

January 2002 La Repubblica Interview

Bishop Echevarria answers candid questions about Blessed Josemaria, Opus Dei, and the Church in the Third Millenium.

10/12/2002

An interview with Bishop Javier Echevarría published in the Italian newspaper La Repubblica. Bishop Echevarría, this has to be a great moment for Opus Dei: soon its founder will be raised to the altars.

When that takes place, it will mean that the Church will have definitively recognized the holiness of a man who reached the fullness of charity, perfect union with God. Christian holiness consists in the ability to love God above all things and to transmit that love to others. I can assure you that Blessed Josemaría had a huge heart, amply capable of suffering with whoever suffered and of rejoicing with whoever rejoiced. And he did so whether the affected party was an entire nation, a group of people, a friend or a stranger.

Some have said that Escrivá was hard to get along with, temperamental....

I don't think that can be said, although he himself wasn't bashful in saying he had a forceful character. God took advantage of his spiritual might to open a path for Opus Dei in the world, in the Church, in so many

places. He knew how to say the right things, at times energetically, but without leaving resentments. And if he realized he'd made a mistake, he'd immediately apologize.

Opus Dei has covered a lot of ground: more than 80,000 members the world over, close to 2,000 priests and deacons, so many undertakings in all six continents. What would you tell a youth today to encourage him to join?

Let me clarify that I wouldn't encourage anyone to join Opus Dei. To follow our Lord in the Work, there's a pre-condition: everyday freedom. One is to do what God wants, answering to him: I do so because I want to. I'd only advise such a person: Be attentive to God's voice and do whatever he tells you.

And if someone wishes to leave Opus Dei. Is there any pressure?

None at all. Never.

But weren't there some unpleasant instances in the past...?

No, never. The doors are wide open for whoever wishes to leave, yet for whoever wishes to enter a lot of pushing and shoving is required. Now, if you're a parent and your child is about to choose a mistaken path, would you let him follow his whim without batting an eye? No, you'd offer some advice. The only kind of pressure is paternal, fraternal. We tell them: Listen, you can do what you wish, but think it over, because it's your life that's in play.

For years wagging tongues have complained about proselytizing, even among minors, or about psychological pressures to go to confession with only Opus Dei priests.

Frankly, such criticisms have never been demonstrated, on the one hand, and, on the other, are things of the past. As far as the duty to confess with our priests, I must say it's simply not true. Such a policy runs counter to the freedom the Church recognizes for all Christians.

Moreover, doesn't it make sense that the prelature's faithful naturally want to confess to a priest who can help them better, because he lives the same spirit as they do? Yet, they are still free to go to whichever Catholic priest they want.

Don't you accept any blame? Even the Pope has been known to ask forgiveness.

I accept that we are all imperfect, that we all ought to correct each other and we all must examine our conscience to be better children of God. And let me add that we don't see ourselves as first in the class. We

know we're poor human beings, who must learn from others. We also try, with the help of grace, to act responsibly by working well, by leading good family life and caring for our social duties.

In nearly 75 years since its founding, wherein lies the Work's particular vitality?

Our specific mission is not to develop this or that apostolic undertaking; rather it's to spur men and women at all social levels to engage in all kinds of jobs while sanctifying their lives. They thus witness to the Gospel's universal values. We currently have centers in more than 60 countries, the most recent being South Africa, Kazakhstan and Lebanon. Wherever they are, the prelature's faithful try to live sincere Christian lives, earnestly carrying out, in our founder's words, an apostolate of friendship and trust in their usual

family and professional settings. Then there are some, with an eye on what their community needs, who bring about larger undertakings of an educational or beneficent nature, among others. They do so with the collaboration of others, often non-Catholics. It's no secret that the founder began apostolate among Madrid's poor and sick.

As a man of faith, what concerns you the most?

The loss of a religious sense in the world: letting worldliness get the upper hand.

How do you see the Church of the third millennium? How should its Pope be?

Opus Dei has no corporate line as to how the Church or papacy should be. The Pope, whoever he might be, gives unity to the Church and is guided by the Holy Spirit. Personally, I think

tomorrow's Church will look both ahead and to its Christian roots. To look at Christ and at the world we inhabit. In this sense I think the word "communion," employed so often by the Pope in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (written after the Jubilee), can supply the very key to analyzing both the Church's problems and mission in the world.

You were Escrivá's personal secretary from 1953 until his death. How do you recall him?

With his word and writings but above all with his example, he taught how to live fully the Gospel ideal, showing it to be neither utopian nor limited to privileged persons. Rather he echoed the divine call to live the Gospel in every corner and occupation. Isn't every job to be turned into an encounter with Christ?

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