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Interview by Sophie de Ravinel, published in the magazine Famille Chrétienne

On December 20 the Holy See published the decrees for a number of canonizations, among them that of the founder of Opus Dei. Although still needing the final approval by the Pope and the cardinals, Josemaría Escrivá, born on January 9, 1902, could be canonized in the next few months. To understand the spirituality of the Work better, we spoke with its present Prelate, Bishop Javier Echevarría.

Your experience as the bishop of a personal prelature is very different from that of bishops who head a diocese. How would you characterize it?

In the four Synods of Bishops in which I have taken part as one of the Synod Fathers, I have felt the solidarity of my brother bishops. As members of the college of bishops we share, united with the Pope, the responsibility for the whole Church. One learns a lot from the others.

Naturally the geographical extension of the Opus Dei Prelature—in China and Estonia, in Lebanon and India, in Mexico and Uganda—puts us in daily contact with very diverse realities. The faithful of the Prelature and its sympathizers and friends who take part in its apostolates form a family. And we are in constant contact with all the problems of mankind,

from the most ordinary to the most serious. Included among the latter are hunger (some of the Prelature's faithful get only one meal a day, for example in the Peruvian Andes or in some of the islands of the Philippines); the war and insecurity in the Holy Land, in Colombia, in the Congo, in South Africa, and in so many other countries. One could also include here the serious intellectual challenges mankind faces, such as those connected with bioethics.

But the means are always the same: the Cross and the Gospel. The mission that the Prelature has received from the Church is addressed to all mankind, reminding all men and women that God loves us and awaits our response in our daily life. In other words, the universal call to holiness, right where each of us is. Opus Dei, therefore, participating in the Church's mission, shares in "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time" (Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1).

One of the problems that the faithful of the Prelature have to confront is that in many parts of the world Christ is not known. At the same time we have to take into account the spiritual "anorexia" in old Europe, with its "culture of death" and a search for educational equality formulated "at the lowest common denominator." Thus there is an absence of clear points of reference and the strength needed to combat one's own defects and sins.

This panorama would be incomplete if we did not mention the noble

desires found in many young people, the growth of an ecological concern that is correctly focused, and a greater openness to the existence of God. Although many Western politicians seem to be allergic to mentioning God, he continues to spur the conscience of many people. And many young people continue to discover the “newness” of Christ.

I would like to add that, thanks be to God, this thirst for renewal, for higher horizons, is not just true of youth. At all levels of society, mature men and women who have kept their heart young are ready to receive the truth and to give themselves.

The personal prelature is a unique tailor-made status that permits Opus Dei to be present in every diocese without endangering its independence and authority, something that might give rise to misunderstanding and tensions.

Personal prelatures appeared at the Second Vatican Council as a response to the present pastoral needs of the Church. The Prelature of Opus Dei is an institution that from the theological and canonical point of view is similar to a diocese, as is the case of the military vicariates. It is distinguished not so much by its independence as by the collaboration it offers to the dioceses. Thus the Prelature of Opus Dei constitutes a service that the universal Church offers to the particular churches. In no case does it take the place of these churches or of the diocesan pastoral work.

Indeed, Opus Dei, which has no special liturgy of its own, does not interfere in any way with local authori-

ties. Its faithful go to their parishes, like anyone else, to take part in the Sunday or the daily Eucharist. They celebrate their weddings, baptisms, communions, confirmations or funerals in their parishes, which are under the authority of the bishop of each place.

Often priests of Opus Dei help out in the particular churches, taking care of a university chaplaincy, a parish, or diocesan clergy. In these tasks they are under the authority of the diocesan bishop.

The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which is an association united to the Prelature, follows guidelines that the Second Vatican Council set down for priests. It is made up of priests incardinated in the Prelature and diocesan priests who want to receive spiritual help from Opus Dei. To a certain extent, it can be seen as a “self-opening” of the charism of Opus Dei to clergy so that they can benefit from the spirit received by Josemaría Escrivá and sanctify their own priestly ministry.

I would like to emphasize that these priests remain under the exclusive jurisdiction of their diocesan bishop. They receive—and provide—a spiritual help within this association of priests, whose essential characteristic is precisely an ever stronger union with one’s own bishop and one’s brother priests in the diocese. It seeks to help priests in all their needs and to spur priestly vocations in the diocese.

Do you think any one aspect of the Prelature of Opus Dei is especially difficult for the public in general, believers or non-believers, to grasp?

