



Sanctifying Ordinary Work:
On the Nature and
Spirit of Opus Dei
By Andrew Byrne

Booklet

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Sanctifying Ordinary Work: On the Nature and Spirit of Opus Dei

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORY

Opus Dei (the Work of God) is a worldwide institution of the Catholic Church. Its members, lay men and women and secular priests, strive to practice the Christian virtues, while remaining in their own state and position in life and pursuing their own occupations and ordinary work in society. In this way they carry out the apostolate of making the doctrine of Christ known by their example and word. The aim of Opus Dei is to help people of all social levels and professions appreciate the dignity of the Christian vocation and the consequences that arise from it. Opus Dei provides its members with the spiritual means and formation they need in order to live a life proper to a Christian who seeks to live out the implications of his faith. It helps them to do this in a specific way – with freedom and responsibility, in the world, among the realities that make up their ordinary work.

Opus Dei is made up of two sections or branches, one for men and the other for women. Both branches have the same spirit and their own specific apostolates.

St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer founded Opus Dei on October 2, 1928. Two years later, on February 14, 1930, he established the women's branch. During those early years, Opus Dei grew through the personal apostolate of its founder, who attracted people who shared his concern for souls. The Work first began among university students and in the working class districts of Madrid; before long it spread to other environments and cities. In 1934, in order to help the spiritual life of those who were in contact with him, whether or not they belonged to Opus Dei, St. Josemaria wrote *Spiritual Considerations*.

The expanded second edition of *Spiritual Considerations* was widely circulated, under the new title *The Way* (1939). Other works of his have been published widely, including collections of his homilies on ascetical topics. These homilies are characterized by their theological depth and the direct way in which they connect the gospel doctrine with the everyday lives of Christians. The first volume of homilies, *Christ Is Passing By*, published in

1973, has appeared in several editions and been translated into a number of languages. A second volume, *Friends of God*, was published posthumously in 1977.

In 1935 Opus Dei was preparing to begin its apostolic work in France, but the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War forced the postponement of these plans. In 1940, it began in Portugal, and in the next few years it was underway in England, France, Italy, and Ireland. In 1946 St. Josemaria moved to Rome, where he lived from that time on and where he established the headquarters of the Work. From 1949 on, the Work spread to the United States, Mexico, Germany, Holland, Argentina, Canada, Venezuela, and throughout the rest of Europe and the Americas, as well as to Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Nigeria, Zaire, the Ivory Coast, and a number of other countries. In 1980 there were over 70,000 members of Opus Dei, representing eighty nationalities.

St. Josemaria, the founder and first President General of Opus Dei, died in Rome in the fame of sanctity on June 26, 1975. Since his death, thousands of people from all over the world have visited his tomb to pray. The reputation for sanctity that he already had in his lifetime spread rapidly after his death; tens of thousands of every age and walk of life the world over now invoke his intercession in prayer. On May 12, 1981, the process of his beatification and canonization was formally opened in the diocese of Rome, and he was canonized in 2002. He was succeeded as President General by the Rev. Alvaro del Portillo, who was elected unanimously on the first ballot in the General Elective Congress held in Rome in September 1975, and who until that time had been Secretary General of Opus Dei.

The universal character of Opus Dei is a fundamental aspect of its spirit. In 1934, only six years after founding the Work, St. Josemaria wrote to the first members: "It should be noted that we are not a circumstantial organization, nor have we come to meet the particular need of a given country or a given time, because Jesus wants his Work to be universal, catholic, from the outset."

Opus Dei has from the beginning enjoyed the support and encouragement of the hierarchy, and has since 1943 received all the approvals of the Holy See.

KINDS OF MEMBERS

The members of Opus Dei are men and women who wish to lead a fully Christian life, seeking holiness and doing apostolate, in their own state in life and in their own work in the midst of ordinary society. They join the Work to commit themselves to progress in their Christian life by fulfilling their family, social, and professional duties as perfectly as possible. As St. Josemaria has commented:

Ever since 1928, I have been preaching that holiness is not reserved for the privileged few, and that all the ways of the earth can be divine. The reason is that the spirituality of Opus Dei is based on the sanctification of ordinary work. The prejudice must be rejected that the ordinary faithful can do no more than limit themselves to helping the clergy in ecclesiastical apostolates. It should be remembered that to attain this super-natural end, men need to be and to feel personally free, with the freedom Christ won for us (Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer, n. 34).

