

To Serve the Church

Opus Dei was born in the Church and exists in the Church to serve the Church. In this year marking the 25th anniversary of the Work's being erected as a personal prelature, we offer an article explaining the relevance of this event.

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"I advise you to lead a life of thanksgiving. All that we have, whether much or little, we owe to God. Nothing good comes from ourselves. If ever you find yourselves

filling up with pride, raise your eyes to heaven and you will see that anything noble and clean that is in you, you owe to God."^[1]

Twenty-five years ago, Don Álvaro del Portillo recalled these words of St. Josemaría in his letter of November 28, 1982. It was the best way to express our gratitude to God for the fulfillment of the "special intention," for Opus Dei being erected as a personal prelature by the Pope.

"Ut in gratiarum semper actione maneamus!"

With the pontifical act erecting the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei and the approval of the new Prelature's Statutes, the *Codex iuris particularis Operis Dei*, prepared by St. Josemaría, the Work's canonical path in search of a juridical configuration suited to its nature attained its goal.

The journey had been a long and difficult one, requiring a succession of approvals conferred in accord with the opportunities opened up by canon law at each stage. St.

Josemaría said: "My children, our Lord has always helped us, in the diverse circumstances of the life of the Church and of the Work, to go along the specific canonical path that at each historical moment—in 1941, in 1943, in 1947—contained three fundamental characteristics: that of being a path that was possible, that responded to the needs of the growth of the Work, and that was—among the various canonical possibilities—the most suitable solution, that is to say, the least unsuitable to the reality of our life."^[2] Opus Dei's Founder stressed that "our *iter iuridicum*, our canonical itinerary, seems tortuous to human eyes. But with time it will be seen to have been successive advances when viewed from God's perspective...Thanks to ordinary

divine providence, little by little a path is made that eventually leads to a definitive one: one that will preserve the spirit and reinforce apostolic efficacy."^[3]

An ecclesial reality that already existed, with a very specific nature, was opening up a path under the impulse and guidance of God's light, which St. Josemaría had "seen" on October 2, 1928. It was a matter of making its potentialities explicit until the canonical configuration fully suited to its nature was attained.

In that same letter of 1982, Don Álvaro del Portillo wrote: *The profound reason for our gratitude cannot be reduced to the very important step of the Pope's approving the juridical configuration which our Founder desired for Opus Dei. It is based, rather, on all that this pontifical act has meant for us throughout these intense, hard and*

happy years, years of expectation and of union with God. The Work, "firm, compact and secure," closely united to our Father in the same intention, has prayed, suffered, hoped, and worked. And this has meant an immense good for Opus Dei and for the entire Church...God constantly took the initiative, acting in many different ways in our Father's heart and mind. We, his daughters and sons, have benefited from this...Despite our personal wretchedness the Work has traveled "at God's pace." Our Father took up this pace heroically from the very beginning. In the midst of a divinely accompanied solitude, it was "his lot" to tackle the steepest slopes towards which our Lord was directing us. Our task was to follow him, all together, though perhaps we were unaware of the thorns that pierced his soul at each step.[4]

By meditating on these words, we will come to grasp more deeply that

the Work has not been invented by men, but that it comes from God,[5] and we will feel impelled to raise our hearts to the Blessed Trinity with a joyful song of thanksgiving.

Don Alvaro also said in the same letter that *the "Te Deum" which today we raise to God cannot be merely a momentary outburst of joy. It must be a lasting record of the heroic verse of Love for God which our Father wanted us to fashion from the prose of every day.[6]*

The silver anniversary is a special occasion to renew our thanksgiving to God, after so many years of prayer and intense work and sacrifice. On contemplating the fruit of these twenty-five years, the echo of these words from Don Alvaro has to reach all the Prelature's faithful, helping them to imbue with gratitude even the smallest events in their lives.

