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"We can 'touch' the living Jesus in all the events of daily life"

An interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published in "Alfa y Omega" in Spain, by Teresa Guitierrez de Cabiedes.

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He tends to fold his arms and then his face broadens into a smile as he speaks softly, but with gentle humor. At 72, he still has a good back-hand at tennis. His sober expression is lightened by a deep but affable look.

After your election as the Prelate of Opus Dei, I don't know whether to congratulate you or give my condolences for the burden that has fallen on your shoulders. How does it feel to be the spiritual father of thousands of people all over the world?

Though I am certainly aware of my great responsibility, I am not troubled by it. Above all, it helps me to know that God, when he gives someone a mission, a job to do, also gives the necessary graces to carry it out.

It also comforts me that the Holy Father has shown me his closeness and affection in a very tangible way, both when I was first named Prelate and afterwards when I had the occasion of seeing him. I also feel supported by the prayer and affection of so many people. I remember a letter I received from a

young boy in a hospital who said he was offering his sufferings for me; and the letters of support from so many members of Opus Dei and other people. That's how I explain the serenity I have had during these past months.

After you were elected Prelate, did your opponents let you win in your tennis games?

I hope not; I would realize it right away and the game would lose interest.

Recently you made your first pastoral trip to Spain to visit the faithful and friends of Opus Dei. What message did you want to transmit in so many face-to-face encounters?

On this trip to Spain I wanted to remind people above all that, as Christians, we should put Jesus at the center of our lives. As Benedict XVI

emphasized in his first encyclical (words that Pope Francis likes to cite), a Christian doesn't adhere to an idea, nor solely to a doctrine, but rather follows and loves a person: Christ Jesus.

That's what I wanted to insist upon on this trip, putting the emphasis on the spirit proper to Opus Dei: that we are called to bring Christ's charity to our ordinary life, to our family, our work, our dealings with our friends.

In Spain, Opus Dei has produced great spiritual and social benefits. But it has also generated controversy. Many people have found God's salvation thanks to this charism and they are happy. But there are also people who recount, some even publicly, that their time in Opus Dei occasioned deep wounds. Can it be that there was something that wasn't done well?

In the 22 years that I worked side-by-side with the former Prelate, Don Javier, I heard him ask for pardon from those who have felt hurt or wounded by the behavior of any of his children. I join myself to that petition for forgiveness and I wish with all my heart that these persons be cured of their wounds and overcome their pain.

Saint Josemaria used to say that he had a great affection for every person who came to the means of formation in Opus Dei, although maybe only for a while. Imagine his affection for those who had actually joined the Work. He felt a deep spiritual fatherhood for them and never stopped loving any child or brother of his.

It's important to consider this on two levels. On the one hand, the message of Opus Dei is a pathway opened to follow Christ. On the other, the

activities that the people and centers of the Work carry out are, as is only natural, influenced by the circumstances and ways of being of those involved. Certainly among such a great number of activities and people—all with good intentions—there are bound to be mistakes, omissions, carelessness or misunderstandings. I would like to ask pardon for each one of these.

You speak of asking for pardon. One of the blessings of the Catholic faith is that we know God's mercy welcomes us back in spite of our mistakes. Even when these errors tarnish his Name. Perhaps one of the most joyful moments in recent years was when John Paul II asked for pardon in the name of all the members of the universal Church for past mistakes.

I think we shouldn't separate our request for forgiveness from the

praise due to God out of gratitude for the many gifts that in His mercy He constantly pours out on us and that come to us through human means, which become then the instrument of divine action.

Saint John Paul II gave us a marvelous example all through his life of these two dimensions that we should always keep in mind when we contemplate God's greatness alongside human weakness. That's what happened on that Day of Forgiveness he called for during the Great Jubilee Year 2000. And Benedict XVI also stressed that forgiveness is the only force that can overcome evil, that can change the world. In first place, we should ask God for forgiveness. But our life also should habitually involve asking for forgiveness and forgiving others. We repeat this every day when we pray the Our Father, but too often we forget it in practice. It's true that we

have to respect the truth, that we can't ask for pardon by accusing other people indirectly or unjustly with a kind of superficial "*meaculpism*." But to forgive and to ask for forgiveness are Christian attitudes that do not humiliate, but rather exalt a person.

