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"The true measure of Opus Dei's state of affairs is whether each member is faithful to Jesus Christ." In an interview, the Prelate answers questions about the Centennial of the Founder's birth, peace in the world, and the Holy Father.

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Javier Echevarria, 69, has been at the top of the Opus Dei hierarchy since April 20, 1994. He is currently preparing to celebrate the centennial

of the birth, on January 9, 1902, of Blessed Josemaria Escriva, Opus Dei's founder. The centennial will have its culminating moment in the canonization of Escriva, already announced by the Pope. Bishop Echevarria agreed to answer a questionnaire sent by this correspondent, whom he received at the Roman headquarters of Opus Dei.

Echevarria rejects the accusations of secrecy that have been directed at Opus Dei. "I have the impression that this is a thing of the past, the result of a manipulation of reality promoted by small groups jealous of their own turf," he said. Although he insisted that Pope John Paul II does not make distinctions among Catholics, the Prelate admitted that for Opus Dei it is encouraging "to be able to count on the support of the Pope." He added that he saw the institution as something not Spanish, "but

universal," with many admirers. As far as detractors are concerned, he thinks they are fed by a lack of information or by "undue generalizations" drawn from the failings of a few members.

Question. What is the present state of affairs of the Work?

Answer. At this moment there are 85,000 faithful of Opus Dei in 60 countries. They try to spread the message of Christ to their friends, without considering themselves in any way better than others, from whom they too can learn. The true measure of Opus Dei's state of affairs is whether each member is faithful to Jesus Christ. And on this issue the Prelature's faithful examine themselves at the end of each day.

Q. The Work has organized various celebrations, but the most important will be the canonization of Blessed Josemaria. Taking into account the

controversy which was aroused by the beatification in 1992, do you fear that the criticisms will be repeated?

A. I do not know the date of the canonization. That depends on the Holy Father. The date of canonizations is usually made public during Consistories. How could we fail to be grateful for the increase of devotion to Blessed Josemaria in so many corners of the world since 1975? I do not fear controversy, and this is not just wishful thinking: articles and letters I have read during the past months confirm this.

Q. Opus Dei enjoys a great reputation with the present Pope, who granted it the canonical status of a personal prelature in 1982. To what extent has it been important to the Work to be able to count on the support of the Pope?

A. I think a Catholic should love the Pope, all the Popes, with the same

feeling of affection and veneration. Love for the Roman Pontiff is born of faith, not of preference, because in him we see the Vicar of Jesus Christ among men. And I venture to affirm that the Pope does not make distinctions. He is the father of all Catholics and he treats all with the same charity. Given this premise, being able to count upon his support is encouraging, an invitation to unity, a motive for thanksgiving and responsibility. The decision to establish Opus Dei as a prelature was based on serious theological and juridical studies. The Second Vatican Council, with the sanction of Pope Paul VI, had laid the groundwork for this. Certainly, John Paul II put his seal on the final document, but the decision was arrived at through a broad agreement; and, at the request of the Pope, the bishops of the nations where Opus Dei was carrying out its apostolate gave their opinions on it.

Q. Opus Dei and the Society of Jesus are Spanish religious initiatives with their own personality within the Church. The Jesuits are considered liberal and Opus Dei conservative. How are their relations?

A. If you will allow me to make a clarifying statement, I would like to say that I discovered Opus Dei in 1948 and have been one of its many faithful ever since, but I have never seen this reality as something Spanish rather than universal. It was born in Spain, but it was planned by God for the whole world.

Additionally, some words that are useful for simplifying matters – such as conservative or liberal – must be used carefully, because the effect they have is that many people, for fear of being labeled or pigeonholed, will not say what they truly think. What do I think? That the Society of Jesus has had and continues to have a great mission in the Church and in

the world. The Society and the Prelature are different in nature and arose from different charisms. I would not interpret them with terms that are alien to their deepest ecclesial reality, nor would I dare to compare them. Josemaria Escriva had a great devotion to St. Ignatius Loyola. What a big embrace they must have given each other in heaven!

Q. In the Vatican they appreciate the capacity of Opus Dei to bring together big crowds for the ceremonies of the Pope; but what has been, and is, the principal contribution of Opus Dei to the Catholic Church?

A. I do not feel comfortable speaking of Opus Dei's contribution to the Church, because all the richness of Opus Dei's spirit comes from the Church. Likewise, Blessed Josemaria has said: "It is Christ we have to

speak about, not ourselves." If I ask myself what the kernel of Opus Dei's message and mission is, I would sum it up in the universal call to holiness, the possibility of transforming the ordinary lives of the faithful into a path of holiness through the sanctification of work and of family and social duties.

