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“The Church's vitality depends on a complete openness to the Gospel”

An interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, published in "Palabra."

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Alfonso Riobó // Palabra Magazine

Following the death of Bishop Javier Echevarria, who led Opus Dei from 1994 until his passing, the Spanish priest Fernando Ocáriz Braña, up

until then the “number 2” in the Prelature, was elected by the General Congress and named the new Prelate by Pope Francis, this past January 23rd. Two weeks later, Palabra Magazine was able to conduct an extensive interview with Monsignor Ocariz.

The goal was to help bring the person of Monsignor Fernando Ocariz closer to the reader. The new Prelate of Opus Dei made himself completely available, overcoming his usual resistance to center the conversation on himself. A certain reserve is typical of his character, as is a sobriety of expression, while not lacking cordiality and openness. As for the photo session, that was the less pleasing part for him, but he underwent it with good humor.

Our encounter took place in the seat of the Curia of the Prelature of Opus Dei, the building where Saint

Josemaria Escriva, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, and Javier Echevarría all worked. While Fernando Ocáriz came into the spotlight of Opus Dei's government in 1994 when he was named vicar general (since 2014, he was the auxiliary vicar), he has lived here for the past 50 years, knows every detail of Opus Dei's activity, and acts in full identification with his predecessors.

We thank the Prelate for this interview, the first done at such length, just two weeks after his election and naming on January 23rd, 2017.

The early years

You were born in 1944 in Paris to a Spanish family. Why was your family living in France?

Because of the Spanish civil war. My father was in the military, on the Republican side. He never wanted to

talk about it; but I understand that, because of his position as a commander, he had the opportunity to save people, and within the Republican army he ended up in a very risky situation. As he was not a supporter of Franco, he thought it best to head for France, and he went there by way of Catalonia. He was a military veterinarian, but he had dedicated himself primarily to animal biology research. He was not what you might consider a politician, but rather part of the army and a scientist.

Do you remember anything from that time?

Everything I know about this period of my life is what has been told to me. When the family left for France, I had not been born yet, nor had the seventh child in my family, the sister that precedes me (I never knew my two oldest sisters, who died when

they were little, some time before I was born). The two youngest ones in the family were born in Paris. I was born in October, just a month after the liberation by American and French troops by General Leclerc.

Did you talk politics at your home?

I don't have any memories with regard to Paris. Once we were back in Spain, we didn't talk much about politics: occasional brief comments (not favorable ones, although not violent either) with regard to Franco's regime. In any case, one has to recognize that, from that period on, my father and our family led a stable life. My father was re-admitted to an official center of research, dependent on the Ministry of Agriculture in Madrid, where he worked up until his retirement.

What about religion? Did you receive the faith through your family?

I received the faith mainly through my family, above all through my mother and maternal grandmother, who lived with us. My father was a very good person, but at that time he was quite distanced from religion. With time he would come back to religious practice, and he even became a supernumerary member of Opus Dei. But yes, it was in my family's home that I learned the basics of Christian piety.

From Paris, the family returned to Spain.

I was only three years old then, so I only have a vague memory of this, a hazy image in my memory of a train ride from Paris to Madrid.

Where did you attend primary school?

At Areneros, a Jesuit school. I studied there up until it was time for university. It was a good school, with

serious discipline. In contrast with what I have heard about other schools at the time, I never saw any Jesuit hit a child in the eight years that I was there. My schooling is something for which I am very grateful. I remember most of my teachers, above all those I had in the final years; for example, in my last year we had a math professor, a layman and father of a family, whose last name was Castillo Olivares. He was a really outstanding person who we all admired a lot.

Encounter with Opus Dei

You studied Physical Sciences in Barcelona. Why did you move there?

Actually, I did my first year of university in Madrid. It was the “selective” which introduced us to all the engineering and science faculties. There were only five courses, common to all of these fields:

mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and geology. There were many people in our year; a large number of groups, each with over one hundred students.

That first year I had don Francisco Botella [professor, priest and one of the first members of Opus Dei] as one of my math teachers. When he found out later on that I was in Opus Dei, and that I was thinking of studying Physics, he told me, “Why do you want to study Physics? Why not study Mathematics? If you want to make money, become an engineer; but if you are actually interested in the sciences, don’t you want to study Math?”