Christianity in the West is now in a "vocational winter" that causes worry. But there is also evidence of a coming springtime in the Church: hopeful fruits in communities that have matured through a renewed teaching of the faith. The Holy Spirit seems to be encouraging us to go deeper in our gratitude for the love of a God who comes out to meet us, who doesn't require that we win Him over by our merits, who needs our poverty to pour out on us his mercy. How does someone in Opus Dei today live and announce this relationship with God?

The foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei is the vivid awareness that we are children of God. Saint Josemaria wrote in *Friends of God*: “God is a Father full of tenderness, of infinite love. Call him 'Father' many times a day and tell him—alone, in your heart—that you love him, that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his child.”

The announcement of our relationship with God in Opus Dei has this focus. As Saint John writes: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

In this world of ours, so often held hostage within a culture of sadness, feeling this love of a Father seems to be crucial to live with hope.

Always, and especially in these times, we should keep this marvelous reality very much in mind, since it will help us overcome the pessimism

that takes over when facing the problems of life, the awareness of our own defects, the difficulties of evangelizing, and even the situation of the world.

Our life is not a romantic novel, but rather an epic poem. Realizing we are children of God helps us live with confidence, gratitude, and joy. It invites us to love this world of ours, with all its problems and all its beauty. The peace of the world depends more on what each one of us contributes in ordinary life (smiling, forgiving, not giving importance to ourselves) than on the negotiations between nation-states, however necessary and relevant these may be.

From your first pastoral letter as Prelate, you insist a great deal on the importance of having Jesus Christ as the center of one's life, that we need to experience and

constantly re-live a personal encounter with God's love. Only as a consequence of this encounter can Christian life spring up and grace superabound in the Church. How does Opus Dei wish to proclaim this great good news?

Basically, through sincere friendship, from person to person, which is always mutually enriching. To evangelize, what's essential is the value of personal testimony and sharing one's own life experience: it's much more effective than theoretical speeches. Logically, this does not exclude various personal initiatives that include evangelization (schools, health clinics, etc.). In some of these, the Prelature takes responsibility for the Christian orientation and for priestly assistance.

Opus Dei was born in the Church with a prophetic character. Nevertheless, the death of the

Founder coincided with the first years of the post-conciliar “tsunami.” It seems only logical that the Work should hold on tightly to its foundations. But could there be some signs of “entrenchment” on the part of the Work in the face of so much chaos and confusion that the barque of Peter has gone and is going through?

Faithfulness to God is one thing that has always shone forth throughout the twenty centuries of Christianity. Fidelity to the Christian faith, which is fidelity to Christ, has always shown itself to be innovative, dynamic and transformative. I think it's true, after Vatican II, when we saw the results of the “hermeneutic of rupture” (as Benedict XVI called it in a famous speech), that the temptation to “entrenchment” you mention became a real possibility.

In any case, these are temporary reactions that it's necessary to overcome— both “rupture” as well as “entrenchment.” They are the result of having given in to a dialectical, political mentality that is foreign to the Church, because it divides and breaks up unity. In the Church there are not, nor should there ever be, sides or parties, but rather unity within a legitimate pluralism.

Relativism has caused havoc in our disoriented society. The Work is famous for its faithfulness and loyalty to the Church and the Pope. This can be a blessing in turbulent times. Stressing doctrine amid the storms offers security; but it can also lead to an eagerness to have everything “according to the rules.” How does one harmonize complete faithfulness to the Divine Law with the joyful freedom of the children of God?

Many problems arise when we pose unnecessary dilemmas or reduce reality to dialectical stereotypes. Faithfulness or creativity, orthodoxy or freedom, doctrine or life experience... I think we should live with a more integrated attitude, that is to say, a more Christian attitude. Reality doesn't let itself be closed up within exclusive categories. It demands of us a certain equilibrium, a pondering of things, an integral "wholeness" that ends up being very positive also in our relationships with others.

