

Working for God
On the Nature and
Spirit of Opus Dei

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“God is calling you to serve him in and from the ordinary, material, and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day in the laboratory, in the operating room, in the army barracks, in the university, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home, and in the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.”

Blessed Josemaria Escriva
—in a homily given
at the University of Navarre,
October 8, 1967.

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Prelature of Opus Dei in the United States

A man, a call, and bells

THE MAN was a young Spanish priest named Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer. As early as 1917, when he was a teenager, he'd come to understand that God wanted something special of him. In fact, he later explained, it was that which led him into the priesthood.

But what did God want? On October 2, 1928, he was pondering that question, as he'd often done, while making a retreat in Madrid. Suddenly, while bells pealed in a nearby church, it became clear: God made him see Opus Dei.

An institution which, as he put it, was to “tell men and women of every country and of every condition, race, language, milieu, and state of life . . . that they can love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life, and their normal social relations.”

Opus Dei—the Work of God

Today it numbers well over 77,000 members representing more than 80 nationalities. It has been praised by popes, prelates, ordinary Christians—and thousands of non-Christians as well. It has brought new insight and encouragement to countless men and women striving to live their Christian vocations in the world.

After Msgr. Escriva died in Rome on June 26, 1975, his reputation for sanctity was such that thousands of people from all over the world asked the Vatican to open his cause of canonization. Following an exhaustive investigation into his life and work, and after the confirmation of a miracle through his intercession, Pope John Paul II beatified Msgr. Escriva before a quarter of a million people in St. Peter's Square on May 17, 1992.

But none of that was so at the start.

The beginnings

At the start, Blessed Josemaria often recalled, he had “26 years of age, God's grace, a good sense of humor, and nothing else. But just as men write with a pen,” he would add, “Our Lord writes with the leg of a table to make it clear that it is he who is doing the writing.”

Gradually the youthful priest gathered a few young men with whom he shared his

vision. In 1930 he saw that God wanted Opus Dei to include women as well. But growth came slowly, and both the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) and the Second World War (1939-1945) made expansion difficult.

Still, efforts continued. By 1940 Opus Dei had between 300 and 400 members. During the Second World War it spread to Italy, then to Portugal, Ireland, and England. It received its first recognition by the Holy See in 1943, and in 1946 Blessed Josemaria moved to Rome. The international headquarters are now located there at 73 Viale Bruno Buozzi.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the Work was introduced into Mexico, West Germany, France, and most of Latin America. It came to the United States in 1949 and to Canada in 1958. Meanwhile, it has continued to grow in Latin America and Western Europe, while spreading to countries of Scandinavia and Africa, the Philippines, Japan, Australia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Opus Dei has recently begun in some countries of Central Europe and in India and Israel.

How does Opus Dei grow? Certainly not by legislative decree. To be sure, Opus Dei establishes a corporate presence nowhere without the permission of local Church authorities, but its actual growth in all cases is due above all to three things: the efforts of individual members and supporters, the gen-

erous response of other individuals when they hear about Opus Dei, and—especially—the action of God’s grace.

Opus Dei in the United States

In 1949 Blessed Josemaria sent Fr. Joseph Musquiz and a young physicist, Salvador Ferigle, to Chicago to begin Opus Dei in the United States. As was customary all he would give them was his blessing and a picture of the Virgin Mary. In time they opened a student residence near the University of Chicago which they named Woodlawn Residence. Vocations began to arrive.

The first women members came to this country in 1950: Margarita Barturen, Nisa Guzman, and Blanca Dorda. They opened Kenwood Residence in Chicago. Opus Dei began to spread across the United States. Activities for men and women are now available in about 35 cities spanning the country.

The spiritual formation members receive inspires in them the desire to undertake apostolic works, normally in cooperation with non-members, many of whom are not Catholic or even Christian. In this country, these apostolic works have primarily been of an educational nature, such as high schools in Chicago, Washington DC, and Boston, and supplementary education centers in many inner cities,

including in Chicago, Washington DC, Boston, and the South Bronx of New York.

A Spirituality of Work

One of the most incisive analyses of Blessed Josemaria’s spiritual legacy was written by Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice, shortly before he was elected Pope John Paul I. Describing Msgr. Escriva as “a revolutionary priest . . . vaulting over traditional barriers,” he compared the founder of Opus Dei to St. Francis de Sales as a master of the spiritual life.