When I went to Barcelona, I was already a member of Opus Dei. I lived in the Monterols student residence, where I combined my studies in Physics with the

theological and spiritual formation received by those who join the Work.

When did you meet Opus Dei?

Through conversations between my older siblings and my parents, I had heard the expression “Opus Dei” from a young age. Although I had no idea what it was, the words were familiar to me.

When I was in my last year of high school, I went to a center of the Work that was at number 1, Padilla Street, on the corner with Serrano Street (that’s why the center was called “Serrano,” but it doesn’t exist anymore). I liked the atmosphere there as well as what was being said, but at school we already had spiritual activities, and so I didn’t really see the need for it. I also went once to play soccer with the guys from “Serrano.”

Later on, after high school and before starting the university, in the summer of 1961, my older brother, who worked as a naval engineer at a shipyard in Cadiz (Spain), invited me to spend some weeks with his family. There was an Opus Dei center close to his house, to which I started going. The director there was a marine and an engineer, and he encouraged me to make good use of my time. He even gave me a Chemistry book to study, something that I would have never thought to do in the summer! There you could pray, study, hang-out, and, between one thing and another, I began to assimilate the spirit of Opus Dei.

Eventually, they spoke to me about the possibility of having a vocation to the Work. I reacted the way many people do, saying, “No. In any case, maybe like my brother, who is a father of a family.” I mulled it over until I finally made up my mind. I

remember the exact moment: I was listening to one of Beethoven's symphonies. Naturally, it's not that my decision was caused by the symphony, but that the two things coincided: the fact that I was listening to Beethoven when I decided, after having thought and prayed about it a lot. A few days later, I returned to Madrid.

Does this mean you like music?

Yes.

Who is your favorite composer?

Beethoven perhaps. I also like others: Vivaldi, Mozart..., but if I had to pick one, I think I'd stick with Beethoven. The truth is that for a number of years I haven't listened to music very often. I don't follow a specific plan.

Do you mind describing that decision of dedication to God?

There wasn't an exact moment of "encounter" with God. It was a natural, gradual thing, starting from when I was young and I was taught to pray. In a progressive way, I began to grow closer to God in school; there we had the opportunity to receive communion daily, and I think this helped make the subsequent decision to join the Work a relatively quick thing. I asked for admission to the Work just a month before my 17th birthday, which means I formally joined at 18.

What can you tell us about those years in Barcelona?

I lived in Barcelona for five years, two as a resident in the center of studies I mentioned earlier and three as part of the staff of the same residence. During those years, I studied the final four years of my degree, and then stayed on an extra year giving lectures as an assistant in

the same Faculty. All my memories of Barcelona are wonderful: of friendship, studying... a special memory for me are the visits that we would make to the poor and the sick, something traditionally done in the Work. Many of us who went, university students at the time, realized that coming in contact with poverty or suffering helped put our own problems in perspective.

When did you meet Saint Josemaria Escrivá? What was that like?

It was August 23, 1963. We were in Pamplona, in the Belagua Residence, during a formative activity in the summer. We had a very long get-together with him, at least an hour and a half. He made an awesome impression on me. I remember that afterwards a number of us there remarked that we wished we could

see the Father (that's how we called the Founder) much more often.

His sympathy and naturalness were noteworthy; he was not a solemn person, but very spontaneous and had a great sense of humor, often telling stories, anecdotes; and at the same time, he said things that were very deep. It was a wonderful combination: he said profound things in a simple way.

I got to see him again shortly after, a month later I think. I went to spend some days in Madrid, and it turned out that the Father was in Molinoviejo, so we went to see him from various places.

On none of these occasions was I able to speak with him personally. But later on, here in Rome, I got the chance to, many times.

Fifty years in Rome

You moved to Rome in 1967...

I came to do studies in theology, and I also managed to get a scholarship from the Italian government to do research in Physics during the academic course of 1967-1968, at the *Sapienza*. In the end, I didn't manage to do that much research, only the minimum required by the scholarship. When I came, the idea of pursuing an academic career in Theology was not exactly on my mind. Things just followed their course. But I didn't have that as a plan.

You were ordained a priest in 1971.

Yes. I was ordained on August 15, 1971, in the basilica of Saint Michael, in Madrid. The bishop who ordained us was Don Marcelo González Martín, the bishop of Barcelona at that time, shortly before he was moved to Toledo.

