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“I feel the weight of the Work and the power of God”

Ten years ago, prior to his appointment as Prelate, Bishop Javier Echevarría spoke about his life in Opus Dei in a lengthy interview by Pilar Urbano. On the tenth anniversary of that appointment, we present excerpts from that interview.

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How did you come to know the Work?

...Back in 1944, the magazine *Catolicismo* published an article about three engineers, members of Opus Dei, who had just been ordained to the priesthood. Four years later a friend of mine happened to find a copy of that issue at home, and showed it to six or seven of us. That struck us as quite unusual, and my friends were intrigued by it. But I wasn't.

Then, one Sunday—June 6, 1948—we had planned to attend a movie, but one of those friends phoned to suggest a different plan: “How would you like to go to a house on Diego de León to see what Opus Dei is all about?” So the six of us went over, and they were happy to see us. Each of us was able to speak individually with a member of Opus Dei, asking whatever most interested us. As we left, I picked up a prayer card of Isidoro Zorzano, an engineer and member of Opus Dei, whose process

of beatification had just opened. The idea of a “lay saint” struck me as attractive—someone you could imitate....

That summer the family stayed in Madrid, something we had never done before, and this made it possible to visit another house of the Work located, by chance, on my own street—Españoleto.... That house offered activities for high school boys. Whenever I would stop in, they would give me some small job to do around the house: sanding old chairs for a new coat of paint; helping redecorate or fixing something that had broken. I liked to feel useful and to be treated as someone able to help out. On Sept. 8, I asked to become a member of Opus Dei. I was 16.

What was it that attracted you?

The cheerful atmosphere. Even though everybody was studying and working hard, they were cheerful

about it. I saw that one could become holy that way without having to make a big change. And it offered an immense possibility of reaching many people and bringing Christ to them. From an early age I had enjoyed being with people, and had come to have many good friends.

How did you meet the Founder of Opus Dei?

The Father had moved to Rome in 1946, but he returned to Spain rather often. On one of those trips—in November 1948—we were invited to a get-together with him in Diego de León.... There were about 35 of us. When it ended, the Father singled out the three youngest and suggested we go with him that very afternoon to Molinoviejo, a country house near Segovia for workshops and retreats.

Six people climbed into an old Vauxhall, 3 in the front and 3 in the back. The Father sat in the back; I sat

up front with the driver, Dr. Odón Moles, and one of the other 2 boys. There was a little bit of everything on that trip—talking, singing, laughing, praying. The Father told us about the great number of apostolic tasks the Work had to carry out throughout the world, tasks awaiting us....

When you think of Blessed Josemaría, what thought, what experience most comes to mind?

His truly astounding passionate love for Jesus Christ and the fatherhood of God. During the 26 years I had the good fortune to spend at his side, I was surprised at the sincerity of his affection for everyone in the Work, even those he had not yet met.

Whatever he heard about a daughter or son of his by letter or in a get-together interested him and affected him personally. He really loved us as children of his prayer and mortification....

When you close your eyes, how to you picture him?

I see him speaking with people about God. I see him going out to meet people. I see him giving himself to all of us “full time,” without thinking of himself, without reserving a single minute for himself. Whatever was going on with us—a toothache, an exam, some family matter, a soccer game we were about to play—he made his own. We were his very life!

What about Don Álvaro, with whom you spent forty years?

I see him as always retiring to the background, watching and listening to our Father and attending to him, eager to learn from him. And this was in spite of his own great resources which enabled him to lead others. I can say without flattery that Don Álvaro was a giant, given his splendid mind, broad culture, refined manner, and sociability, as

well as his lofty thoughts, deep interior life, and the whole series of moral virtues he lived to an heroic degree. I'm not exaggerating. But in spite of that, he was attentive to the Founder, supporting him in everything so as to do Opus Dei. He faithfully carried out everything indicated by the Founder.

Is it true that you were a favorite of the Founder?

Me? Not at all! Certainly not! Possibly he had more confidence in me, as with the others who lived close to him. But he never had favorite sons. If he ever did have a favorite, it would have been Don Álvaro because of his valuable role in the Church and in the Work. We have to remember, too, that the Founder used to say, "I didn't choose Álvaro; it's God who put him at my side."

I could tell that the Founder loved me, but he also demanded very much

of me. Sometimes he would give me strong corrections. Once he even told me, “My son, if you don’t change, I won’t be able to trust you!” It was hard for me to hear that, but the Father was right, and it helped me a great deal....

For you as his successor, it seems that it will be quite a challenge; from one saint to the next, the crossbar is very high.

It’s true that they have left the bar very high, but they have also left a strong vaulting pole. On the one hand, they continue to help from heaven, and on the other hand, they left the clear example of what to do. Confronted with any situation, it’s enough to ask, “What would the Founder do? What would Don Álvaro do?” Almost without a doubt, that will lead straight to the mark....

When Msgr. Escrivá died..., Bishop del Portillo took the “lignum

crucis” from around his neck, and put it on “until a new Father is named.” When Don Álvaro died, did you do the same thing with that relic of the Cross?

Yes, but not right away. It was a few days later....

Is that when you felt “the weight” of the Work?

I did feel the weight of the Work, but I also felt the power of God. Like it or not, the Work is spiritually all of one piece, or more clearly, “one heart, and one soul.” Everyone is praying that I make the right decisions.

Letters are arriving by the thousands from every corner of the world and from all kinds of people.

What is that “weight” of the Work?

It’s the holiness of more than 70,000 persons, all called by God to show their commitment to him in their

work, in their ordinary duties, in their relationships with others. That weight is felt because all of us are fragile; we can all fail to respond in harmony with the great symphony of the Church.

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