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"People have recognized in Pope Francis an authentic priest"

An extensive interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published on December 15 in Milan's "Corriere della Sera," the best-selling Italian daily.

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What does Opus Dei think of Pope Francis? How has one of the most widespread and influential institutions in the Catholic Church

welcomed the election of this Jesuit with his surprising initiatives?

We welcomed him with great joy (the prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría responds smilingly), and in my prayer I asked St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Company of Jesus, and whose apostolic fruits are a treasure for the Church, to intercede for Pope Francis. The founder of Opus Dei had a great appreciation for this saint. In one of his books, *The Way*, he refers to him six times, even using his nickname Íñigo.

Let's reverse the question. What does the Pope think of Opus Dei? He has already received you twice in an audience. People say that he has devotion to the founder, St. Josemaria. Is that true?

The Holy Father expressed his joy and gave me his blessing for the

apostolic work of the Prelature, which he knows quite well. Among other reasons, because when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires he was in contact with various faithful of Opus Dei. He also is well acquainted with St. Josemaria. Some years ago, here in Rome he came to visit his sepulcher and stayed there praying for 45 minutes. This is a practical sign of how intense and generous is the prayer of the one who is now the successor of Peter.

From the first moment, Pope Francis has proven to be a “revolutionary” Pontiff, capable of surprising decisions.

And right away people have recognized in Pope Francis an authentic priest, who prays a lot and is attentive to the concerns of the person in front of him. At the same time, he is austere in his personal life. He wants to live deeply that

beautiful image of Benedict XVI, who longed for a Church ever more like the home at Nazareth. For this to be a reality, it is not simply a matter of renouncing material goods (some of them are necessary for one's work and for family and social life). As Pope Francis is teaching us, one needs to truly love the virtue of poverty.

And right from the start, the Pope has spoken of a Church that is “poor among the poor,” that goes out to the peripheries, and he himself has chosen a sober lifestyle. How is all of this seen by Opus Dei which, justly or unjustly, is viewed by many people as an organization that is not directed to the needs of the poor?

In reality, one could say that Opus Dei was born, back in the 30s, precisely in the peripheries, in the poorest districts of Madrid. Since

then, many people throughout the whole world continue helping the poor and sick, men and women and children with material needs, in New Delhi and Manila, in Manchester and Kinshasa. Allow me also to clarify that Opus Dei is not only for the rich. Many faithful of the Prelature, in various parts of the world, find it hard to reach the end of the month with enough money to pay all their bills, and have to confront this challenge with heroism and faith, without making a lot of fuss.

With the first year of his pontificate still not over, the Pope has already made important decisions regarding his co-workers, with the clear intention of reforming the Curia, despite meeting some resistance. He is also moving with determination in the matter of financial transparency and the reform of the IOR. How do you view this strategy?

It is not my role to judge what is a priority here, but rather the Holy Father's. Given my personal experience I can say that there are many people who work with great generosity in the Holy See. But without doubt reform is always needed: no matter how organized they might look, human structures are never at the level needed for the mission of bringing the Gospel to the whole world. Therefore, as the Pope says wisely, it is important not to confuse the Church with an NGO. The Church should always be grounded on faith in Christ, as his faithful Spouse.

In line with John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis insists on the need for the New Evangelization. How is Opus Dei responding to this call?

Pope Francis is helping the whole world to give priority to the culture

of being, of life, in contrast to the culture of having that sometimes suffocates the more economically developed societies. And he speaks about sanctity in ordinary life: a woman who cares for her children, a man who works to put bread on the table, the sick. The western world needs to rediscover this type of sanctity. It's not a path for a privileged few: it's an invitation that our Lord addresses to all men and women. In countries with a Christian tradition, Opus Dei (through its activities for spiritual formation) offers a path for rediscovering the faith in the midst of one's daily occupations. This is what the New Evangelization means: to re-ignite in Christians (who sometimes see themselves as such only because of their cultural context) the flame of a living and personal relationship with God.

Pope Francis has spoken of the Church as a “field hospital” after a battle, which should also be concerned about those who have had an abortion or are divorced. In 2014 a synod on the family is scheduled, and the Pope has sent out a questionnaire in which he asks the bishops their opinion on these topics. What is Opus Dei’s position here?

Many people today are undergoing great suffering in their working lives and social relationships, and also within the ambit of their own family. As Christians, we are called to respond, to see others with Christ’s eyes, filled with love and mercy. When a Christian helps a friend, it is like Christ looking at a sick person who needs to be cured. The synod on the family will spur us to rediscover the beauty of love and fidelity, of the family environment, which is built up also with words and gestures of

service for those who have suffered wounds in this area of their life.

In an interview published in this newspaper, the president of the Focolare Movement, Maria Voce, has asked that a greater role be given to women in the Church. Do you agree?

Certainly. For, as the Holy Father has reminded us, the Church is a woman: one only needs to remember the role of our Lady. The topic of the role of women isn't new, and in fact women have played an important role in the development of the Church.

Moreover, Opus Dei has always viewed women as playing a central role in the life of the Church.

What in your view is the role and responsibility of those in government regarding the crisis that for years now has afflicted the western world, especially in countries such as Italy?

I think it's important not to place all the blame on those in government. First we need to ask ourselves what each of us personally is doing each day, whatever our role in society may be. We can't place the responsibility only on others, those whom we elect to govern and whom we can always make demands of. We should first ask ourselves how we live, how we work, how we get along with others, with our own family. To emerge from this crisis, the commitment of each and every one of us is needed, not just those who govern.

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