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John Paul II: Unflagging defender of truth

Bishop Javier Echevarría, prelate of Opus Dei, discusses the twenty-five years of John Paul II's pontificate, the Christian roots of Europe and the prospects for peace in Holy Land. An interview with Paolo Cavallo.

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The Pope's pontificate has spanned 25 years of the world's history.

How do you view his accomplishments?

“The scope of the Pope's activities is so extensive that it is hard to give a brief summary. John Paul II is a unique figure in our moment of history. His moral authority is universally recognized. His prestige is such that no one can ignore his efforts on behalf of human dignity, respect for life, peace, and the poor of our world. The Pope has shown with his deeds, as did his predecessors, that he is "the servant of the servants of God," an unflagging defender of truth, and an advocate for all men and women, in whose dignity he believes with all his strength. But there is something more important than his personal prestige. In the past 25 years John Paul II has made Christ present to our day and age; he has encouraged humanity to turn to Jesus for the answers to the fundamental

questions about the meaning of human existence. This is the ultimate reason for his authority."

Nevertheless, it doesn't seem that he is actually making much headway. Why not?

“Some of the Pope’s efforts clearly contrast with the reigning mindset and culture. Thus people may view them as obligatory but out-of-date, as necessary but destined to fail. This apparent discordance is not a sign of irrelevance. Real teachers are not enclosed in their own times. His efforts should be viewed from the perspective of the Church’s teaching authority. They indicate a direction that we should follow, one that everyone finds difficult, but that can be ignored only at the expense of our civilization. They hold up values that should be beyond argument: the promotion of peace, the defense of life, the affirmation of justice, the

offering of and asking for pardon. What we can’t do is to try to choose one of these values at the expense of another. The good is indivisible."

Does Opus Dei owe a great deal to this Pope?

“The message spread by St. Josemaría since 1928, later confirmed by the Second Vatican Council, has been particularly attractive because it is a rediscovery of the extraordinary beauty of Christian holiness. Sanctity is an ideal that should be sought and put into practice in every moment of life, as much in times of peace and serenity as in times marked by discord and suffering. It is an ideal within reach of all men and women. Everyday life can at times seem mundane, but if we seek Christ, what is routine is transformed into a path towards God and our own happiness. I am grateful to all the Popes, from

Pius XII down to today, because they have all shown great affection for Opus Dei. But we have a particular debt of gratitude to John Paul II, because during his pontificate several events of special importance for Opus Dei's history have taken place, such as the canonization of St. Josemaría."

What does Opus Dei do to support the Pope's efforts? For example, the Pope has been speaking out about the European constitution and the need for recognition of Europe's Christian roots. What has Opus Dei done in this regard?

“The mission and commitment of Opus Dei is to give formation to the faithful of the Prelature and to anyone else who asks for it. A consistent spiritual formation fosters personal responsibility, a desire to contribute to the building up of a more Christian and more human

society. To ignore the Christian roots of Europe would be to deny the reality of European history, something the Bishop's Commission of the European Union has noted clearly. The Church does not pursue privileges but rather tries to be of service to everyone. It is a question of respecting reality, instead of going along with the anti-clerical prejudices of the past. In fact, Christianity is the cradle of Europe. In this context, Opus Dei emphasizes the responsibility of each person, in particular of each Christian citizen, to contribute to the evangelization of culture through one’s work, showing a spirit of initiative, going against the current if need be and opening up a path for future generations."

But it seems that the Church wants to dominate European politics ....

“Along with the value of freedom, it is necessary to keep pluralism in

mind. No one could think that Catholics are promoting a ‘single model’ for Europe, neither in cultural matters nor in politics. The many cultures living together in Europe are, notwithstanding their common Christian roots, quite distinct from each other, but no one is trying to make them uniform. What is essential, ultimately, is respect for reality and respect for history, in a climate of freedom and pluralism."

Freedom and peace are interrelated. Will there ever be a day when peace comes to Palestine?

“In the Holy Land the fight is over a piece of land. The dispute is a question of justice. Among the Palestinians and Israelis there are men and women capable of living together in a spirit of fraternity. Peace is a gift from God, but it requires men and women of good

will on earth. It must be constructed with human effort. Authentic peace is inseparable from justice. It requires a spirit of understanding and forgiveness, and an effort by people to know and value one another. St. Josemaría often said that peace within and between peoples can only arise out of peace in consciences. And he added that violence neither conquers nor convinces. The one who uses it is always left defeated."

War often has its origin in situations of extreme poverty, such as in Africa. The African continent needs help. Has Opus Dei committed itself to doing something for the poorest people of Africa?

“When the Pope announced his intention to canonize St. Josemaría last year, an organizing committee was set up. Among others things, the

committee established a solidarity fund for Africa with contributions from people attending the canonization. We called it Project Harambee 2002. So far, more than a hundred thousand people, as well as various entities and institutions, have contributed to the fund. The money collected is going to help 18 educational projects in sub-Saharan Africa. One of these is a center for the social reintegration of children obliged to fight during the civil war in Sierra Leone. It is only a drop in the ocean of need. But Project Harambee 2002 has been a way to channel the natural happiness of those who have received graces through St. Josemaría towards a desire to remember those in need. Life is made up of joy and sorrow, health and sickness, strength and weakness. Our life will always contain both light and shadows. What is important is putting one's life at the service of others."

Paolo Cavallo // Il Secolo XIX (Genoa, Italy)

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