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Interview with Isabel Sanchez, Author of ‘Compass Women . . .’ and Principal Secretary of Opus Dei

Zenit's exclusive conversation with Isabel Sanchez, the woman who occupies the most important position in the Opus Dei's administration, who recently published and presented her first book "Compass Women in a Forest of Challenges".

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Isabel Sanchez, the woman who occupies the most important position in the *Opus Dei's* administration, recently published and presented her first book "Compass Women in a Forest of Challenges (Planeta-Espasa), the reason for Zenit's exclusive conversation with her.

Since 2010, Isabel Sanchez Serrano (Murcia, Spain, 1969) directs the *Opus Dei's* Central Consultancy, an entity made up of women who advise the Prelate on the institution's government. She has a Licentiate in Law, lives in Rome since 1992, and works for the over 50,000 women in 70 countries that are part of the institution.

"Compass Women"

As a fruit of her trajectory and her post in the Work, she has been able to visit over 50 countries. She has known the work of many women, whom she calls “compass women,” namely, “those who become a point of reference for others, point out the North, trace the way and accompany to the goal.”

In her book she talks about 75 experiences of women that work in the five Continents, heading social projects to improve their surroundings. In addition, the book addresses subjects such as work, leadership, women’s role, care of people, peace, solidarity, and the planet’s sustainability.

To Make Compatible the Work of Writer

In the interview granted to Zenit, the *Opus Dei*’s principal secretary says that the proposal to write this book arose on the part of the publisher,

after an interview on the occasion of the Beatification of Guadalupe Ortiz de Landazuri, a scientist, and member of the Work.

Sanchez acknowledges that “although it required effort,” to make the book compatible with her work in this institution of the Church, she “was favored by several factors. In the first place, the support I received from the Prelate of the *Opus Dei*, Fernando Ocariz, and from my work team,” which made it easier from the first moment to dedicate different times of the week to the writing and limit my travel agenda.”

The Power of Forgiveness

Despite the fact she finds a choice difficult, of the 80 “inspiring” women that appear in the book, she says the one that made the greatest impact on her was an Argentine woman, a terminal patient, who told the doctor looking after her that she could leave

in peace because she was able to forgive her husband, who reappeared after abandoning her many years before, leaving her alone with several small children.”

“This debate between resentment and forgiveness certainly questioned me because we all go through it at some point in our existence.”

Therefore, “she was a reference for me, a clear example of a “compass woman,” who can change her fate and that of her dear ones in her kitchen,” highlights the writer.

Integrating and Enriching Feminism

In regard to the subject of women in present-day society, Sanchez is in favor of an integrating feminism, which includes men as allies. “I want to move away from a feminism of opposition, which reaffirms woman by crushing man. A glance at today’s world reveals that antagonisms will not be able to lead us to social

balance or create humanizing surroundings.”

Personally, that dialectic of confrontation worries me, not only between man and woman but also between races, social classes, or ideological options. I advocate the creation of collaborative areas, in which the look of one enriches others, in which men and women contribute to every realm of life.”

So, “we must work elbow to elbow to build a new model of society, which answers the anxieties that the future poses.”

We, women, “have passed several decades opening for ourselves a way in work environments and public areas, which historically had an exclusively male presence” and, “in this effort, there have been men who have collaborated because they have understood that women’s contribution was necessary to have a

complete vision of reality,” she clarifies.

A Sorority that Reaches Out

Given the confrontation that happens sometimes between women themselves. Especially in realms such as work, she points out that that in the past “injustices and errors have also been committed, such as, for example, to think that the winning of these areas required the assumption of masculine roles by women or of regarding other colleagues as potential rivals, instead of as allies.”

Nevertheless, we “women have much to contribute, as we carry with us a centuries-old patrimony in the care and primacy of the person, but we can also fall into the trap of revenge or envy, which undermines our self-esteem. Many women are arriving at the summit of their profession in numerous ambits.”

And she stresses that sorority passes through reaching out to the next one to go up. I have had the opportunity to talk with many women of very varied latitudes, and I see as an inherent condition of ours to be integrators, innovators, and stimulators of others.”

Foster Conciliation

Regarding her opinion on the principal achievements that should be obtained for women today, she says that perhaps, the first of them would be “to understand that maternity isn’t a subject of women; one must be convinced that the care and education of children concern everyone,” as, from this understanding of maternity and paternity, “the organization of work would have to be rethought to facilitate human relations, and reconcile family and work.”

“A step would be to rationalize schedules or give social recognition to professions related to care. Then there are other issues in which there is yet a long way to go, such as the salary gap or glass ceilings,” she adds.