I find faithfulness to doctrine perfectly compatible with openness to the inspirations of the Spirit. The history of the Church confirms this. Without losing its identity, the Church is permanently new. In this context, I consider freedom of spirit to be important, and this obviously doesn't consist in the absence of obligations and commitments, but

rather in love. It's what Saint Augustine meant by his famous phrase: "Love and do what you wish." Or as Saint Thomas Aquinas said in different way: "The more love a person has, the freer he is."

Then a creative fidelity means living the freedom of love, seeking to open oneself to the perennial newness of the Spirit.

Ways of doing and speaking change, but the core, the spirit, remains the same. Faithfulness doesn't come from a mechanical repetition; it shows itself when we know how to apply the same spirit in different circumstances.

This sometimes implies keeping also what is accidental; but in other cases it means changing things. In this case, a serene discernment and openness to the light of the Spirit is key; above all in order to know the boundaries (often not so evident)

between the accidental and the essential.

Another risk of a stagnant doctrinal zeal in our Church is the proliferation of souls trapped in a rationalism that scorns any emotional manifestations of their personal relationship with God—as if living a heartfelt faith would make them fall into sentimentalism. As a physicist, would you dare to give us an equation by which we can grow in love for God?

My years of theological study and being close to certain persons have brought me to greatly value what the light of faith also means for the exercise of reason. But always without undervaluing the importance of the heart, of the emotions, which are profoundly human. Our God is always near us: in the Eucharist, Jesus makes himself

very close in the intimacy of our heart.

One of the most provocative challenges of our times is recovering the fruitful value of silence. The Work is an expert at forming Christians called to live in God's presence in the midst of the world. Perhaps one of the "shortcuts" for doing so is Saint Josemaria's advice to put ourselves into the Gospel, a permanent fountain of wisdom and peace, as one more person in the scene. How does one touch the living Jesus, today, now?

Saint Josemaria, when he advised us to put ourselves into the Gospel scenes just like one more person there, was passing on his own experience. God granted him a lively faith in the Incarnation, from which an ardent love for our Lord sprang, to follow in the footsteps of his life on

earth and to see him as a model for us.

Jesus, being God, when he came and lived as a man among us, growing up, being educated, living in a family, working, having friends, dealing with his neighbors, suffering and weeping... shows us the value of everything human in God's eyes, and that our daily life has, in union with Him, a divine value.

Therefore, we can "touch" the living Jesus in all the situations of daily life. Above all, in those privileged "places" where He is present: in small children; in the poor, with whom He especially wanted to identify Himself; in the sick, in those whom the Pope calls "the suffering flesh of Christ." And in a more intense way, as I pointed out before, in the Eucharist.

Opus Dei projects an image of strong unity, which is

praiseworthy. But at times it doesn't seem to appreciate healthy self-criticism. Your first written words to the faithful of the Work pointed to all the good works (and they really are good!) that you had all carried out together. I ask myself this question: whether speaking only about the good and the ideal (and I understand that it is necessary to do this) could perhaps generate a breeding ground for self-complacency or move members toward the idealism of confusing what one desires to be (the divine charism) with what one is actually doing (so often, a poor human performance).

Self-complacency is always a danger for those who want to do good. And in Opus Dei, as everyone else, we also have to be vigilant and guard against this danger. As I said before, I worked closely with Bishop Javier

Echevarria for more than twenty years. He used to repeat to us that those in the Work neither are, nor should we feel ourselves to be, any better than anyone else, that each of us is capable of any evil.

But humility on the personal level is not enough. There's also a collective, institutional humility that has many manifestations: in the way we speak, in the sincere admiration we have for others, and so forth. That's why when we acknowledge good things done it's to give glory to God, who is the One who grants this to us, and not to compliment ourselves. I ask God to free us from praising ourselves—something Don Javier often warned us about, as did Saint Josemaria as well.