Q. Both you and your predecessor at the head of the Prelature, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, had been direct collaborators of Blessed Josemaria. You were his personal secretary for 25 years. Couldn't one say that there has been too much inbreeding in the succession to the leadership of the Prelature?

A. I consider the 25 years that I spent close to Opus Dei's founder as an undeserved privilege and a constant call to responsibility. I can never thank God enough for this gift. And I can say the same of the time that I

worked with Bishop Del Portillo. Inbreeding? It is very normal for the choice of prelates of the Church's hierarchical structures to fall upon persons already working in them.

Q. Josemaria Escriva lived almost his whole adult life in Rome. Why was this? Was it a high priority for him to obtain a canonical status for Opus Dei?

A. Rome is the see of Peter, the capital of the Church, the symbol of its universality. Opus Dei was born in Madrid, but with an essentially universal dimension, and therefore it was natural for it to be based in Rome. The canonical statute of Opus Dei reflects that original characteristic. Blessed Josemaria had a profound feeling for that law which would give form to his charism and guarantee its future in the Church. Therefore he used all possible means to find a canonical configuration

which would reflect the essential features of Opus Dei.

Q. You said in 1994 that the criticism of Opus Dei proceeded from a Spanish minority. Nevertheless, in Italy in the eighties there was an attempt in the Italian parliament to have Opus Dei considered as a sect or cult. What is it about Opus Dei which bothers people?

A. First of all, Opus Dei is held in esteem by very many people. In fact, the accusations that you mention were investigated and found to be baseless. In regard to your question, I think that Opus Dei could bother only a person who does not know or is bothered by the Catholic Church itself. Sometimes stereotypes have been formed that have little to do with the reality of the life of the Prelature's faithful, and which create a picture as disagreeable as it is false. It could also be that some might be

bothered by defects or mistakes they have seen in some of the faithful of Opus Dei. Isn't it an undue generalization to project those personal failings on the Prelature? There are also people possibly bothered by seeing intellectuals, politicians, businessmen, workers, or fathers and mothers of families who live their faith consistently and who sometimes express an opinion going against the current: in favor of life or of the family, for example.

Q. The Work has been accused of secrecy and of exercising its great influence in a way that is somewhat hidden. Why is there so much reserve on the part of its members to acknowledge that they belong to it?

A. Please pardon me for saying that I don't agree with this. The faithful of Opus Dei are well known as such to their families, their colleagues, their friends. They do not object, very

much to the contrary in fact, to being known as belonging to the Prelature. If this were not the case, how could they speak about what they practice, about Opus Dei, about the seeking of sanctity in one's professional work? I have the impression that this accusation of secrecy is a thing of the past, the result of a manipulation of reality promoted by small groups jealous of their turf. It seems to me that there are few institutions about which so much is known as Opus Dei: an official bulletin of the Prelature is available, and one can find Opus Dei in telephone books and on the Internet.

Q. What do you make of the international situation since the terrorist attacks of September 11?

A. Like everyone else, I felt great sorrow at these attacks. I was deeply moved by those words of the Pope – I am now speaking from memory – of

the hopes for peace, long desired and suddenly wounded by these thorns. I have thought too about the tragedies of our time, like those of Africa, which have occurred far from the television cameras, and which also cry out to heaven. These profound crises demand radical solutions, perhaps new forms of relationship among peoples, in which not the logic of violence, power and money but that of dialogue prevails. It seems that more concrete means of fostering justice must be found.

Q. There are some who say that it is a question of a real conflict of cultures. How does Opus Dei see relations with Islam?

A. I would rather not look at the situation as a planetary conflict. A terrible terrorist act, carried out by a group of fanatics, cannot taint at one stroke the history and culture of

dozens of countries, even though it is for everyone a warning cry.

Q. What do you believe would be the reaction of Blessed Josemaria, if he were to see the present situation of the world, in which one can foresee even the possibility of cloning human beings?

A. Humanity has always had a genius for bringing torments upon itself. Cloning is like a nightmare of a man who has become drunk with the power of science and uses it without moderation, sowing fear and distrust around himself. This deficiency of ethics and morality allowed justification of the worst forms of barbarism of the twentieth century, which caused such great pain. I have no doubt that this would cause Blessed Josemaria great pain. But in today's world there are also many positive things which would cause him admiration and joy.

Q. Do you think that he would be satisfied with the evolution of his Work?

A. I think so. It seems to me that one of his great achievements was especially that of encouraging Christians to feel themselves to be "sowers of peace and joy." Josemaria Escriva had great sympathy for saints who had, according to their contemporaries, a good sense of humor, such as Thomas More, Philip Neri, Teresa or Don Bosco. This is why he always had a good rapport with young people.

Interview by Lola Galan, El Pais, Madrid