

John Paul II: "You come to Finland to do Opus Dei"

The Pope raised his eyes and looked intently at him. "The best way to help the Church in Finland," he said, "is to do Opus Dei." Fr. Barto Menchen recalls this encounter.

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In the summer of 1989 I was living in Finland. I had moved there from Sweden two years earlier to begin the stable apostolic work of Opus

Dei. That was a very special summer for the Nordic countries, since the Pope would visit them for the first time.

When John Paul II arrived in Finland, we Catholics fitted comfortably into the Helsinki Jäähalli (ice pavilion) for Holy Mass, joined by a good number of Protestants.

Before the Mass, all thirteen Catholic priests in Finland, including myself, had dinner with the Pope in the Bishop's residence. I recall that a parish priest from Estonia also joined us. He had managed to leave his country—then still part of the USSR—with some of his parishioners.

The meal was unforgettable.

John Paul II led the conversation. He took an interest in everyone, and asked each of us questions about our priestly work. When he turned to me, I told him about the apostolic

work that we in Opus Dei were beginning. But he didn't let me go on for long. He interrupted me in a friendly way and said: "You don't have to tell me about it. Your Prelate in Rome has already told me."

I was a bit disconcerted. Although I knew that Don Alvaro del Portillo had seen him before he left for his visit, I didn't think that, with so many concerns in his mind and heart, he would have been so aware of what we were doing.

The Pope went on to speak to everyone at length about the Holy Spirit's gift to the Church seen in the many initiatives for revitalizing the life of the laity. He referred specifically to the apostolic work of Opus Dei and said its spirit was of service to all countries and cultures.

The Pope stressed that we priests all had to help one another to carry out

a pastoral work that was dispersed throughout the whole country.

I was very moved by what John Paul II told me when saying good-bye. We went up to him one by one to receive a commemorative medal of the trip and a rosary. He looked at me intently and said: "You have come to Finland to do Opus Dei, and the best way to help the Church is to do precisely that."

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