Along these lines, I have always found very heart-warming an expression that he used when he spoke of Opus Dei as a “little part”

of the Church. Spiritual families formed within the Church by inspiration of the Holy Spirit sometimes run a risk. Where I come from we call it “not seeing beyond the tip of your nose,” or in other words, living a sort of short-sighted “cult” to the institution itself, or to its charisms, or to its founder. How does one avoid promoting one’s own brand, and instead put God and the unity of the Church first?

That expression “little part” of the Church is from Saint Josemaria, who was using the typical diminutive of his Aragonese background to express the affectionate tone in which he was speaking. The temptation of referring to oneself is always at hand everywhere. Often it’s through an excessive enthusiasm, or else through not recognizing other realities, or out of vanity. Saint Josemaria tried to prevent that

danger by reminding us frequently that the Work only exists to serve the Church as the Church wants to be served. If serving the Church—a necessary expression of our love for Christ—is always a reality in the life of each of us, then we're doing well.

Sometimes I ask myself why we pray for the unity among all Christians but we forget about unity within the Church herself. Here's an example: the family is one of the greatest victims in our society and, unfortunately, within the Church too. In Spain, if you have a large family, you are often asked: "Opus or *Kikos*?" How can we all, being faithful to the gifts received, learn how to love the richness of others as the fruit of God's diverse ways of acting?

To love, one first has to know. Many divisions and misunderstandings in the Church come from a lack of

knowledge. And they are mainly resolved by getting to know the reality, the real situation.

Moreover, loving Christ means loving everyone, and especially those who in one way or another are dedicating their lives to spreading the Gospel. Joy is also a real bridge that unites people, helping them to overcome their differences.

In regard to getting to know one another better (first of all those who share our faith), what about organizing some joint initiatives? For example, what would happen if a family event were organized by the New Catechumens and the faithful of Opus Dei? Or if young people from Communion and Liberation took part in a UNIV congress? Or you organized an inter-religious event, side by side with the Focolare people?

We Catholics run the risk, as Pope Francis has pointed out, of reducing apostolate to structures, activities or events, which often are not particularly effective for reaching the hearts and minds of those who do not know Christ.

What's essential in the Work is giving good Christian formation so that each one acts with freedom and initiative, individually. Those possible meetings that you mention certainly at times can be very useful, and in fact have taken place on some occasions, particularly when the Pope or the bishops are the ones who take the initiative.

At any rate, I think that besides getting together in these ways, we normally spend each day carrying out our daily activities: in our workplace, our school, our culture, a business enterprise, politics. There, where there are already Catholics of

different “stripes” working, we can collaborate in countless evangelical initiatives: with an open ecumenical spirit, hand in hand with other Christians, together with many other people of good will.

The next Church synod will be dedicated to the vocation of young people, a topic that has generated controversy regarding Opus Dei. A well-intentioned apostolic zeal may have “forced” some decisions to dedicate oneself or perhaps converted that apostolic mission into a task for which one has to show some results. If that’s the case, how would you avoid that happening again? Would it be productive to go beyond proselytism and promote instead an apostolate of “contagion” or example?

Benedict XVI and Francis have both made reference to proselytism in the

negative sense that it has acquired in recent times, especially in the ecumenical sphere, and they have explained very well what Christian apostolate really is. Naturally, the sense in which Saint Josemaria used the term “proselytism” was not a negative one; he was always a decisive defender of freedom. It’s possible that on occasion some people have committed those errors that you mention. There comes to mind, among so many practical manifestations of the love Saint Josemaria had for freedom, a small detail, but one which I think is very significant. When a mother asked him to bless the child she was carrying in her womb, the blessing was this: “May you be a great friend of freedom.”

Maybe the goal should be that others ask themselves: “Where does the joy and love that these people have come from?”

