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Recognizing our need to give thanks

Bishop Javier Echevarria, Prelate of Opus Dei, delivered the following homily on September 22 in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in observance of the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

10/10/2005

1. The celebration of my fiftieth anniversary as a priest invites me to address this brief prayer to Our Lord: "Thank you, forgive me, help me more." It gives me an incentive to

take the path of conversion and thanksgiving, the highway to a fuller identification with Christ. This is how I must follow in the footsteps of my predecessor as Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who loved to address Our Lord with that same exclamation, especially on anniversaries and other significant dates in his life. We, too, can start each day with the same or similar words.

Thank you, Lord! As the years pass, one can see God's mercy more clearly, and at the same time--not with sterile pessimism, but with realism--one becomes more aware of personal limitations. This does not shake our serenity, for like the first Apostles, it leads Our Lord to tell each one of us, "Ego sum, nolite timere" (Mt 14:27)--Be not afraid, it is I.

Taking a glance at the fifty years that have passed since priestly ordination, I recall a phrase of St. Josemaria from the 1930s: "How little a life is to offer to God...!" (1)

Assenting to the truth of those words, I add: How brief is all of earthly existence to adequately thank the Triune God for being so near and so loving! How poorly we find ourselves able to respond to God's love as He deserves!

I would like to address the Lord with the same deep gratitude I have admired in so many holy persons, especially in St. Josemaria. I know very well that I am very far from those lofty models, and yet it is what I truly desire. Therefore, I dare to make my own some words I heard from the Founder of Opus Dei on the eve of his own fiftieth anniversary as a priest.

It was March 27, 1975, which that year fell on Holy Thursday. A small group of his sons were at his side, adoring the Blessed Sacrament. Spontaneously, St. Josemaria began his personal prayer aloud. Toward the end of his earthly life, his praying had become continuous, day and night, for the Lord had granted that grace to him--as He did some of the Fathers of the Church--of prayer uninterrupted even by sleep.

On that occasion, we heard him say, along with other expressions of his confident dialogue with Jesus, present in the Sacred Host, something that deeply moved those of us who were there: " 'Gratias, tibi, Deus, gratias tibi!' Everyone's life has to be a canticle of thanksgiving. How else was Opus Dei made? You, Lord, have made it with four 'rejects'--the 'stulta mundi, infirma mundi, et ea quae non sunt' (1 Cor. 1:27-28). All of St. Paul's teaching has been fulfilled:

You sought completely illogical means, apt for nothing, and have extended the result throughout the world. People are giving thanks in all of Europe, in parts of Asia and Africa, in all of America, and in Oceania. They are giving thanks everywhere." (2)

If a saint has expressed himself that way, what would my thoughts have to be, seeing myself so far removed from him, both in human gifts and in supernatural qualities? Nevertheless, I know that when He conferred upon me the ministerial priesthood, the Lord called me to be his own (John 15:15); He conferred on me the capacity to renew among men His divine Sacrifice on Calvary and to dispense its fruits in the other sacraments. I know well that He has granted me the power to proclaim the Word, to represent Him before men, to be intimately united to Him, who desires to get close to everyone

by using me as His instrument. Besides that--"gratiam pro gratia!" (Jn 1:16)--He has entrusted to me the pastoral care of Opus Dei, this small portion of his "pusillus grex" (Lk 12:32), which is the Church. Help me to ask the Lord to know how to accomplish this mission fruitfully, deepening the furrow opened by my predecessors in the task of directing what is now the Prelature.

In some way, the Lord has subjected Himself to the will of priests. He has wanted to depend on our words and our gestures to make present in the Holy Mass the paschal mystery of His death and resurrection. He is, as St. Augustine said, "intimior intimo meo," more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. (3) We would want to experience every moment that presence of His in our souls in such a way that all twenty-four hours of the day we know ourselves, and feel ourselves, to be instruments

completely His--priests, only priests, priests of Jesus Christ.

2. When each of us looks at his own life, he can discover a flawless love, ever young and new, that the Holy Trinity has given us. God has looked upon all of us with divine interest, with that exquisite attention that is given to important people in the world. Certainly, for God our Father every man and woman is a person of inestimable importance. "Empti enim estis pretio" (1 Cor 6:20, 7:23), as St. Paul puts it: We have been redeemed at an infinite price--the blood of his Only-begotten Son, who became man for our sake.

Nevertheless, on our part--on mine, at least--we have to recognize that our response has not always been adequate: so much is missing, so many lacks of love, in little things and in great. Hence the imperative need to ask pardon. Help me, too, to

supplicate Our Lord, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity, for not having dealt with circumstances as they demanded, for not having caught on more completely to how it is that God finds his delight in being with the children of men--"deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum" (Pv 8:31)--and desires to find solace in me, in all of us with greater intimacy. So often have we received Him and conversed with Him so wretchedly!

Once again making the words of St. Josemaria my own, I too must confess--and with more reason--that "after fifty years I am like a babbling child. I am beginning and beginning again every day. And so it will be until the end of my days: always beginning over. The Lord knows this so well, for it keeps us from having any reason to be proud of ourselves or entertaining foolish vanities. We have to be concentrating on Him, on His every word, our ears attentive,

and with a ready will to follow the divine inspirations." (4)

If you want to be especially united to my prayer today, I beg you to ask the Lord that those words of a holy priest might take deep root in my heart so that I make them my own with complete sincerity. For my part, I promise to pray for all and each one of you every day. I ask everyone's pardon for my failures to correspond, to serve, and for possible offenses I may have done to you, for the times I may have behaved toward anyone without taking into account the stupendous reality that we are most beloved children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ.