Each member of Opus Dei commits himself specifically to practice the Christian virtues proper to his condition in the world, as priest or layman, single or married, and to do apostolate according to his possibilities and personal situation. This diversity of personal situations means there are various ways of participating in the apostolic activities promoted by the Work, according to the time each person can devote, the kind of activity he can manage, and so on. The majority of the members of the Work are married people who strive to live Christianity fully in their own homes; others may decide to remain celibate and devote more time to the various apostolic activities and to the formation of other members. In return for this dedication of its members, the Work undertakes to give them spiritual help, sacramental assistance, and guidance to sustain and increase their interior life, and at the same time stimulates them to find fields of apostolate in which they may effectively serve all men.

The same variety of people is found in Opus Dei as in any social community: men and women, young people and old, single and married. In the Work there are people of all social conditions and professions: doctors,

engineers, and lawyers, along with factory workers, farmers, and clerks. In the words of St. Josemaria:

All that is required to belong to Opus Dei is the good will to correspond to a vocation from God; inviting a person to seek Christian perfection in his own state and in the exercise of his profession or job in the world according to the spirit of Opus Dei. That is precisely why men and women of the most varied conditions belong to Opus Dei: because it is God who gives the vocation and . . . with God there is no respect of persons (1954).

To this multiplicity of personal situations corresponds a multiplicity of personal ways of putting into practice this same vocation which each has received.

There are also priests in Opus Dei. Some were already members of the Work when they were ordained. These men devote themselves principally, though not exclusively, to the spiritual care of the other members; they are, by vocation, secular priests in whatever diocese they find themselves. Others ask to join Opus Dei after their ordination; this in no way diminishes their status as diocesan priests or their full dependence on their own bishops.

Briefly, it may be said that in the Work: (a) there are both lay people and secular priests; (b) among the lay people, there are married people and others who remain celibate; (c) both among the married and the celibate, there are people of all professions and social backgrounds. There are also individuals referred to as Cooperators (many of whom are not Catholics), who, while not members of Opus Dei, participate in its apostolic activities through their prayer, alms, or work.

DIVERSITY AND PERSONALITY

There is no uniformity in the way of life of the members of Opus Dei. Just as anyone else would, each member lives in the place he personally considers most appropriate, whether this be with his family, or where his professional work takes him, or where he might have to live because of family needs, social necessity, or whatever. Only in limited situations might some members of Opus Dei live together — when the proper care of apostolic undertakings calls for it; and such activities, of course, are always professional and secular in character. The majority of members are married and live in their own homes with their husbands or wives and children.

The same applies to other aspects of the members' lives, such as their way of dressing, their general lifestyle, their type of work, and anything their work might call for or require. Opus Dei does not establish or advocate for any particular mode or modes of behavior. Its purpose, rather, is to help its members and those who come in contact with it discover what God is asking of them personally, so that they can put into practice the demands of Christian life precisely in their own particular situations and circumstances, whatever these might be. As a result, one of the fundamental characteristics of Opus Dei is the value it places on individual personality: far from restricting it, Opus Dei seeks the proper realization and enrichment of individual personality.

FREEDOM IN TEMPORAL MATTERS

The members of Opus Dei are ordinary citizens engaged in diverse occupations and professions. In most cases they have joined the Work as adults, and they continue in the profession or occupation they had previously learned and practiced. Those who join the Work in their youth freely decide and prepare themselves in due course for the career or job of their own choice, just as they would if they were not connected with the Work. Whatever the case may be, all members engage in professional life with complete freedom. Each chooses his profession freely, employing the means he has personally available to secure the job he desires, and fulfilling his duties according to principles he deems appropriate. Opus Dei does not support its members in their work, nor does it tell them how they should go about it. Their work is their own professional activity, for which they will have to account to the appropriate authorities – perhaps a government agency or the shareholders or owners of their company – but never to Opus Dei. There is no connection whatever between the Work and the professional activities of the members, regardless of what they are.

