occasion of Opus Dei's 80th anniversary.

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Opus Dei has 83,000 lay members and 1,900 priests. The majority are in Europe and America, but 6,600 live in Africa, Asia and Australia. Looking back on its first 80 years and ahead to the future, the Prelate says: "Opus Dei exists to remind people that God

calls everyone to be a saint, and to help them live the Gospel in the myriad situations of ordinary life. Eighty years ago this message was new and even revolutionary, and it still is today." Bishop Javier Echevarría sees in people today a search for "the meaning of life, with a hope they may as yet be unaware of. It is a search for a meaning that transcends this world, which many are running away from but which they so greatly need."

Seventy-six years old, this slightly-built man still plays tennis once a week, listens with appreciation to Beethoven, and when time allows keeps up with new books in theology, philosophy, canon law, church history, and literature. Tennis has taught him to return serves with a keen eye:

Bishop Echevarría, *The Da Vinci Code* gave you a lot of publicity,

but its image of Opus Dei as a suspicious, secretive group is still circulating.

"Doesn't it seem a bit odd to be talking about secrecy in the pages of a major newspaper? Every day hundreds of inquiries reach us from people who want to get in contact. At www.opusdei.org we provide current news, documentation, and personal accounts in 28 languages. Anyone who has met one of the Prelature's faithful knows about his or her commitment and dedication to Christ. For us, transparency means letting Jesus be seen in our friendship and in the relationships of daily life."

Are its members found especially among those in positions of leadership, among influential, well-placed people?

"In reality, the majority of Opus Dei's faithful belong to the middle class

and many are hard pressed financially at the end of each month. But the important point is that any honorable profession can be sanctified and become an opportunity to find Christ. Our spiritual formation is meant for people in all social categories."

Aren't the members of Opus Dei a bit too eager to do proselytism?

"Jesus called all Christians to follow him and become 'fishers of souls.' Apostolate and proselytism should not be seen as ends in themselves nor as the way an institution might try to build itself up. Our goal is to bring Christ to many other people, always respecting their personal freedom. Opus Dei has no other aim than to echo the teachings of the universal Church."

What is the central focus of your mission today?

"Our mission follows the priorities of every historical period. Today the main challenge is the family: the upkeep of a home, educating the children, caring for the elderly and infirm, harmonizing the parents' work schedules. Consequently, one of our priorities is the Christian formation of many parents, whether or not they belong to Opus Dei."

Even atheists and agnostics?

"We are open to everybody, including people who don't even know they have an immortal soul, and don't want to know it. We treat them as friends, as brothers and sisters, and place ourselves at their service, the same as we do for everyone else."

Eighty years is a long time: What has Opus Dei learned? What defects need to be corrected?

"I see what I so often heard St. Josemaría Escrivá say, not out of

pride or arrogance: that Opus Dei will never need to be reformed in order to adapt itself to a changing world. For its aim is to teach everyone, beginning with ourselves, to sanctify daily life. Since we live in the world, it will always be necessary to keep our eyes on the God who never leaves us, who always extends a helping hand for us to grasp so as to walk with his help."

What have you personally learned as Prelate?

"Every day I have to learn how to pray, how to be more mortified, how to serve everyone I meet. For our Lord's words are not simply a story, but a reality. He said: 'If you have mistreated the sick, the poor, the uneducated, you have mistreated Me.' "

What do you especially remember about St. Josemaría?

"What impressed me was his good humor, along with his love for God. He was a good teacher who knew how to encourage and correct people, a priest and a father who devoted himself completely to the service of God and souls. He used to laugh a lot and joke with me. On trips in the car he would sing popular love songs, expressing in them his love for God. Once he told us that when he was dying he wanted to hear the Italian song about opening the windows to let in 'the springtime sun.' "

You are also carrying out apostolic work in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. What is happening there?

"Everywhere these days we hear a lot about consumerism, but let's not forget that a large part of humanity lives in conditions of poverty and misery. In the West, too. The Church's response has always been not only to

provide welfare, but also education. For example, in the Peruvian Andes, some of the Prelature's faithful, alongside other persons, have set up a network of 'rural co-ops' that teach language skills and basic hygiene and sanitation. In so many countries, both in the Southern and Northern hemisphere, the challenge is to help local people assume responsibility for improving their own society."

Are you also in China?

"China is not new to us, and neither is Russia. Many of Opus Dei's faithful work in China—as diplomats, engineers, lawyers, teachers. They are ordinary citizens who deal with many people around them, making them feel understood and loved. They also bring them the seed of Christ's teaching. We have educational and social aid facilities in Hong Kong, Macao, and Canton.

And priests are responding to the call to help people on mainland China."

Bishop Echevarría: Josemaría Escrivá has already been canonized. Now the process of beatification has begun for his successor, Álvaro del Portillo? Why are you so interested in having your own saints?

"We don't have a hunger for saints but for sanctity. It is sanctity that brings us close to our Lord, who is peace and joy for the whole world. It's not our aim to point to saints and say, 'Look how special this saint is!' Our aim is to help all men and women see that, if they want, they can strive to be a saint."

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