In France there is a great tradition regarding the importance of work well done, both in the private and public spheres. Opus Dei, being a work of God (which is what it means in Latin) is hard to understand for a person without faith or who tries to understand his neighbor without first leaving behind his own often exclusively political or sociological mental categories. Thus the social and humanitarian aspect of the Work has drawn the sympathy and collaboration of many non-Christians.

Although it's true that the Prelature puts special emphasis on the formation of intellectuals—which is not the same as the rich or powerful of this world—in reality its efforts are directed at all who live an ordinary life in the middle of the world. This can bother those who hide from others the fact that they are Christians, or those who nourish an atheistic ideology or desire to eliminate Catholics from public life, from the arena of social debate, from the centers of learning and the world of work.

Consistent Christians are a “pebble in the shoe” for those who want to extinguish the faith. To employ a Gospel metaphor, Christians are meant to be salt for the world. The real danger is not a lack of understanding “from those outside,” but rather that of the salt becoming insipid, of Christians making a pact with mediocrity, failing to make their lives conform with their faith.

The Prelature of Opus Dei has organized a Congress in honor of the centennial of the birth of its founder, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá.

The Congress organized in Rome by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, under the theme “The Greatness of Ordinary Life,” is one of many ceremonies foreseen for 2002. Not the celebration of a holy priest, but, I dare to say, a celebration of Jesus Christ. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá used to say: “We should speak about Christ, not about ourselves.” Each man, each woman, everyone, is called to sanctity, that is to say, to identify themselves with Christ. Josemaría Escrivá noted in 1930 in his personal journal: “Holy! Remaining in the world, in our ordinary activities, in the duties of our state: there, and thanks to all this, holy!”

A French saying contains a lot of traditional wisdom: “If each one looks after his own concerns, the cows will be safe.” If each one makes the effort, in his own work, in his daily life, to do things well, without letting himself be carried along by agitation and without shutting himself up in a comfortable selfishness, one will be able to meet Christ in order to work with him and in him.

On the personal path of each one's vocation to holiness, through the grace of the Holy Spirit we are able to transform the environment around us and love all those we encounter, who are our brothers and sisters.

With regard to the canonization of Josemaría Escrivá, permit me to express my joy for the fact that Josephine Bakhita, the Sudanese religious who was beatified with him in May of 1992 has already been canonized. The recognition, on December 20, of a number of miracles, one of

which is attributed to the intercession of Josemaría Escrivá, is for me, especially in the framework of the centennial of his birth, another cause for joy. For miracles are always a sign of God's mercy towards mankind.

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Interview in the weekly Alfa y Omega

A hundred years after his birth, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá continues to attract people by his fidelity to his mission. But he also continues to be misinterpreted by some for their own purposes. What features of Blessed Josemaría do people find most attractive today?

Yes, a hundred years after his birth Josemaría Escrivá is still close to us in time, and attracts us by his human and Christian vigor. History, specifically the history of the Church, teaches us that those who walk at Christ's pace are sowers of peace and joy, and also signs of contradiction. News reaches me every day, by word and writing, of many people who find the peace and joy of God when they grasp what he wants to tell us through those friends of his, the saints, among them, Blessed Josemaría.

Features that attract us? I think millions of people have been drawn by the joy of knowing themselves to be children of God. Amid so much stale and sad triviality, souls feel the need to have at their side the smile of

someone who lives as Christ's disciple, who serves others.

What is the main thing that Opus Dei hopes to see come about as a result of the centennial celebration?

Blessed Josemaría wrote and said often that "it is Christ that we have to speak about, and not ourselves." Therefore I hope that this celebration may awaken in many men and women the realization that Christ should be at the heart of our personal history, through a continual encounter with him in the ordinary circumstances of life. And also in our collective history, through peace, justice and forgiveness. The saddest calamity for a people is to marginalize Jesus Christ, as though He, who gave his life to save us, were an intruder. It would be a marvelous legacy of the centennial to discover once more, and help others discover, those horizons Blessed Josemaría opened to us: "To know Jesus Christ. To make him known. To bring him everywhere."

In addition, Christian commitment to others' needs, which Blessed Escrivá so urged us to undertake, is leading many people to begin new social and educational projects, both in third world countries and in impoverished areas of the developed countries. In Nigeria, for example, a professional school has recently been opened for young men in Lagos who have little possibility of obtaining work. And similar initiatives are being undertaken in various countries. I was very happy during the congress in Rome to see the eagerness of many men and women to begin new tasks aimed at great needs, from the Congo to Colombia, in Asia and in Europe.