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"We Catholics need to have a common father on earth"

An interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría, published in the Spanish daily "La Razon" about the recent papal election.

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How did you receive the news that we had a new Pope? What sensations went through your heart at that moment?

Great joy. We Catholics need to have a common father on earth, the Vicar of Christ in the universal Church. When we saw the white smoke I knelt down and prayed for him, without yet even knowing who he was. I renewed my inner desire to be a good son to the Roman Pontiff.

When the newly-elected Pope Francis spoke from the Balcony of Blessings, he mentioned all people of good will. And I thought about how, as well as Catholics, the Pope carries the burden of the joys and sorrows of all mankind. So as well as joy I also felt an intense desire for all of us to pray for the successor of Saint Peter, and a filial yearning to invite people to love the Roman Pontiff.

From the first days of the new Pope's pontificate, have you been especially struck by anything he has said?

“Christ is the center,” he told the journalists in the audience on March 16. This reminded me of what Saint Josemaria so often said: “We have to speak about Christ, and not about ourselves.” This is what is truly essential. Pope Francis also spoke about the action of the Holy Spirit. That’s the key for interpreting the recent conclave and the Church’s entire history: the viewpoint of faith.

We now have the first Latin American Pope in history. With your experience as the prelate of Opus Dei, what can the Catholics of Latin America contribute to “old” Europe?

In Latin America one sees the good spirit of showing charity with affection, with a warmth you can sense. This human warmth can so often help to prevent prejudices against others, to avoid the intellectual “complexity” that can

harm interpersonal relationships, and to forge truly human relationships. A sign of this capacity to love is the popular piety that is so vigorous in many Latin American countries, with a devotion to the Mother of God that is both tender and strong, and that can be very enriching for all men and women. All of this is a gift for the Church.

Bit by bit we are getting to know more details about the Holy Father's life: how he used to travel by bus, and lived in a small apartment in Buenos Aires.... Do you think these small everyday gestures can help change the minds of those who have a stereotyped image of priests, cardinals, and of the Church in general?

This austerity is a common note of recent popes (with some different external manifestations), and also of

the great majority of priests, who have the minimum they need to live on, and many don't even have that much. As you said, we are talking about a stereotype. I remember a cardinal who came to the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. In the time between activities, at 5 in the afternoon, there was a coffee break. While drinking the coffee he said: "Tonight I'm not going to have dinner, since I don't have anyone to help prepare dinner for me." This isn't always the case, but many more examples could be given here.

The lack of material goods, Saint Bernard said, is not in itself a virtue; rather this virtue entails loving poverty, which is also shown by these small deeds of self-denial. This disposition also finds expression in knowing how to do without superfluous possessions and in being detached from what one has. Certainly, as Saint Josemaria said,

poverty is one of our treasures in this world, and he pointed to the example of parents of a large family who, in lovingly striving to support their family, joyfully renounce so many personal items. Poverty is thus seen as a virtue needed to love (as Jesus taught us), and as part of charity. At the same time, we have to do everything possible to alleviate the suffering caused by personal and social injustices, and I see it as only natural that sometimes we become impatient on confronting so many injustices we would like to remedy.

The reform of the Curia, the new evangelization... The Cardinals have discussed many topics in their “general congregations.” Of all the concerns that have been mentioned, which do you see as the most urgent for the Church?

The Curia, for human and supernatural reasons, is adapted by

each Pope to the needs of the Church, according to the times. But it isn't my job to set priorities: that is in the hands of the Holy Father, whose only desire is to serve everyone. When speaking of a reform that might be needed, we also know that many people work in Rome self-sacrificingly, with a great spirit of service, sometimes far from their homeland and family, and with low salaries.

Obviously, I wasn't in the general congregations, where the cardinals have their discussions together, but there is no doubt that the new evangelization is still a priority for the Church. I think that this Pope's simple, direct style will be a great help here.

In your statement right after the Pope's election, you highlighted Pope Francis' call to evangelize. How does the Holy Father's

invitation fit in with Opus Dei's specific charism? What are the challenges involved?

Cardinal Bergoglio's motto was *miserando et eligendo* . This is taken from a text from the Venerable Bede that we read each year in the Liturgy of the Hours. It is a commentary on the call of Matthew. Jesus had compassion, mercy, and also called his disciples to follow him. The vocation is a proof of love: it springs from the divine heart filled with mercy. Saint Bede comments that Jesus looked at people "with the internal look of his heart more than with his bodily eyes."

Saint Josemaria, with the message he received from God, came to remind all of us that we are called to holiness. And he used to say: "May I see with your eyes, my Christ, dear Jesus." I think that the urgent need to evangelize, always present in the

Church, involves an invitation to look at people, at everyone, with apostolic vision, with mercy and affection, with the desire to help them receive the great gift of knowing Christ and his love.

The spirit of Opus Dei urges the faithful of the Prelature—both priests and laity—to realize that in our ordinary life, in our professional, family and social relationships, we have to discover that the others need us, not because we are better, but because we are their brothers and sisters. As Saint Josemaria said during a catechetical trip to Buenos Aires in 1974, “when you work and help your friends, your colleagues, your neighbors, in such a way that they don’t notice it, you are curing them; you are Christ who heals, you are Christ who lives alongside others without turning up your nose at those in need of health, as can happen to us as well some day.”

All of that also means carrying and loving the cross, which Pope Francis also spoke about in his first homily. And as Cardinal Bergoglio said in his homily in the Chrism Mass last year, we need to have “patience with people” when we teach and explain and listen, and always pray to the Holy Spirit for grace.

How much will it help Pope Francis to know that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is close at hand?

I think that the Pope will feel, above all, the spiritual strength and companionship of his predecessor. And he'll often find support in the rich, ever-relevant teachings of Benedict XVI. The love that all of us in the Church feel for him grows still greater, because we know he is praying for us in his Mass and his prayer, and supporting our unconditional union with Pope Francis. In that regard, I think it is

important to respect Benedict XVI's wish to disappear from the eyes of the world, so that it is completely clear that there is only one Pope, and not confuse people who may not have much Christian formation or don't know much theology. The Roman Pontiff is now Pope Francis, to whom the previous Pontiff has promised joyful and total veneration and obedience.

Do you know the new Pope?

I've spent time with him on various occasions, here in Rome (for example, during several synods of bishops) and also in Buenos Aires. He is a very affectionate person, a priest who is both austere and smiling, close to the sick and to those in need, both materially and spiritually. He has a strong personality. He knows with the clarity of a son of God what he wants and doesn't want. It's well known that he always asks people to

pray for him, and that he prays a lot for others. He once came to this center, some years ago now, to visit the crypt of Saint Josemaria, which is in the prelatric church of Our Lady of Peace. Cardinal Bergoglio was on his knees praying there for 45 minutes. His unhurried prayer is an example for all of us, since it is in prayer that we find God's light and consolation.

José Beltrán // La Razón

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