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International congress on Blessed Josemaria Escriva opens

Prelate of Opus Dei says that holiness is not for the few.

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This morning in Rome, Bishop Javier Echevarria opened the international congress, "The Grandeur of Ordinary Life," held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. In his inaugural

speech, Echevarria, Opus Dei's Prelate, outlined the human and intellectual qualities of Blessed Escriva and discussed his message that "holiness cannot be for the few," but is open "to all the children of God."

The Prelate related how, in 1928 (the year Opus Dei was founded), Josemaria Escriva began proclaiming the need to pursue the "fullness of Christian life" in and through the "ordinary circumstances" in which divine Providence has placed us. Chief among these ordinary circumstances is "work, which must be transformed to become an instrument of sanctity and apostolate."

The core of Escriva's message, according to his successor, is the "bold formulation" of a "Christian materialism." This Christian materialism stands in opposition to

all other types of materialism, which are closed to the spirit. Escriva's Christian materialism led him "to greatly appreciate earthly realities, to view them always in reference to their Creator, to seek to transform them into instruments of apostolate."

For Escriva, continued Bishop Echevarria, the faith "is a virtue the Christian should practice every day in the accomplishment of his ordinary duties." Consequently, "Blessed Josemaria gave great importance to the Christian's obligation to be present – each according to his own convictions – in all areas of social life and in every forum where public opinion gestates. Thus, with active and free participation, Christians will contribute towards the defense of "human dignity, human life from conception till natural death, justice, and individual and family rights – the great causes of humanity." A

corollary to this message is Escriva's defense of "the positive character of pluralism in a free society." This pluralism holds freedom as "essential" for action to be Christian. In fact, the Prelate emphasized, only by comprehending the Christian concept of freedom "can one fully understand the central point of Blessed Josemaria's message of living ordinary life with holiness."

"In an original and energetic way," said Bishop Echevarria, Blessed Josemaria stressed the fact that "Christians can reach the fullness of Christian life in the middle of the world specifically through their ordinary circumstances and daily occupations." Sanctity, to use the founder of Opus Dei's expression, becomes a concrete reality in the life of a person who is "sanctifying work, sanctifying himself through work, and sanctifying others with his work." Work must be understood not

merely as an economic function at the service of profit, but more importantly as "solidarity," as an "effective service to one's neighbor."

The Prelate of Opus Dei also commented on Blessed Josemaria's personality. "He was an energetic person; he was strong, understanding and optimistic. He always acted responsibly, was generous, and was full of zeal for souls." Echevarria described the founder as "a tenacious worker, sincere, loyal and a good friend." "He showed, towards each and every person, a spirit of courageous and affectionate service."

Among the first day's speakers were Giorgio Rumi, professor of Modern History at the University of Milan, and Maria Jose Cantista, professor of Philosophy at the University of Porto (Portugal). Professor Rumi described the historical background of Blessed

Escriva's life, while Professor Cantista concentrated on the various aspects of his personality.

According to Rumi, Blessed Josemaria "restored work to its original dignity, making it an integral part of the general plan of the sanctification of time." Work cannot be viewed as a form of alienation, nor as an instrument of conflict between classes, nor as something negative from which man must liberate himself. For Escriva, work was a "blessing" that "aids in the Christian ordering of temporal realities," reopening the world to the creative and redemptive work of God. Professor Cantista spoke about the principal characteristics of Escriva's personality, starting with the proviso that "it is difficult to speak about any person, and even more so about a saint." She discussed how the founder of Opus Dei emphasized the necessity of

promoting sanctity within contemporary society.

The congress was preceded last night by a 30-minute documentary entitled "The Grandeur of Ordinary Life," which was produced by Alberto Michellini. The documentary, which had been translated into Italian, English and Spanish, focused on the influence Escriva's message about daily living had on various people. It portrayed how an ordinary day of work acquires a new human and supernatural value with a constant awareness of God's presence.

The International Congress "The Grandeur of Ordinary Life" is taking place in Rome from January 8 to January 11 and can be followed live on the Internet at www.escriva2002.org. About 1200 people from 57 countries are discussing a variety of themes in light of Blessed Josemaria's message.

Topics include the family, development, education, social integration, work, youth, solidarity, public opinion, art and the priesthood. An audience with the Holy Father on January 12 will conclude the congress.

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