

"The Prelature Aspires to Serve, as a Leaven"

In this interview, Bishop Javier Echevarría explains why "we all can and should live in intimacy with God, because we are all his children, and he expects love from all of us."

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How is the personal prelature of Opus Dei observing its 25th anniversary?

Along with our ordinary occupations, each of us is striving to thank God frequently for the many good things he has given us. Therefore, I have asked that the Prelature of Opus Dei observe 2008 as a Marian Year of thanksgiving, to conclude on November 28. Clearly, this anniversary is also an opportunity for each of us to renew our personal effort to follow Christ more closely, in communion with the Pope and all the bishops.

To put it in human terms, would it be correct to say that Opus Dei has "come of age"?

In light of the service it is called to render to the Church and souls over the course of time, we could say that it is still just beginning. Certainly not with respect to its mission, which is to remind people that all Christians are called to holiness in their ordinary lives. But it's true that it is

just beginning when we consider the scope and depth of the evangelizing task entrusted to it, since what has been accomplished so far is quite small in comparison with the expectations of so many people in the Church. For example, many bishops want us to begin working in their dioceses.

Moreover, all the faithful of the Prelature are faced with the daily challenge of making this message a reality in our own life, with the help of grace. From this point of view—which in my opinion is what matters most—Opus Dei will never be able to consider itself as having "come of age," since it always stands in absolute need of God's help, as a small child needs its parents.

What did it mean for Opus Dei to be recognized in the Church's law as a personal prelature 25 years ago? Why was this particular

canonical form chosen rather than other forms that are more frequent in the lay movements?

After consulting with thousands of bishops and studying the question carefully, Pope John Paul II established Opus Dei as a personal prelature because this legal form gave full ecclesial recognition to its foundational charism. As is well known, on October 2, 1928, St. Josemaría saw that God was asking him to help foster throughout the world the universal call to holiness. He was being asked to help lay people become fully aware of their mission in the Church and the world, above all by sanctifying their work and the ordinary circumstances of their lives. The apostolic work arising from the seed that God had inspired, and that spread throughout many parts of the world, failed to find a suitable channel in the Church's law until the Second

Vatican Council provided for personal prelatures to serve particular apostolic needs. This legal form perfectly expressed the fully secular and international nature of Opus Dei's mission, bringing together in an organic way lay faithful—who continue to belong to their respective dioceses—and secular priests incardinated in the Prelature. It also makes clear how Opus Dei is in full communion with the diocesan bishops and how it fits within the various dioceses.

Thus it was an outcome the founder had long desired, and for which he had prayed so much and offered so many sacrifices, even that of not living to see the full ecclesial recognition by the Church's supreme authority.

The faithful of Opus Dei, moreover, in striving to live up to their Christian commitments, just like

other Christians, feel a special communion of prayer, intentions and affections with all the charisms in the Church, which are an expression of the People of God's rich spiritual patrimony—both the older ones and the new ecclesial movements.

How has the Prelature developed over these past 25 years? What have been its most important experiences?

The definitive attainment of the proper legal form has helped make it easier for people to understand how Opus Dei carries out its mission in the service of the universal Church, as well as its place within the local Churches. Besides that, there have been many reasons to rejoice during these past 25 years—the founder's canonization, for one. Another noteworthy event has been the passing of his first successor, Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, whose cause of

beatification has been opened.. Also during these years, the Prelature has extended its apostolate to new countries on every continent.

I would like to stress, however, that for the faithful of Opus Dei these are not the most important events. The most important ones are the events that fill their daily lives, even when seemingly of little significance humanly speaking. It is there that God is waiting for each one of us, and it is there that we can find him .

How did the founder's death impact the Prelature?

God gave our founder the heart of a father, filled with great humanity. At first, his death caused us deep sorrow. But with Msgr. del Portillo's help, who invited us all to keep that "wound" in our soul open so that we would be faithful to the treasure we had received, we came to understand

that the head and heart of this family of Opus Dei was now in heaven.