The directors of Opus Dei have no authority over the judgments made by each member in his professional life or in his political, economic, or social activity or thought. All the members of the Work are personally free in temporal matters and all those theological matters open to discussion. In these matters, members are guided by and act according to their own consciences and personal preferences. They are autonomous in the ways they think and conduct their temporal affairs, and they realize that they act with personal freedom and are likewise personally responsible for their actions, which should always be in accordance with Christian faith and morals.

In political matters, the members of Opus Dei think and act with the same full personal freedom. This is precisely why the members' diversity and broad pluralism in temporal matters is connatural to the spirit of the Work. Less than two years after he founded Opus Dei, St. Josemaria wrote:

Our pluralism is not a problem for the Work; on the contrary, it is a sign of good spirit, of upright corporate life, of respect for the legitimate freedom of each individual, because *ubi autem Spiritus*

Domini, ibi libertas (2 Cor 3:17), where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (1930).

Thirty-eight years later, he replied to a query of a journalist:

The members of Opus Dei have come together only for the purpose of following a clearly defined way of holiness and of cooperating in specific works of apostolate. What binds them together is something exclusively spiritual and therefore rules out all temporal interests, because in the temporal area all the members of Opus Dei are free and so each goes his own way, with aims and interests which are different and sometimes opposite (Conversations, n. 67).

APOSTOLATE

The principal apostolate of Opus Dei is that which each of its members carries out personally, with their daily resolve to make the doctrine of Christ known by their example and word. Since people of all ages and social conditions are in Opus Dei — celibate and married people, priests, clerks, farmers, lawyers, scientists, artists, domestic staff, office staff, salesmen, businessmen, servicemen, writers — the only way to describe this personal apostolate would be to tell, one by one, the life stories of thousands of individuals all over the world. When they join Opus Dei, people neither change their lifestyle nor begin a series of set activities. Rather, they continue to do the same jobs they would be doing otherwise. The radical change lies in that those same everyday things acquire new meaning, a new perspective, because of the commitment undertaken to turn every human situation into a meeting with God, an act of service to others, a Christian apostolate.

Opus Dei's main activity is forming its members ascetically, doctrinally, and apostolically so that each one individually may give Christian witness in the environment in which he carries out his professional work. Free personal initiative finds full scope in the apostolic spirit of Opus Dei, because the Work's main concern is not to develop this or that specific field of apostolate, but to stimulate its members so that each one, in his own professional and family environment, may carry out an intense, personal apostolate.

There is no attempt to direct all the members uniformly toward specific sectors of society. There is, however, a concern that everyone in Opus Dei, each with his own mentality and way of acting, should try to bring others closer to God. The worker in the factory, the intellectual in his writings or research, the athlete in his professional environment, the housewife in her family — each tries to be, for those around him or her, a witness of Christianity. That is why Opus Dei's founder has said from the beginning that the Work's apostolates are like “a boundless ocean” or “a great program of Christian catechetics” in all spheres of society.

The ideal Opus Dei proposes to its members is that each of them should do apostolate, but it specifies no particular apostolate and does not require

participation in any group or team apostolate that follows some preconceived pattern and dictates each person's role. Individual freedom, an essential feature of Opus Dei, is relevant here too, in that there are as many expressions of apostolate as there are members of Opus Dei. Above all, the spirit of Opus Dei emphasizes personal apostolate.

In the homily of a Mass celebrated in Castelgandolfo on August 19, 1979, Pope John Paul II addressed a group of members of Opus Dei who were professors and university students:

The purpose of your institution is the sanctification of life lived in the world, in one's own place of work. Yours is to live the Gospel in the world — to be completely immersed in it and yet to transform it and redeem it with Christ's own love. Truly, yours is a great ideal, and one which from its very beginning has foreshadowed the theology of the laity which later has characterized the conciliar and postconciliar Church.

Such is the message and spirituality of Opus Dei: to live united to God in the midst of the world, in any situation whatsoever, each struggling to be better with the help of grace and making Jesus known to others by the testimony of one's own life.