A "small portion" of the Church

St. Josemaría assured us that the definitive canonical configuration would bring with it *omnia bona pariter cum illa* (Wis 7:11), that with it would come an immense sum of blessings for the Church. Among them we find the reality that now it is much easier to grasp that the Work is really and truly a "small portion" of the Church.[7] As the papal document *Ut Sit* put it: "With very great hope, the Church directs its attention and maternal care to Opus Dei...so that it may always be an apt and effective instrument of the salvific mission which the Church carries out for the life of the world."^[8]

With these words the Roman Pontiff situates Opus Dei among the "manifold particular expressions of the saving presence of the one Church of Christ."^[9] It is a part of the Church, present and active, thanks be to God, in a great number of

dioceses throughout the world through the work and apostolate of its faithful, who try to carry out in a Christian way a great variety of human activities, in close communion with the Roman Pontiff and the local Bishops.

Opus Dei was born in the Church and exists in the Church to serve the Church. It is the service of a part for the whole, of a member for the other members of the same body. And each member serves the others, primarily and essentially, by fulfilling its own mission. Outside the body it could not serve as a member; there is no service to the body without communion with the others and with the body as a whole. This was St. Josemaría's spirit from the beginning: "The only ambition, the only desire of Opus Dei and each of its members is to serve the Church as the Church wants to be served, within the specific vocation God has

given us."^[10] Right up to the moment of his death, he offered his life, united to the Sacrifice of the Altar, for the Church and for the Pope.

Close union with the Prelate is essential for this service to be effective. As the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: "Although every Christian receives the love of God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, the Bishop receives in his heart through the sacrament of Holy Orders the pastoral charity of Christ. The purpose of this pastoral charity is to create communion."^[11] Since "communion expresses the Church's essence,"^[12] the faithful of Opus Dei, by being united to the Prelate as the Prelature's own pastor, participate in its mission, which has as its purpose to create communion in, and with, the whole Church.

Pope John Paul II invited the faithful of the Work to carry out this service

by imitating St. Josemaría "with openness of spirit and heart, with a readiness to serve the local Churches." For thus "you contribute to strengthening the 'spirituality of communion' which my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* points out as one of the most important goals of our time."^[13]

At the service of the local Churches

We give thanks to God that the Church's Supreme Authority, by erecting the Work as a personal prelature, has ratified it as what it is: *fully secular priests and ordinary faithful, who certainly constitute on an international level a jurisdictional unity of spirit, of specific formation and of government, but who, just like the other faithful, cheerfully continue to depend on the Bishops in everything related to their ordinary pastoral care, that which each Bishop*

exercises over all the other lay people of his diocese.[14]

This insertion in the local Churches becomes a reality through the faithful of Opus Dei's personal and free actions in their professional work, in their family, among their friends, acting as leaven or salt that disappears in the mass.

One can apply to the Prelature and its members these words from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "there are institutions and communities established by the Apostolic Authority for specific pastoral tasks. They belong *as such* to the universal Church, though their members are also members of the particular Churches where they live and work. The manner of belonging to the particular Churches, with its own particular *flexibility*, takes different juridical forms. But it does not erode the unity of the particular

Church founded on the Bishop; rather, it helps endow this unity with the interior diversification which is a feature of *communion*."^[15]

In a gathering in 2001 with "the purpose of strengthening the Prelature's service to the particular churches where its faithful are present," Pope John Paul II, after reminding those present that he had erected the Prelature of Opus Dei on November 28, 1982, said: "I wish to emphasize that the membership of the lay faithful in their own particular Churches and in the Prelature, into which they are incorporated, enables the special mission of the Prelature to converge with the evangelizing efforts of each particular Church, as envisaged by the Second Vatican Council in desiring the figure of personal prelates. The organic way that priests and laity work together is one of those privileged areas where

pastoral activity will take life and be strengthened, activity marked by that ‘new energy’ which has encouraged us all since the Great Jubilee. In this connection, we should recall the importance of that ‘spirituality of communion’ stressed by the Apostolic Letter.”[16]

These words of John Paul II remind us that an important part of our thanksgiving should be for the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Intrinsically and inseparably united to the Prelature, its growth has enabled many priests incardinated in the various diocese to participate in this spirituality of communion. Thus these priests have been greatly helped to *feel that they are more truly priests of their own Bishop, more dedicated to their diocese, more brothers to their brother priests, more concerned for the seminary and diocesan undertakings, and more given to the service of souls.*[17]

Yet one more reason for giving thanks is the widespread perception in the People of God that the Prelature of Opus Dei belongs to the pastoral and hierarchical organization of the Church, perfectly integrated into the entire universal Church and into each of the local Churches where its apostolic activity is being carried out.