Actually, it's not so much the idea of "doing apostolate" as it is of being apostles. Therefore, I repeat that giving witness is absolutely necessary. But that does not exclude but rather demands the positive transmission of the Gospel, the proposal to follow Jesus, which stems from real love for others and therefore with complete respect for their privacy and freedom. In this, as in everything, the example of Jesus is shining and decisive. Not only did "he pass through this world doing good," but he was also explicit and very direct in his specific proposals: "Follow me," "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

Opus Dei is known for its concern for education at all levels and on every continent. How does one live in the world without being worldly? At times, in undertakings by religious institutions, the logic of success filters in and priority is

given to attaining excellence or the tangible merits awarded by rankings. How can one avoid eclipsing the authentic mission, which is to show ever better the beauty of God's face?

Above I referred to the danger of dialectical stereotypes. I think that when people of Opus Dei promote educational centers or schools, they want them to be excellent from the professional viewpoint, and at the same time to offer an excellent Christian education, always respecting the freedom of students and their families.

Not only then is there no conflict, but the Christian spirit requires integration. Seen in another way, it's a question of confirming with deeds that the fact of being Christian does not bring with it a carelessness regarding human behavior; just the opposite.

I'm afraid that I didn't express myself well. It's not so much an "either-or"—either human success or letting God shine. Neither am I referring specifically to apostolates of the Work. We live in a climate of belligerent secularism that can easily lead us to think that it's dangerous to mention God and it's better to leave Him in small letters or even add Him like a detachable "sticker." How does one face the challenge of speaking about God with naturalness, with passion, without complexes, as the wonderful Love who sustains our life and our endeavors?

Certainly, we can have the sensation of living in unsteady times. But we can also see great desires for change. Our world seems to be distancing itself from God, and nevertheless one can sense so much spiritual thirst... God's action is being carried out today and now, in the times in which

we've been given to live, and I hope we open ourselves to it! When some thinkers say that interpersonal relationships in our society have gone "fluid" and they point out the shipwreck on the shores of the superficial and ephemeral—this shouldn't fill us with pessimism or bitterness, but rather spur us to spread the joy of the Gospel even more diligently.

Maybe one of our first steps should be to assume that numbers aren't as important as grace. If we live a Christianity of the minority, but with the unshakeable faith of a grain of mustard seed...

I'm convinced that one of the most important challenges of the Church today is to give hope to each person, especially to the youngest, to families who suffer difficulties or break-up, and to victims of poverty (not only

material, but so often in the form of loneliness or an empty existence).

To face this challenge, given our personal limitations and sins, the only way is to sense the merciful look of Jesus and ask Him to send us to bring his Love to our contemporaries.

The Church granted the Work the status of being a personal prelature at the service of the universal Church and of particular churches. But often it is perceived as an “extra-diocesan” reality. To be fair, many priests of the prelature are filling in for the scarcity of diocesan priests. But in practical terms, the fact that the faithful of the prelature have means of Christian formation in their own centers, have their own confessors, their own apostolic work, can that cause them to live on the margins of the daily life of

the parish? How does one confront the challenge of being “living stones” (integrated, not just added) within the structure of the Church?

Perhaps on this point, when speaking about the Work, you are really talking about the priests of the Prelature, or the numeraries. But the majority of the faithful in Opus Dei are actually supernumeraries who take an active part in parish life, within their possibilities, juggling their work and family responsibilities. It isn't always easy to find the time, and each one does what he or she can. On the other hand, the priests who belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross are diocesan priests, fully engaged in the pastoral tasks of their dioceses. In my opinion, as time goes by, this ecclesial aspect of their work, which perhaps today is not so well-known, will become ever clearer.

Sometimes we fail to see the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and that each one of us with our own vocation contributes to the wealth of grace that comes to us through the Communion of the Saints. But I wonder if another of the great challenges facing our Church is that parishes need to become more fully enriched by the charisms of the Holy Spirit. I think some effort is needed for both these things to happen.

