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Setting out on a new path

Brendan O'Connor, a 53-year old architect from Dublin, was one of 38 members of Opus Dei from around the world ordained priests in Rome on Saturday 26 May 2007. The following interview appeared in the "Irish Catholic newspaper" of 24 May 2007.

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Could you give our readers a brief snapshot of your youth, family, education and work as an architect?

Although my family roots are in Kerry, where we often spent summer holidays, I was “born and bred” in Dublin—we had the best of both worlds. I grew up in Churchtown, attended primary and secondary school in the CBS, Synge Street, and studied Architecture in the Dublin Institute of Technology. My father, also an architect, died when I was 15, which meant that my mother had to rear four children, still in school, on fairly slim resources. That experience and the example of her faith and fortitude have no doubt helped each of us in different ways in our lives.

I started work in 1976, at a time when there were relatively few opportunities in Ireland for architects—in fact, many of those with whom I studied went abroad to gain experience. The professional climate improved a little in the late seventies and at that stage I joined an

architectural practice in Merrion Square. In addition to the normal range of work in a general practice, I had the opportunity to work on a few projects associated with the apostolates of Opus Dei in Ireland, which were of course of special interest to me.

It is not often that an architect in his fifties, who has worked on a variety of building projects in Ireland and abroad, is ordained to the priesthood. What were the main influences in your life which led to this major change?

Although the priesthood involves a new relationship with Christ and a different way of contributing to society and to the Church, I don't see it as a fundamental change in terms of personal commitment. In the course of our lives, I think we all develop a disposition either to identify with God's plans for us, in

the service of others, or to “do our own thing”. I have been a member of Opus Dei since my student days and I have learned from St. Josemaría to see professional work and involvement in the affairs of society as ways of serving others, an important part of God’s plans for our happiness in this life and the next. Although most members of Opus Dei are married, some remain single, in order to be more available than a married person could be to meet the expanding needs of the Prelature in various parts of the world. Among those needs, of course, is the availability of priests to provide the sacramental support which is so necessary for the Christian life. This is a need to which I was willing to respond, if it became opportune, and so I gradually completed the relevant studies in philosophy and theology.

Did you ever meet Saint Josemaría Escrivá or his successor, the Servant

of God Bishop Alvaro del Portillo? If so, what memories do you have of them?

I had the privilege of meeting Saint Josemaría on a couple of occasions during a visit to Rome, to a student congress, in 1973. My strongest recollection is of his contagious optimism and the personal warmth of his greeting—simple but unforgettable. It has always helped me to read his works and to watch recordings of meetings with him with a more personal interest.

Although I also met Bishop Alvaro, on that occasion, my clearest recollections are from meeting him during his visits to Ireland, in August 1980 and again in 1985 and 1987. His personal simplicity inspired great confidence—you could tell him anything.

The traditional family is under severe pressure in Ireland, especially. What

practical steps might be taken, by priests and laity, to protect the family in this time of crisis?

The biggest challenges facing the family—a reality which precedes the political community—are not legal or institutional, but personal and cultural. Whereas marriage is about others, the dominant cultural value is about self. Without a stronger culture of personal commitment, it is more difficult for people entering marriage to understand that their true happiness does not depend on where they live, what they drive or where they take a holiday.

The happiness of their children is more firmly assured by the company of brothers and sisters than by the latest video games. Obviously, this is a wide field, in which teachers, priests, and others involved in supporting families, have an important role to play. The particular

role of the Church has always been to help people to distinguish what is important in life and to bring those values to bear in their own lives, and in their involvement in the affairs of their community.

Your doctoral thesis in theology focussed on the question of solidarity. Many feel that the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger, with its emphasis on increasing personal wealth at any cost, needs to hear more about the importance of the virtue of solidarity. Has your study led to any special insights?

The essence of social friendship is the capacity to understand the good of others, of the community, as one's own higher human good. It is not a question of feelings of brotherhood or of pity for those who suffer—although these can be valid expressions of solidarity—but of realising that what is really good for

me as a person must be good also for every other human person.

When we begin to realise that, we see that it makes sense for each of us to work not just for *my* interest, or *my* individual good but for what is really good for all of us, as human persons. This understanding is the basis of human solidarity, which is essential to a successful community or political life. Some aspects of this virtue can be seen, for example, in those who have a good "team spirit"—they work, not for their personal benefit as such, but for the sake of the group of which they form part. At a higher level, it is seen in those who sacrifice themselves in a more direct way in the service of their country—perhaps even to the extent of risking their lives for others. The Christian virtue of charity elevates this human virtue and gives it the necessary strength to overcome the challenges posed by

our defects. Even from a sociological point of view, therefore, a society founded on Christian principles is a more intrinsically human and successful community.

A person who works in this way for the common good is clearly a better human being—this is the essential point of the virtue of solidarity—and it is this humanity that is elevated to holiness by charity. Perhaps the most appropriate and evident indication in recent times of the potential and effect—on an international scale—of this personal virtue was seen in the experience of unity in the world-wide reaction to the death of Pope John Paul II, who was truly an apostle of solidarity.

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