Thus what the Statutes say regarding relations with the diocesan Bishops is made a reality: "All the apostolic activity that the Prelature carries out—in accord with its own nature and ends—contributes to the well-being of each of the local Churches." [18] As Don Álvaro del Portillo stressed: *in the midst of our personal weaknesses, we always try to be the most faithful and loyal subjects the Bishops have. With what joy we expressly pray and mortify ourselves several times each day for the person and intentions of the diocesan Pastor!* [19] Proof of this

union is the affection so many bishops throughout the whole world show the faithful of Opus Dei, and the trust with which they rely on the support of their Christian lives.

An echo of this appreciation for the Prelature's service to the Church is found in the words Pope Benedict XVI addressed to the Prelate, Bishop Echevarría, on the occasion of the golden anniversary of his priestly ordination: "When you foster the eagerness for personal sanctity and the apostolic zeal of your priests and lay people, not only do you see the flock that has been entrusted to you grow, but you provide an effective help to the Church in her urgent evangelization of present-day society." [20]

These encouraging words from the successor of St. Peter spur us to continue fervently asking our Lady: *Cor Mariae Dulcissimum iter serva*

tutum! Most Sweet heart of Mary, preserve a safe path for us! May all of us grow in our eagerness to serve the Church and the dioceses, in each one's place in civil society, infusing all noble human professions with Christian life. Thus, with a renewed eagerness to evangelize the world, beginning again each day in our personal apostolate of friendship, the Founder of Opus Dei's words will continue to become a reality: "the years will go by and you will see many things that I won't be able to see on earth—and I have seen so much, so much!—and you will not stop giving thanks to God."^[21]We want our thanksgiving to pass through the Immaculate Heart of our Lady, *Mater Ecclesiae*, Mother of the Church, with the petition that all the faithful of Opus Dei respond faithfully to whatever our Lord is asking of them in the service of the Church and souls.

V. G.-I. and J. A. A.

1. St. Josemaría, Notes taken during his preaching, in Álvaro del Portillo, *Rendere amabile la verità*, Libreria Editrice Vaticano, 1995, p. 49
2. St. Josemaría, at the Plenary Session of the Special General Congress, September 12, 1970, in Amadeo de Fuenmayor, Valentín Gómez-Iglesias, Jose Luis Illanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Princeton-Chicago: Scepter-MTF 1994, p. 567.
3. St. Josemaría, *Letter December 29, 1947/February 14, 1966*, no. 163, in *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, p. 6.
4. Álvaro del Portillo, *Letter November 28, 1982*, no. 3, in *Rendere amabile la verità*, p. 50.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

7. Cf. Pedro Rodríguez, Fernando Ocáriz, Jose Luis. Illanes, *Opus Dei in the Church*, Dublin-Princeton: Four Courts-Scepter, 1994, p. 1.

8. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution, *Ut Sit*, November 28, 1982, prologue.

9. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communionis Notio*, May 28, 1992, no. 7.

10. St. Josemaría, *Letter May 31, 1943*, no. 1, in *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, p. 360.

11. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, October 16, 2003, no. 44.

12. *Ibid.*

13. John Paul II, Address at the canonization of St. Josemaría Escrivá, October 7, 2002.

14. Álvaro del Portillo, *Letter December 8, 1981*, no. 7, in *Rendere amabile la verità*, p. 43.

15. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communionis Notio*, May 28, 1992, no. 16.

16. John Paul II, *Address at the international conference on the Apostolic Letter "Novo Millennio Ineunte,"* March 17, 2001.

17. Álvaro del Portillo, *Letter December 8, 1981*, no. 14, in *Rendere amabile la verità*, p. 46.

18. Statutes, no. 174, §1, in *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, p. 642.

19. Álvaro del Portillo, *Letter December 8, 1981*, no. 7, in *Rendere amabile la verità*, p. 46

20. Benedict XVI, *Letter on the 50th anniversary of the priestly ordination*

of the Prelate of Opus Dei, July 9, 2005.

21. St. Josemaría, Notes taken from his preaching, in *Rendere amabile la verità*, o. c., p. 49.

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