“St. Francis,” Cardinal Luciani wrote, “proclaimed sanctity for everyone, but seems to have taught only a ‘spirituality for lay people,’ whereas Msgr. Escriva wants a ‘lay spirituality.’ Francis, in other words, nearly always suggests for the laity the same practical means used by religious, but with suitable modifications. Escriva is more radical; he goes so far as to talk about ‘materializing,’ in the good sense, that quest for holiness. For him, it is the material work which must be turned into prayer and sanctity.”

There is nothing complicated or obscure about the purpose which Opus Dei has in view—holiness and apostolate in and through one’s ordinary work, using the traditional practices of the interior life. What is new is that Opus Dei encourages ordinary

lay people living in the world to aspire to heroic sanctity without changing their state of life or occupations.

In response to a question from a journalist, Blessed Josemaria explained the importance of work: "Ordinary work is not only the context in which people should become holy: it is the raw material of their holiness. It is there in the ordinary happenings of their day's work that they discover the hand of God and find the stimulus for their life of prayer." He added that "holiness, apostolate, and the ordinary life of the members of Opus Dei come to form one and the same thing, and that is why work is the hinge of their spiritual life."

To Blessed Josemaria any honest work can be a means for holiness. "In God's service there are no second-class jobs. All of them are important. . . . Sanctity, for the vast majority of men and women, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it."

The beatification of Msgr. Josemaria Escriva

Msgr. Escriva's cause of beatification began in 1981. By then, the Vatican had received some 6,000 requests, among them from over a third of the world's bishops. Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio considered him a "turning point" in

the history of spirituality; Cardinal Parente compared him to the great founders like St. Benedict and St. Francis; Cardinal John Carberry, former Archbishop of St. Louis, said he was "one of the heroes of our time"; and Cardinal Maurice Otunga of Nairobi did not hesitate to call him "one of the greatest saints of all time."

After an exhaustive study, the Vatican declared on April 9, 1990, that Msgr. Escriva lived the Christian virtues to a heroic degree. On July 6, 1991, the Holy See confirmed that Carmelite Sister Concepcion Boullon Rubio, who was at the point of death in 1976 from a rare disease that caused tumors throughout her body, had miraculously recovered through Msgr. Escriva's intercession. The cure was one of many attributed to Msgr. Escriva, including thousands of small favors.

At the beatification ceremony in St. Peter's Square on May 17, 1992, Pope John Paul II told the 250,000 people in attendance that Josemaria Escriva was an "exemplary priest who succeeded in opening up new apostolic horizons of missionary and evangelizing activity." The following day, at an audience in the Square, the Holy Father again echoed Blessed Josemaria's exhortation that all Christians must strive to "permeate homes, workplaces, centers of culture, the media, public and private life" with the Gospel message. Quoting the newly

Blessed, John Paul said: “Christians, working in the middle of the world, have to reconcile all things to God, placing Christ at the peak of all human activities.”

For canonization to occur, the Church requires proof of another miracle through Blessed Josemaria’s intercession.

The beatification processes of two other members of Opus Dei (Isidoro Zorzano, an Argentinean engineer who died in 1943, and Montserrat Grases, a young Spanish girl who died in 1959) are also underway. †

An open book

The very ordinariness of the members of Opus Dei—the fact that they don’t look or act or speak differently from anyone else (because in fact they aren’t different)—does not imply any type of secrecy. While members of Opus Dei do not advertise their membership, neither do they conceal it. As one expressed it, “We never hide what we are or what we do, but we don’t carry a sign saying that we are good Christians or want to be.”

In any case, Opus Dei’s spirit, purposes, and program are, both literally and figuratively, an open book: they can be seen in the writings of its founder and in the lives of its members.

Perhaps the best-known book by Blessed Josemaria is *The Way*. It is regarded by many as

a spiritual classic, with nearly four million copies in 39 languages published to date. Several other works by him—collections of homilies and meditations—are also available in English.

“Don’t let your life be sterile,” *The Way* begins. That could serve as a motto for the organization. Opus Dei urges people to be of service, to carry on an active apostolate in and to the world. This spirit has been called a “naive success ethic,” but it isn’t. Opus Dei does not aim at routine success but at sanctity. Says *The Way*: “I’ll tell you a secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of people ‘of his own’ in every human activity. Then . . . *pax Christi in regno Christi*—‘the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.’”

Opus Dei is people far more than it is institutions, however, there are a certain number of institutions conducted by members on their own initiative, which in one way or another embody the spirit and purposes of the organization.

Although these institutions—universities, schools, study centers, student residences, conference centers, and professional or vocational training institutes of various kinds—have an apostolic purpose, they are not officially “Catholic,” since members of Opus Dei conduct them on their own and in collaboration

with others who are not only not members of Opus Dei but, in many cases, not even Catholics. Opus Dei itself takes responsibility only for the spiritual and doctrinal aspects of the programs of these institutions, not for their practical and professional management.