Is there any ideal more beautiful and more moving than this? Inserted into humanity, commingled with it, this humanity that is so happy and yet so sad, you seek to love it, to enlighten it, to save it. May you be blessed and ever eager in this your goal! (L'Osservatore Romano, August 20–21, 1979).

At times, Opus Dei assumes responsibility for the doctrinal and spiritual formation given in specific educational institutions and social works. But even there, such activities remain the personal apostolate of the members who carry them out, together with many other people who are not members of Opus Dei and may not even be Catholics.

Sometimes, these apostolic undertakings need a physical plant or material center in order to function. Such centers are not the property of Opus Dei but generally belong to a group of persons — who may or may not be members of Opus Dei, and may or may not be Catholics — who make these instruments available for works of a social nature. These may be centers for vocational training or literacy projects; medical dispensaries; centers for

primary, secondary, or higher education; clubs for young people; cultural centers; or specialized academic institutes.

These centers are not officially or even unofficially Catholic institutions; they are professional activities of citizens exercising their civic rights. They are conceived and developed in conformity with the laws of the country, without privileges, receiving the same treatment as similar activities undertaken by any other citizen, foundation, or association.

SPIRITUALITY

Although Opus Dei's foundation is comparatively recent, the theological depth and richness of its spirit is such that it has already made a deep impression in the Church. Its teaching — on the universal call to holiness, sanctification in and through temporal realities, the need for unity of life, and many other points — has been echoed widely, explicitly or implicitly, in solemn documents of the Magisterium of the Church and in the works of many Catholic writers and theologians. Without claiming to be exhaustive, we can mention the following distinctive aspects of the spirituality of Opus Dei: the consideration of work as a sanctifiable and sanctifying reality; the effort to live a contemplative life in the midst of the world; a sense of divine filiation as the foundation of spiritual life; making the Holy Mass the center of the interior life; love for freedom and personal responsibility; and a spirit of understanding and solidarity with all men.

Sanctification in the midst of the world. A central characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei, and to some extent a prerequisite for understanding anything else about it, is the awareness that the ordinary Christian, living his life in the world, is called to sanctity and to the apostolate, precisely through the occasions presented by his professional, family, and social life. In the words of St. Josemaria:

An essential characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei is that it does not take anyone out of his place, unusquisque in qua vocatione vocatus est, in ea permaneat (1 Cor 7:20). Rather it leads each person to fulfill the tasks and duties of his own state, of his mission in the Church and in society, with the greatest possible perfection (Conversations, n. 16).

The members of Opus Dei are not people who live apart from the world but then return to it to work as doctors, clerks, laborers, or whatever. They are doctors, clerks, and laborers; their work itself and the dealings they have with others in it become for them the way to God. It is a matter of deepening that supernatural life which began with Baptism. There is no intention of making any artificial addition to the life of the Christian; it is simply a question of making him aware of the real, divine significance of the life of grace. As St. Josemaria has explained:

The easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by the simple and sublime fact of their Baptism (Conversations, n. 24).

Sanctification of ordinary work. One of the principal features of the spirituality of Opus Dei is that ordinary work is seen as something that can be sanctified and can sanctify us. Among the many writings of St. Josemaria on this subject, consider the following three texts:

We have reminded Christians of the wonderful words of Genesis which tell us that God created man so that he might work, and have concentrated on the example of Christ, who spent most of his life on earth working as a craftsman in a village. We love this human work which he embraced as a condition of life and which he cultivated and sanctified. We see in work, in men's noble creative toil, not only one of the highest human values, an indispensable means to social progress and to greater justice in the relations between men, but also a sign of God's love for his creatures, and of men's love for each other and for God: we see in work a means of perfection, a way to sanctity (Conversations, n. 10).

And:

Since we are convinced that man was created ut operaretur (Gen 2:15), in order to work, we know well that our sanctity hinges on ordinary professional work, which is the appropriate human and supernatural means by which we can take Christ with us and do good to all men (1950).