Throughout his life, St. Josemaría had sought never to make himself indispensable. He wanted to leave the spirit of Opus Dei "sculpted," as he put it. Now it's up to each of us who has received that spirit to correspond very faithfully to it and make it bear fruit day by day. I am very thankful that God gave me the opportunity to live for so many years with a saint like Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. I entrust myself completely to his powerful intercession, and I think that now he continues to watch over and help us with his fatherly and motherly affection, while telling us, as he so often did: "More, more, more!" We can always love more and do more for God and our neighbor. Despite our personal mistakes, we want to strive to finish each day closer to God than we began.

What is Opus Dei's secret in continuing to attract young people, especially in Europe, to this radical following of Christ, whether in matrimony, apostolic celibacy, or the priesthood?

It's the same secret as the Church's—the unfailing attraction of our Lord Jesus Christ. All Christians have the obligation to make present, by our example and words, the beauty of Christ's face and message without blemish, even when it seems we're going against the current. In our experience, the real Christ is always attracting people.

To use one of St. Josemaria's favorite expressions, Opus Dei is nothing but a great work of catechesis. It offers the means of Christian formation and personal spiritual guidance to its faithful and those who take part in its apostolic activities. Through the naturalness of their lives, the

friendships they form, and their one-on-one conversations, they communicate the teachings of the Gospel to their family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors.

Today, 25 years later, what are the most urgent challenges the Prelature faces?

The fundamental challenge is the personal holiness of each of its members, and the extension of this desire for holiness to many other persons through the work of evangelization. This task, which is and always will be pressing, is particularly urgent today, as the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, never fails to remind everyone who has faith.

And as I mentioned a moment ago, many bishops are calling the Prelature to begin apostolic activities in their dioceses. Just a year ago, Opus Dei's first center opened in Moscow. Right now we are praying

and working to make this a reality in Romania and Indonesia as well.

Another equally permanent challenge for the faithful of Opus Dei and for all Christians, especially lay people, is working alongside all men and women of good will to help shape a culture that respects the dignity of the human person.

Can we speak of an Opus Dei charism? Is "sanctity in one's work" still the pillar of its spirituality?

Yes, and it always will be. Any honest work, any upright occupation, when it is well-done, finished out of love, can and must be the place where God is to be found, where we can serve others, and where we improve personally. God calls us not only when we pray but throughout the day. It would not be correct, then, to term some jobs or occupations "second-rate." Any job or work can

be an opportunity to draw close to God. And not only at work; for married people, for example, the loving fulfillment of their spousal and family duties is also a true path to sanctity, just as is the priesthood, and the loyal fulfillment of civic duties for all citizens.

In short, God calls everyone to holiness—not just some of us, but all of us. We all can and should live in intimacy with God, because we are all his children, and he expects love from all of us.

Then, closely united to that central message, comes unity of life, love for personal freedom, and the eagerness to sow peace and joy everywhere in society, without rejecting anyone.

As Prelate of Opus Dei, how do you view the responsibility of heading one of the most lively and enthusiastic charisms in the Church today?

Please pardon me if I protest a bit at how you phrased this question. In the Church today—as has always been the case—spiritual riches abound, signs that the Holy Spirit is accompanying and inspiring her. Opus Dei is one more proof of the perennial vitality of the Church, but we don't wish to be "at the head of the class." Personally, I can tell you that I am well aware of the disproportion between my own strength and the task entrusted to me, and I try to rely on the prayers of the Prelature's faithful, its cooperators, and so many others who pray for our apostolic work. The Prelature of Opus Dei is not seeking any human glory; it aspires to serve, as a leaven—without any secrecy, but avoiding the limelight.

The intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom you decided to entrust this anniversary, has

surely been present throughout these past 25 years.

Yes; and not only during these 25 years, but throughout the entire life of Opus Dei. Faced with any need, we have always had recourse to Mary. As soon as St. Josemaría began to sense that God was asking something of him, he always relied on our Mother. Among many other indications of this, I could mention the Marian pilgrimages he made to her shrines all over the world, includingMontserrat, and especially Our Lady of Mercy in Barcelona. His visits to that basilica are closely connected to Opus Dei's juridical path, which came to a happy conclusion 25 years ago. Both at present and in the future, we will always be in need of Mary's help. During the Marian year that the Work is currently observing, I have encouraged all the Prelature's faithful to pray the Holy Rosary with

greater fervor, and to spread it among their colleagues, friends, and relatives. It is a very timely prayer.

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