Members of all kinds

People of all kinds belong to Opus Dei: priests and lay people, men and women, young and old, married and single, of every occupation and profession. Most members are married and have families. A relatively small number of members, both men and women, make a commitment to celibacy and thus have more time and availability to provide guidance for the other members and to staff the various apostolic activities.

Some single members are ordained as priests after years of professional work and following the required studies to prepare for the priesthood. They make up about 2 percent of the membership and are, properly speaking, "priests of Opus Dei."

Other secular priests can also have access to the specific spirituality of Opus Dei by receiving personal spiritual guidance and participating in such activities as retreats and days of recollection. Some in fact join, by divine vocation, what is called the Priestly Society of

the Holy Cross, which is integrally united to Opus Dei. In doing so, however, they remain priests of their own dioceses with their own bishops as their superiors. Like any other secular priests, they follow all the indications given by their bishops for the running of the diocese and for the collective spiritual direction of priests; what they receive from Opus Dei, not in place of but in addition to this formation, is help and guidance in seeking holiness in carrying out their ministry.

In addition to the members of Opus Dei and the priests associated with the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, there are also "Cooperators" who help through their prayers, work, and financial assistance. In return, they benefit from the prayers of members and other spiritual helps. If they wish, they can participate in various spiritual and educational activities. Non-Catholics as well as Catholics can be Cooperators. (Opus Dei was the first Church institution to have non-Catholic Cooperators.)

A vocation

Why do people join? The answer is that they receive a vocation from God. Usually, an individual was impressed by someone already a member, to the point that membership began to seem like an attractive possibility for him

or her, too. The criteria for membership aren't income, education, social status, race, or similar considerations. They are, instead, the conviction, shared by the directors of Opus Dei, that one has this vocation and the accompanying determination to live according to the spirit and program of Opus Dei. That determination is concretized by means of a contractual commitment that spells out the rights and obligations that members of Opus Dei assume.

Opus Dei observes canonical and common-sense requirements regarding commitment and vocation. The earliest age at which an individual can formally apply for membership is sixteen-and-a-half. But, someone applying at that age cannot make even a temporarily binding commitment until he or she is 18. Before that, a contract would not be valid, in accord with the general provision of Canon Law. Moreover, no lifetime commitment can be made earlier than age 23.

To a great extent, Opus Dei can be summed up in four words: vocation, work, apostolate, and formation.

Despite the different forms of membership and the differences in function and lifestyle that they entail, members believe they all share essentially the same vocation. This concept of a calling is central to Opus Dei, and its idea of vocation focuses especially on work.

"The vocation to Opus Dei in no way changes or modifies a person's condition or state in life," Blessed Josemaria once said. "And since man's condition, his lot, is to work, the supernatural vocation to holiness and apostolate according to the spirit of Opus Dei confirms this human vocation to work."

Apostolate in ordinary life

Work and the round of everyday activities provide the context of apostolate for the ordinary lay person. As Opus Dei sees it, apostolate is simply the natural response of a person trying to live as a Christian and help others do the same. Blessed Josemaria expressed it this way: "Whoever said that to speak about Christ and to spread his doctrine, you need to do anything unusual or remarkable? Just live your ordinary life; work at your job, trying to fulfill the duties of your state in life . . . be loyal; be understanding with others and demanding on yourself. Be mortified and cheerful. This will be your apostolate."

This understanding of apostolate in ordinary life was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council, which taught that all the faithful—owing to their baptism—are called to participate in the mission of the Church, both as a right and a duty. In practice, this means helping other people—both by responding to their

ordinary human needs for friendship, encouragement, and support, and also, where possible and appropriate, urging them to persist or go deeper in their own struggle to know God's will for them and observe it more faithfully.

It isn't a sense of superiority that causes members to act in this way but something quite different. As one expressed it: "It would be absolutely false to imagine I joined Opus Dei, solved all my problems, and then set out to help everybody else solve theirs. I want to become a saint, but I'm not one yet. The difference Opus Dei makes is that I now have a new source of encouragement in trying to cope with my weaknesses—including picking myself up and starting over when I blow it—and for giving others a hand."

Spiritual life

Opus Dei's program of formation for this enterprise is demanding but not remarkable, composed as it is of traditional elements of Catholic piety and doctrine according to the letter and spirit of Vatican Council II. The spiritual elements include daily Mass and Communion, frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance, Scripture and spiritual reading, mental prayer, the Rosary. Small acts of self-denial and penance are encouraged in line with traditional Christian practice.