Finally:

Those who think we turn our back on work when we come to build up our supernatural life will not understand our vocation; because for us work is a specific means of sanctification. Our interior life, which is contemplative in the midst of the world, makes use of and feeds on our exterior life of work. We do not separate our interior life from our apostolic work: it is all one and the same thing. Our external work should in no way cause an interruption in our prayer, just as our heartbeat does not divert our attention from what we are doing, no matter what it is (1948; cf. Conversations, ns. 20, 114, 116).

Shortly before he was elected pope and took the name John Paul I, Cardinal Luciani wrote about the message of the founder of Opus Dei in Venice's *Il Gazzettino*:

Msgr. Escriva, with Gospel in hand, constantly taught: God does not want us simply to be good . . . , he wants us to be saints, through and through. However, he wants us to attain that sanctity, not by doing extraordinary things, but rather through ordinary, common activities. It is the way they are done which must be uncommon. There, in the middle of the street, in the office, in the factory, we can be . . . holy, provided we do our job competently, for the love of God and cheerfully, so that everyday work becomes, not “a daily tragedy,” but rather “a daily smile.”

More than three hundred years earlier, St. Francis de Sales taught something along the same lines . . . However, Msgr. Escriva went further than he did in many respects. St. Francis 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 some practical means used by the religious, but with suitable modifications. Escriva is more radical; he goes as far as talking about “materializing”— in a good sense — the quest for holiness. For him, it is the material work itself which must be turned into prayer and sanctity (*Il Gazzettino*, July 27, 1978).

Spirit of freedom. Within the spirituality of Opus Dei, love of freedom springs from the lay mentality that characterizes the entire Work and leads it not only to respect but positively to cherish the variety that is proper to human things.

It also flows from the truly Christian conscience, since Christianity is essentially a religion of freedom. As St. Josemaria has said:

God wants to be served freely: *ubi autem Spiritus Domini, ibi libertas* (2 Cor 3:17); where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom; and therefore an apostolate which did not respect the freedom of consciences would not be right. . . . Violence, never. I do not understand force, nor does it seem to me an apt means of convincing anyone, or of winning a victory; on the contrary, a soul who receives the faith always feels a sense of victory. Error is to be fought with prayer, with the grace of God, with dispassionate arguments, by

studying and getting others to study, and with charity. Therefore, should anyone try to maltreat those who are in error, you can be sure that I would feel impelled to line up alongside them, and share their lot, out of love of God (1954).

Love of freedom is to be seen in all the apostolic activities run by Opus Dei. They are open to persons of any race, creed, ideology, and social condition, without discrimination. Opus Dei is the first Catholic institution to admit non-Catholics and even non-Christians as Cooperators.

Life of prayer. Sanctification in the midst of the world, sanctifying one's ordinary professional work and the duties of one's state, and contemplating with a supernatural outlook on all human realities, in a climate of true love for the freedom of all men — these three characteristics of the spirituality of Opus Dei are sustained by a spirit of prayer and of intimacy with God through prayer and the Eucharist. That is why St. Josemaria has indicated that the sense of divine filiation is the foundation of the spirituality of Opus Dei, and why he insists at the same time on the need to make the Holy Mass the center and root of Christian life.

To pray is to converse with God. In the spirituality of Opus Dei, all noble human realities — all man's work, all his relations with others — are prayer. On this point we recall St. Josemaria's words:

A Christian life should be one of constant prayer, trying to live in the presence of God from morning to night and from night to morning. A Christian can never be a lonely man, since he lives in continual contact with God, who is both near us and in heaven (Christ is Passing By, n. 116).

And:

I assure you that when a Christian carries out the most insignificant everyday action with love, that action overflows with the transcendence of God. That is why I have told you repeatedly, and hammered away once and again on the idea, that the Christian vocation consists in making heroic verse out of the prose of each day. Heaven and earth seem to merge on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives (Conversations, n. 116.)

This everyday sanctification can be an important step toward sainthood, as modeled by the life of St. Josemaria himself. We may also

consider the examples of two other members, of whom the causes of beatification have been initiated: Isidoro Zorzano, an Argentinian engineer (1902–1943), and a young Catalan girl, Montserrat Grases (1941–1959).

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