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Opus Dei in Africa

This year Opus Dei is celebrating 50 years in Africa. Fr. Cormac Burke, an Opus Dei priest working in Kenya looks at the impact this has had on the continent.

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Ever since the foundation of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría looked forward to its beginning in Africa and prayed very much for when that moment should come. When it finally arrived in the 1950s, the first country where Opus Dei members came to work and

settle was Kenya. Their arrival was on August 25, 1958, so we are now celebrating 50 years since those beginnings. From Kenya, the Work spread to Nigeria, and after that to many other places. Now there are centres also in Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Congo, Uganda and South Africa; and plenty of visits to other countries where a growing number of members and cooperators are working professionally and laying the foundations for future expansion.

The spirit it brought

What has Opus Dei brought to Africa? What can it still bring? Many things, both new and old. St. Josemaria liked to speak of the spirit of the work he founded as being both "as new as the Gospel and as old as the Gospel". By that he wished to centre attention on the simple message of Opus Dei, which in its

essence is the same gospel message lived by the Early Christians of the first centuries: that we are all called to holiness ("You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Mt 5:48), and that this holiness, this struggle to know and love God, along with the apostolic spirit which must accompany it, is to be lived in the incidents of ordinary life. It is no coincidence that at the canonization of Josemaría, Pope John Paul II called him "the saint of the ordinary".

St. Josemaría often said that we must love the world - love it "passionately" he went as far as to say -, because it is God's creation and it is good - even though, he would add, we men at times make it bad through our selfishness. He never turned his back on the world or treated human progress with indifference. On the contrary, his very spirit - that we must seek sanctity by sanctifying

work itself, implies a constant call to do our work well, both humanly and supernaturally. We must purify our work of self-centred motives (pride, vanity, greed, desire for domination); our aim must be to honor God through our work, to give Him glory. Yet we will not do that unless we work well, really well. He would often say that we cannot offer God anything shoddy, defective or mediocre... The consequence is that one can only work according to the spirit of Opus Dei by being just and punctual in one's work, thorough and orderly, working moreover without jealousy or envy, always ready to accept corrections or to ask for advice.

Importance of this spirit for new countries

When a person's work and everyday life are truly inspired by love for God, then they are bound to be

marked by a series of qualities that are so important for the proper human development of society: thoroughness in work, honesty in all dealings with others and pride in serving them, avoidance of gossip or negative attitudes, responsibility in one's social commitments, care for marriage and family life. Evidently, the more such a spirit spreads, the greater the peace and harmony in a society. This also explains why so many non-Catholics and even non-believers, are Cooperators of opus Dei since, independently of religious outlook, they see a powerful force for human good in the spirit it spreads, and are happy to cooperate in spreading it.

How devotion to Saint Josemaría has spread throughout Africa

Josemaría's feast day (June 26) is celebrated in many dioceses and parishes, also in countries where

there are not as yet any Opus Dei centres. Many thousands of persons have read his life and are seeking to put his teachings into practice. After all, one does not have to be a member of Opus Dei to understand the power and worthwhileness of that simple spirit with which God entrusted him. Besides all of this, so many people have received favors through his intercession (many of the favors obtained by Africans were presented during the processes of his beatification and canonization). The following account is just one among many.

"Through the intercession of St. Josemaria, I have had many answers to outstanding problems in my life. And in turn I have learnt to live God's presence and to practice God's Word in my heart. I love Jesus Christ with all my heart, soul mind and spirit. I am married, a mother of three, and we all love Jesus Christ.

Last year I attended a Mass at Holy Family Basilica. I had been looking for a shop here in my area for over three months. But that Saturday afternoon, after attending a Josemaria Mass, God blessed me with a shop - placed in a good site and convenient. I opened the shop in July last year. I must confess that I have seen the hand of God in my business. Although the competition is tough, I have God's grace."

What lies ahead

St. Josemaria, right up to his very last days, insisted that he was young, that each day God renewed the joy of his youthfulness. There is indeed a youthful challenge in the spirit of Opus Dei - the challenge of justice, of loyalty, of mutual respect, of sincerity in friendship, of chastity, of fidelity in married life... Such challenges are needed in the African countries which are in danger of premature

aging due to the consumerism and hedonism sweeping in from the West and draining the vitality, the idealism and the other-centeredness that every society needs for its true human development.

The heart that is open to God in work and daily life, must also be open to others. No one, whatever their religion, color, tribe or race, can be excluded or treated indifferently or coldly. That is the spirit animating Opus Dei; it was by God's providence that Josemaría wished to highlight it in a special way when he suggested "*ut omnes unum sint*", "that all be one", as the motto of Strathmore College, the first corporate undertaking of Opus Dei in Africa. Openness to all, understanding and love between all, for we are all children of God: that fundamentally marks the spirit that Opus Dei seeks to spread.

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