I ask Our Lady, who was so faithful at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:25), to help all of us advance along the highway of charity, knowing how to lift up the Holy Cross in our bodies and souls, so that the profound

aspiration Our Lord himself engraved with fire in the spirit of Opus Dei's Founder on a precise date in 1931 might become a reality in everyone.

That day, August 7, while celebrating Mass, St. Josemaria heard deep within his soul words of St. John's Gospel according to the Vulgate version then used in the Liturgy: "et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum" (Jn 12:32). God made him understand by means of a very clear intellectual light the meaning of the mission entrusted to the men and women of Opus Dei within the Church. Years later, he alluded to that divine locution in a meditation: "The poor priest hadn't realized that Opus Dei was to be crowned that way, in such a divine way. But he had understood that at the summit of all human activities there would need to be men and women with the Cross of Christ in

their lives and in their work--high up, visible, atoning, redeeming; a symbol of peace and of joy; a symbol of the Redemption, of the unity of the human race, of the love God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Trinity, has had and continues to have for mankind." (5)

3. The Apostle teaches that "no one can say 'Lord Jesus,' except through the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). If St. Paul speaks that way, how much more help from heaven will we need, who find ourselves so poor in God's presence! Well aware of the help that reaches me continuously, I tell Our Lord God again, to say it one more time, "Thank you, forgive me, help me more!" For this reason, I have chosen the figure of the Crucifix as a memento of my fiftieth anniversary of ordination. Thus, the conviction--real, practical, concrete--is rooted more incisively in my life and in the

lives of all that our strength, our virtues, our accomplishments, come from God's goodness alone, supremely manifested by Christ nailed to the Cross for our sins.

If we are to bring forward the new evangelization so much desired by John Paul II, and now by Pope Benedict XVI, we have to be men and women of the Cross. This world of ours requires it urgently. Let us try to live this ourselves and announce it to others: "lux in Cruce, requies in Cruce, gaudium in Cruce" [Our light is in the Cross, our rest is in the Cross, our joy is in the Cross].

Other considerations of Opus Dei's Founder stand out in my memory. Near the end of that burning colloquy he carried on with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, which I mentioned earlier, he reminded those of us who were following his words--and the faithful of the

Prelature of all times--of something he had taught many times: "We always have to be in heaven and on earth--not in between heaven and earth, because we are in the world. But at the same time in the world and in Paradise! This will be a kind of formula to express how we have to live our lives so long as we are 'in hoc saeculo': in heaven and on the earth, immersed in God, but knowing that we are in the world, that we are of the earth, with the fragility proper to the earth--a clay pot that the Lord has wanted to make use of for his service." (6)

Before concluding, I feel a duty to give thanks to St. Josemaria, who called me to the priesthood and from whom I learned everything, and to Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, at whose side I spent many years. He was for me a teacher of faithfulness to God. I also thank the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei--men and

women, lay people and priests--and the bishops and priests of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, as well as the cooperators and the innumerable young people who take part in the apostolates of the Work. With their prayers and sacrifices they are sustaining me and accompanying me day after day. I thank my parents, brothers and sisters, to whom I owe, humanly speaking, a very considerable part of my Christian and priestly vocation. I thank the innumerable persons whom I have known over these fifty years, who have also helped me with their prayers, their example, and their words. To all I express my heartfelt gratitude along with my promise of constant and uninterrupted prayer.

I wish to extend a special greeting to my brother bishops and priests here present, and to the many who could not accompany me physically on this day but are spiritually united to us.

In a particular way, I give thanks to the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, for the fatherly letter he sent me for this anniversary, and for the ways he has shown his affection for Opus Dei and for me. All of this is a stimulus to increase my affective and effective union with his Holiness and his intentions.

I also wish to acknowledge the previous Roman Pontiffs whom I have known. In a particular way my thoughts turn to our most beloved Pope John Paul II of venerable and happy memory, a true father for millions of people, as indicated by the enormous impact his death had on the entire world. Besides naming me a bishop and conferring on me episcopal ordination, he showed his interest and affection for the Prelature of Opus Dei so often and in so many ways. Full of confidence, I invoke his intercession before God.

Mary, "Woman of the Eucharist," is also the faithful Woman beneath the Cross. With her "fiat!" at the Annunciation and prolonged without interruption in the course of her life, she corresponded to the love of God by a complete self-giving. Now she takes care of us, her children, with maternal love. I address her in words of the "Stabat Mater" sequence, recently recited on the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows:

"Sancta Mater, istud agas, Crucifigi plagas cordi meo valide." As a fruit of that identification with her crucified Son, I beg Holy Mary to teach me--to teach us all--to love Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit ever more. "Fac ut ardeat cor meum in amando Christum Deum." Amen.

Bishop Javier Echevarria, Prelate of Opus Dei

Rome, the Basilica of St. Mary Major,
Sept. 22, 2005

(1) St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 420.

(2) St. Josemaria, Meditation of March 27, 1975, cited in Salvador Bernal, *A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, p. 396.

(3) St. Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6:11.

(4) St. Josemaria, Meditation, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

(5) St. Josemaria, Meditation, November 2, 1958.

(6) St. Josemaria, Meditation, Mar. 27, 1975, *op. cit.*, pp. 398 f.