In that sense, what can help us is a change of attitude. Instead of keeping account of what each one does, we should give thanks to God that we're all working together for Him! In my first letter as Prelate, I think I was clear in this respect. I wrote: "I want to encourage some faithful of the Prelature, Cooperators and young people to collaborate freely and responsibly in teaching catechism, marriage courses, providing social

services in parishes or other places where these are needed, always in accord with their secular status and their lay mentality. And not by depending in any way on the authority of the Prelature. On the other hand, I also want to make special mention of the men and women religious who have done so much good and are doing so much good for the Church and for the world. ‘Whoever does not love and venerate the religious state is no friend of mine,’ Saint Josemaria taught us. I am happy besides, to think of so many religious as well as diocesan priests who have seen their vocation blossom through their association with the Work.”

There comes to mind also something that people usually question about the Work, an aspect of pastoral practice: the fact that men and women work separately, which can be effective and at times

necessary. Is this part of the Work's foundational charism? Couldn't it be unnatural not to allow any exceptions? Externally, it could be seen as something that stifles healthy initiatives that arise naturally, or that facilitate young people coming together, or spiritual sharing among married couples...

In the Work, separation of men and women is limited to the means of formation, to the centers where these are given, and to the organizing of different apostolates. In these cases, separation is part of the original charism, which has well-experienced pastoral reasons for this practice, although I understand that some people don't share that view and prefer other ways of doing things which are equally legitimate. Apart from these means of formation, there are many activities in which both men and women participate: courses

for married couples or for engaged couples, sessions for mothers and fathers of children in youth clubs, initiatives in parishes that are staffed by priests of the Prelature, etc. That's without mentioning countless informal activities that come about through the initiative and creativity of families.

In my opinion, what's important is that married couples receive formation that helps strengthen their marriage and their family. That's the point of giving them the formation offered in the Work.

We are living in rather tense and turbulent times. I am thinking especially about places where the Church is persecuted. How can we respond to the martyrdom of so many of our brothers and sisters who are pouring out their lives for Christ?

First, by accompanying them with our prayer. We cannot get used to this kind of news, which unfortunately happens daily. Saint Josemaria, who felt deeply everything that was affecting the Church, denounced the “conspiracy of silence” that weighed upon persecuted Christians, especially on those who, at that time, lived behind the Iron Curtain. He asked people in the Work—and I think his advice holds for all Catholics—that we confront silence with information, making known what is happening with persecuted Christians, and helping them in whatever way we can. Information is the key, because making known the reality can move us to give more active and generous help.

Sometimes we have the feeling that we are living in a world gone wild. What did you ask our Lady for on your recent trip to Fatima?

In her maternal presence, I went over some of the challenges of this world of ours, so complex and exciting. I asked her for the grace to bring the Gospel to everyone, in its original pure form, and at the same time, in its radiant newness. In a message sent later to my children, I wrote something that I think can be useful: “Our calling summons each of us, with our spiritual and intellectual resources, with our professional skills or life experiences, and also with our limitations and defects, to try and see how we can cooperate more and more in the huge task of setting Christ at the summit of all human activities. To do this we need in-depth knowledge of the times we live in, its dynamics and potential, and also of the limitations and injustices, sometimes serious ones, that afflict it. Above all, we need personal union with Jesus, in prayer and the sacraments. Thus we will be able to remain open to the action of

the Holy Spirit, in order to call, with charity, at the door of our contemporaries' hearts.”

I think that these words can be a fitting conclusion to our conversation, one in which I would have liked to bring up even more topics. But we have to leave it here. Thank you so much for your time and your frank answers, and also for not rejecting any uncomfortable questions! Thank you for having tried, together with us, to build bridges.

I also thank you for the time you have spent with me. Besides, it has been wonderful to speak in an atmosphere of freedom, openness and affection where we always learn from one another. I'm actually happy that you asked me some questions that could be annoying, but that have given me the opportunity to deal with some interesting points, and

that besides were motivated by a sincere desire to spread the truth. As I say this, there come to mind some words from the third letter of Saint John: “cooperators in the truth,” which Joseph Ratzinger chose as his episcopal motto.

Thank you also for your dedication in leading thousands of people of all races and conditions throughout the world. Because we need to keep on building up families, the Church and this blessed world of ours with the joy of the Gospel. May each of our readers also beg strength from God to faithfully fulfill their mission, and thus we will all come out winners!

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