We jokingly claimed that there were four Frenchmen in our promotion: two were “fully” French, Franck Touzet y Jean-Paul Savignac; and then there was Agustín Romero, a Spaniard who had lived in France for many years; and lastly myself, who was born in Paris and had lived there for three years.

I cannot say that I had always felt a call to the priesthood. When I came to Rome, I made known my openness to the possibility from the very beginning, and later on I told Saint Josemaria more explicitly: “Father, I am open to being ordained.” He took me by the arm, and told me, among other things, more or less: “You give me a lot of joy, my son; but when the moment comes, you should do it with complete freedom.” I think that conversation took place in the *Galleria della Campana*, at the end of one of the many get-togethers we had with him.

Did you receive any pastoral assignment in Spain, following the ordination?

No. Three days after the ordination, I celebrated the first solemn Mass in the Basilica of Saint Michael, and then immediately came back to Rome. Here I had previously helped out in apostolic activities with the youth in Orsini, at that time a center for university students, giving classes of Christian formation and participating in other activities.

Once a priest, here in Rome I helped for a number of years in the parish in Tiburtino (*San Giovanni Battista in Collatino*), and then in *Sant'Eugenio*. I also provided priestly attention to a number of centers of the Work, both women's and men's; and I also worked here in the offices in the Opus Dei's central see. In short, a normal trajectory.

**It's known that you like tennis.
When did you take that up?**

I began with tennis early on, in Barcelona. An Italian named Giorgio Carimati, now an elderly priest, taught me a lot – at that time he played really well, almost at a professional level. But I have been on and off with tennis, because I injured my right elbow and at times I would do more cycling. Now I try to practice tennis; I try to play every week. But it is not always possible, and depends on the weather, work, etc.

Do you play “real” games? To win?

Of course. In terms of winning, it depends on who I play against.

Do you like to read?

Yes, but there isn't always time... I don't have a favorite author. I like to read classics. For lack of time, it has taken me years to finish longer

books; a while back now, it took me a year to get through *War and Peace*. I have had to read many things in Theology, because I have taught it until 1994, and also for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith I have to study theological topics.

In theology, you have studied aspects central to the spirit of Opus Dei such as divine filiation. Do you see deepening these reflections as critical?

A lot has been done in this area. It needs to continue, and it will always need to continue. The spirit of Opus Dei is, as the philosopher and theologian Cornelio Fabro said, “the Gospel *with no additives*.” It is the Gospel placed in ordinary life; and one can always go deeper.

In this sense, we are not in a new period now, because really a lot has been done. It’s enough to read, for

example, the three volumes by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, under the title *Daily Life and Holiness* .

In an article published in this same magazine, when describing Bishop Javier Echevarría, you used the expression “dynamic fidelity.” In what sense did you mean that?

The expression “dynamic fidelity” is nothing original. It’s something that Saint Josemaria expressly confirmed: the ways of speaking and doing change, although the nucleus and the spirit remain untouchable. So this is not something new for today. One thing is the spirit, and another is the material aspect of the functioning of the accidental aspects, and these are things that can change with the times.

Fidelity is not just mechanical repetition; it is applying the same essence to different circumstances. Many times it is good to maintain the

accidental aspects also, and at other times, change them. From there comes the importance of discerning, above all in order to know what is the boundary between the accidental and the essential.

What role did you play in the beginnings of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross?

I had nothing to do with the juridical or the institutional aspects. I was just one of the first professors. I had been a professor at the Roman College of the Holy Cross for many years, in connection with the University of Navarre, and from 1980 to 1984 I gave classes at the Pontifical University Urbaniana; as I had enough publications, the competent authority of the Holy See considered my qualifications sufficient for starting out directly as an ordinary professor. There were three of us who began as ordinary professors

then, under these conditions:
Antonio Miralles, Miguel Ángel Tabet
and myself.

Who have been your teachers, intellectually speaking?

In Philosophy, Cornelio Fabro and Carlos Cardona. In Theology, I wouldn't be able to name one in particular. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine, and later on, Joseph Ratzinger, have all been big influences. But above all I would point to Saint Josemaria Escriva himself: naturally, in a non-academic sense, because of his depth and originality. So if I had to select one for Theology, it would be him.

Memories of three popes

When did you meet Saint John Paul II?

In one of these large meetings with the clergy in the Vatican, at the

beginning of his pontificate. Later on I saw him on many occasions, and while accompanying Bishop Javier Echevarría, I ate with him a few times, together with three or four other people.