Women in the Church

In her book, Isabel Sanchez also addresses the question of women’s role in the Church defending that, at the same time, it is necessary to point out the jobs and functions that the laity can do in her, being aware, in this connection, of the work that the laity can do in ordinary life.

Therefore, she says that she would like to see “many laypeople — ordinary Christians, at street level, men and women exercising a leadership role in the life of the Church.”

“Street Leadership”

To achieve it, she thinks “a process of de-clericalization “ is necessary, “a fine filtering work to discover what jobs have been attributed –when it might not be so.”

And she referred to “street leadership,” which includes “not so much assuming posts or reducing women’s contribution in carrying out functions in the structure of the Church, as it does embracing our vital commitment with today’s world, and taking to contemporary society — each one from the place he/she occupies — Christ’s message and the values of the Gospel — a leadership that will be visible “if each baptized person assumes this commitment.”

Solidarity as Solution to the Pandemic

Another subject that Isabel Sanchez addresses in her book is solidarity. Her proposals are linked to the Pope’s recent words, in which he states that the present pandemic “has

highlighted our interdependence: we are all connected, with one another, both in the good as well as the evil” (Pope Francis, General Audience, September 2, 2020).

In his line, the *Opus Dei*'s Principal Secretary says, in fact, that “the pandemic has manifested how much we have yet to advance as society in the care of our elderly and of the most vulnerable, in the acquisition of resources to protect them.”

“I agree fully with Pope Francis that this health crisis has made us see that today’s world, with these global challenges, require a mutual cooperation based on friendship as social value. We must go arm in arm with others.”

Moreover, in the chapter dedicated to solidarity, “as I understand it, the most valuable thing we have is the capacity to discover the needs of

others, to make them our own and to try to remedy them.”

“Humanize the Environment”

Asked about the tendency to trivialize the term “solidarity” as mere attractive content for the social networks, she clarifies that “solidarity is much more than a photo on Instagram; it’s to embody in one’s life the values of the Gospel, to empathize with our contemporaries.”

Moreover, in face of the discouragement that the fact can cause, in the present context, that many challenges exist to address in this field, she points out that “it’s true that our world is experiencing lacerating inequalities and that the challenges are titanic, however, at the same time it’s not necessary to go very far or carry out great feats to try to give back to them their original beauty: an attentive ear, a helping

hand, a smile or a favor done without expecting a return can humanize a hostile or indifferent environment, and change lives.” And “stories are narrated in the book that reflect this.”

Ecological Sustainability

Immersed fully in the “Time of Creation,” annual ecumenical celebration of prayer and action for our common home, and given that in “Compass Women “ there is talk of ecological sustainability, Sanchez states in this connection that in the Work “encouraged above all is that each person that displays his/her creativity must think of ways of embracing the commitment we all have with our planet, as a work that issued from the hands of the Creator.”

She also highlights that, in the chapter on this subject, “there is talk of the link with the surroundings,

established by the University of Piura, whose campus went from being an inhospitable desert to a notable natural reserve.”

Or Lucia’s story, “who works in the realm of technological innovation and was dedicated to start-up investments. Her reading of Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, led her to create her own consultancy firm on innovation and sustainability, placing the person at the center.”

Christians as “Ecological Agents”

In “Compass Women,” the author defines a Christian as an “ecological agent of the religious dimension,” who can destroy contaminated ideas about God.

In asking her how she believes Catholics can fight against the complexity and also the fear of relating to those that think

differently, she said that the Holy Father already “shared with us his desire in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he invited the Christian faithful to a new evangelizing stage marked by joy.”

In it, Pope Francis “speaks of the joy of the Gospel, which fills the heart and life of those that encounter Jesus. Through this testimony of joy of plenitude and of meaning, we, Christians of today, will be able to cancel the suspicions that still weigh on God as a tyrant, as men’s party pooper, as the constant accuser, as the robber of meaty and vital happiness.”

And she points out that we Catholics, “have before us today an exciting mission: to present to today’s world the merciful face of the Father. How? Essentially with our witness of faith, among our equals, in our family and

work relations or those of friendship.”

Write to Open Dialogues

Finally, in regard to the possibility of writing other books, Isabel Sanchez says that she has enjoyed “enormously” writing her first work, “although a moment awaits me of quite a bit of office work when I return to Rome,” and that the writing of a second part will depend on the readers and the book’s reception.

She also says that when “I thought of the chapters’ structure, I did so thinking of transversal challenges that affect all of us. I did it with the hope that the book would serve to open dialogues, to invite to conversation among friends on important topics, even if one has different positions or postures, <which are> seemingly contradictory.”

As interesting readings, “I am attracted by universal topics because it’s from them that we will be able to build a society of inclusive and transcendental dialogue.”

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