There is an emphasis on devotion to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph and on loyalty to the Pope and bishops. Members are urged to deepen their knowledge of Christian doctrine through courses, lectures, and systematic study and reading of books by writers faithful to the Church.

The program is undoubtedly time-consuming, but members find the time for it because they recognize it as essential to living out their freely chosen commitment. As one said: "If there are shortcuts to establishing and maintaining a relationship with the Lord, I don't know what they are. Furthermore, Opus Dei puts a lot of emphasis on order and the good use of time. When you get the hang of it, you find that you have time for what the Work asks of you and for a lot else besides, because you don't waste time as you used to do. The basic purpose of it all is nothing more and nothing less than to help you live your whole day in the presence of God."

Freedom in temporal matters

Men and women of Opus Dei can be expected to work in every conceivable field, from very humble occupations to positions of influence in business or politics or whatever. No situation, however, compromises the exclusively spiritual purposes of Opus Dei and

the unqualified respect that the institution has for the freedom of its individual members.

This view remained that of Blessed Josemaria, who, congratulated on one occasion by a well-meaning individual over the appointment of a member to the Spanish cabinet, replied, "What does it matter to me whether he is a minister of state or a street sweeper? What I am interested in is that he sanctify himself in his work."

As one might expect from that, Opus Dei has no views of its own on politics, economics, and similar matters, and no concern for the views of its individual members, as long as they are consistent with Catholic teaching.

Blessed Josemaria recognized the obligation of Christians to participate responsibly in the public life of their communities, to contribute to the common good. He urged that these obligations would be included in religious instruction. And he incorporated respect for the dignity of the human person, the virtue of justice, and all the social doctrine of the Church in his own teaching. He encouraged his sons and daughters to do the same.

Ahead of its time

Ideas like lay initiative and sanctity in the world were avant-garde novelties when Opus

Dei began, but, especially since Vatican Council II, they've come to be widely appreciated. The universal call to holiness, for example, is a major theme of the Council's Constitution on the Church; the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People stresses the laity's role; the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World underscores the importance of the secular order and the Christian's mission there.

Members grasp what the Council, in developing the Church's teaching, had in mind in saying lay people should "endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order." Despite the weaknesses and limitations they share in abundance with everybody else, they know that the Council's proclamation of a "universal call to holiness" is neither theory nor mere rhetoric but a mandate for every Christian in every walk of life.

While times may be catching up to the vision Blessed Josemaria Escriva had in 1928, it wasn't always so. "You have come a century too soon," a ranking Vatican prelate told Blessed Josemaria when he first brought Opus Dei to Rome in 1946. Church law then lacked a category for Opus Dei.

It was left to the Second Vatican Council to find the solution. Lay spirituality and lay apostolate were not its invention, but something else was—the personal prelature.

The first personal prelature

A personal prelature, according to Vatican II, is a jurisdictional structure in the Church that is not territorial, as is a diocese, but "personal" in the sense that it affects individual persons. Opus Dei received this status in 1982 by decision of Pope John Paul II, the first institution in the Church to do so.

Rather than being cut off from their dioceses under the new arrangement, lay members of the Prelature—that is, members of Opus Dei—remain ordinary faithful in the dioceses in which they live and work. As a Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, dated August 23, 1982, explains, the lay members of Opus Dei "are under the jurisdiction of the Prelate in regard to what has to do with the fulfillment of the specific ascetic, formative, and apostolic commitments, which they have freely undertaken by means of the contractual bond dedicating them to the service of the aims of the Prelature." It is "an ordinary power of jurisdiction or government, limited to that which refers to the specific finality of the Prelature, and differs substantially, by reason of the matter involved, from the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishops in the ordinary care of the faithful."

Diverse in education, temperament, occupation, politics, and virtually everything else,

members of Opus Dei nevertheless agree on this: Here they find an exciting vehicle for spiritual growth that gives a new dimension to work, family life, study, recreation, friendship, and all they do. To be sure, what God showed Blessed Josemaria in 1928 has been nothing short of revolutionary to the practice of one's faith.

Books by Blessed Josemaria Escriva

The Way

Considered by many to be a modern spiritual classic, this book of considerations for prayer has sold more than 3.5 million copies in 39 languages.

Furrow

Born of the author's interior life and experience with souls, this book also facilitates dialogue with Christ.

The Forge

A book of over 1,000 points for meditation intended to bring many souls to the forge of divine love.