I also had lunch with him two other times, because of my work at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The first time, we had a meeting in the pontifical apartment with, in addition to the Pope, the Secretary of State, the Substitute, Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect, and three consultants. After a long conversation, we all went to the dining room, and during the meal, each one of us took turns giving our opinion about the topic under discussion. Meanwhile, on this occasion and also the second time, the Pope mainly listened. At the beginning he said some words of

gratitude for our being there, then he asked Cardinal Ratzinger to lead the meeting, and at the end he gave a synthetic summary and evaluation of everything he had heard.

I think it was on the second occasion when, after listening and thanking everyone who had spoken, he put his hand to his heart and said: “But the responsibility is mine.” One could see that the matter in question particularly weighed on him.

And when did you meet Benedict XVI?

I met cardinal Ratzinger when I was named consultant for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in 1986. Later on, we crossed paths with some frequency, in small meetings. And I have gone to see him many other times for different reasons.

Do you remember any anecdotes from these encounters?

One thing that I always observed in him is that he listened a lot. He was never the one to end the interview.

I remember various anecdotes. For example, with the famous Lefebvre *affaire*, I was in conversations with the French bishop, if I remember correctly, in 1988. In one meeting, Cardinal Ratzinger was there (as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), the Secretary of the Congregation, Lefebvre himself with two advisors, and one or two other consultants. Lefebvre had accepted the invitation to come, but later on he backed out. I was alone with Ratzinger for a moment when he made a heartfelt remark: “How is it they don't realize that, without the Pope, they are nothing!”

Once he was Pope, I was able to greet him a number of times, but never

had a proper conversation. Since his stepping down, I have seen him on two occasions, with Bishop Echevarría when we went to see him in the place where he lives now. I noted that he was very affectionate, aged but with his mind completely lucid.

Speaking of the problem with the Lefebvrians, do you think it will ever be resolved?

I have not been in touch with this question since the last theological meetings with them, some time back. But from the news I hear, it seems like a solution could be near.

When did you first meet Pope Francis?

I met him in Argentina when he was the auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires. I was with Bishop Javier Echevarría. I saw him again in 2003, and by that time he was Cardinal Archbishop.

The impression he gave was that he was a serious person, friendly, and in touch with people's concerns. His face has since changed: now we see him with that continuous smile.

I have seen him various times since he was made Pope. Yesterday I received a letter from him. I had sent him a letter thanking him for my appointment, the promptness with which he had carried it out and for the image of Our Lady that he sent me that same day. And he answered my letter with another beautiful letter in which, among other things, he asks me to pray for him, as he usually does.

Priorities

On your first day as Prelate, you referred to three current priorities for Opus Dei: youth, family, and people in need. Let's start with the youth.

In the work Opus Dei does with young people we see that today's youth – at least a good number of them – respond with generosity to great ideals, for example when taking part in activities that serve the most needy.

At the same time though, many young people seem to have a lack of hope, because of the lack of work opportunities, or because of family problems, or because of a consumerist mentality or the different addictions that cloud over these great ideals.

It is important that young people ask deep questions, which ultimately find their complete response only in the Gospel. One challenge, then, is to bring them closer to the Gospel, closer to Jesus Christ, to help them discover its attraction. There they will discover reasons for being proud of their Christianity, for living their

faith with cheerfulness and serving others.

The challenge is to listen to them more, and understand them better. In this area, parents play a principal role, along with grandparents and educators. It is important to have time for the youth, to be at their side. We need to show affection and patience, and accompany them and know how to challenge them as well.

In your opinion, what should be the priority for families?

To develop what Pope Francis has called the “heart” of *Amoris Laetitia*, that is chapters 4 and 5 of the Apostolic Exhortation, about love’s foundations and its growth.

In our day and age it is especially important to rediscover the value of commitment in marriage. Living without ties of commitment might seem like a more attractive option,

but that kind of attitude tends to lead to loneliness or emptiness.

Meanwhile, committing oneself means using one's freedom in favor of a great and valuable endeavor.

Moreover, for Christians the sacrament of marriage provides the necessary grace for a fruitful commitment, which is not a matter of just two people, because God is also a part of it. Therefore it is important that we help people rediscover the sacramental nature of matrimonial love, especially during the period of marriage preparation.

During the pastoral visits you made with Bishop Echevarría, you have gotten to know many initiatives in support of people in need. Have you seen these needs up close?

The world's poverty is heart-rending. There are countries that have, on the one hand, people at a very high level,

scientists, etc. and at the same time, real misery, and these two realities coexist in the great cities. In other places, you find yourself in a city that looks like Madrid or London and, a few kilometers down the road, a completely impoverished neighborhood, a whole shanty town formed around the city. The world is different in different places. But what is clear everywhere is the need to serve others, the need to make the Social Doctrine of the Church a reality.

In what sense are people in need a priority for the Church and, as a part of that, Opus Dei?

They are a priority because they are at the center of the Gospel and because they are loved by Jesus Christ in a special way.

In Opus Dei there is an initial aspect that is more institutional in nature: that of the initiatives carried out by

individuals within the Prelature together with others in order to respond to specific needs of the moment and of the actual place where they live, to which the Work offers spiritual assistance. Some recent examples include *Laguna* in Madrid, a health initiative that offers palliative care; *Los Pinos*, an educational center situated in a marginal area in Montevideo, which promotes social development for youth; or *Iwollo Health Clinic*, a medical dispensary that offers free health care to hundreds of people in rural areas in Nigeria. These and many other similar initiatives need to continue and grow because Christ's heart leads in that direction.

On another, deeper plane, there is a need to help each and every faithful of the Prelature and each person that comes in contact with its apostolates to discover that one's Christian life is

inseparable from helping those most in need.

If we look around us, in our place of work, in our family, we will find plenty of occasions: older people who live alone, families that are going through economic difficulties, poor people, some unemployed for a long period of time, or sick in body or in soul, refugees... Saint Josemaria was concerned about caring for the sick, because he saw in them the suffering flesh of Christ the Redeemer. That's why he used to refer to them as a "treasure." These are dramas that we find in ordinary life. As Mother Theresa of Calcutta – now "Saint" – would say, "one does not have to go to India to care for and love others: it can be done right in the street where you live."

Current society offers new challenges for evangelization, and the Pope often reminds the Church

that it should always be “going out.” How does Opus Dei participate in this invitation?

The Pope is calling for a new stage of evangelization, characterized by the joy of those who, having found Jesus, put themselves “out there” in order to share this gift with their fellow men and women.

The only person who can give true joy is the one who has personal experience of Christ. If a Christian dedicates time to his or her personal relationship with Jesus, he or she will be able to give this witness to the faith in middle of ordinary activities, and help people discover right there the joy of living the Christian message: the worker with fellow workers, an artist with other artists, the university student with fellow classmates...

We in Opus Dei – with all our defects – want to contribute to building up

the Church from our own place of work, in our own family... striving to sanctify ordinary life. Many times it will mean areas of professional and social life that have yet to experience the joy of God's love and that, in this sense, are also *peripheries* we need to reach, one by one, shoulder to shoulder, among our peers.

Fostering vocations is a real concern for the Church. What would you suggest, based on your experience in Opus Dei?

In Opus Dei we experience the same difficulties as everyone else in the Church, and we ask Our Lord, who is “Lord of the harvest,” that he send “workers for his harvest.” Perhaps a particular challenge is that of fostering generosity among young people, helping them to understand that giving oneself to God is not just a sacrifice but also a gift – a gift that

one receives and that makes one happy.

What is the solution? Something the founder of Opus Dei said comes to mind: “If we want to be more, let’s be better.” The Church's vitality does not depend so much on organizational formulas, new or old ones, but rather on a complete openness to the Gospel, that brings with it a change of life. Both Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have reminded us that it is above all the saints who build up the Church. So, if we want to see more vocations for the whole Church, let us each strive to correspond better to the grace of God, who sanctifies us.

Since your election you have frequently asked for prayers for the Church and for the Pope. How does one foster this unity with the Holy Father in the life of ordinary people?

You're asking me for a suggestion. Everyone who has personally greeted Pope Francis, and since 2013 there have been thousands, have heard this petition: "Pray for me." It's not a cliché. Hopefully in the life of every Catholic there is a daily offering done out of love for the Holy Father, who has a lot of weight to carry: for example, reciting a simple prayer, making a small sacrifice, etc. It's not about looking for difficult things, but specific, daily things. I would also encourage parents of families to invite their children, from a young age, to pray a short prayer for the Pope daily.
