

OPUS DEI: FIFTY YEARS OLD

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Shortly after I became archbishop of Boston I paid a visit to Elmbrook, a center for University students a few blocks from the Harvard University Law School in Cambridge. Elmbrook is one of a great number of university centers that are directed by Opus Dei, the worldwide association for lay people and priests that encourages the pursuit of sanctity in the midst of ordinary life. I wished to become more closely acquainted with it because I was concerned about the deep spiritual unrest of countless students who in a variety of ways cry out for the healing word and love of Jesus Christ.

At Elmbrook I met some fifty young men who were so happy and cheerful that conversation flowed easily. Much of what they told me I found striking, as coming from them. One boy commented on his efforts to get a few of his classmates to accompany him on a visit to a shrine of Our Lady. I asked another

about prayer, and he told me how through Opus Dei he has learned to live in faith with Jesus, Mary and Joseph, not as though they were distant abstractions, but as real persons, close by, whom he can approach simply and confidently, like a child. Others spoke of their vocation to foster the desire for interior life and service to others in everyday work. The evening wore on and I forgot how tired I had been from the day's round, and when I departed I was filled with fresh optimism.

In the succeeding weeks, as I visited various parishes of the archdiocese, I happened to meet other members of Opus Dei, housewives and working men, who talked to me about personal apostolate in their families and communities. When they too spoke to me of their efforts to be contemplative souls in their secular environment, I became more eager than ever to know the priest who had inspired this hunger for sanctity.

A few months later I met the priest, Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, the founder of Opus Dei, at his residence in Rome. His book of ascetical

maxims, *The Way*, had sold almost three million copies, but he definitely was not a man who sought publicity. His only wish was to disappear so that God would stand out. He was so extraordinarily forthright, so humble and unassuming, so warm and cordial, so enthusiastic about the Church and its mission, that I felt I had always known him and that I too could call him "Father" as did more than 60,000 men and women who were striving at that time to sanctify themselves in Opus Dei in their ordinary work, all over the globe, according to the lay spirituality that he had taught them.

He was seventy years old at the time of our first and regrettably only meeting, but his youthful vitality was astounding. I was able to recognize someone who was very close to God, a veritable rock of faith. 'That is what we need,' I remember telling myself after leaving him, 'a man of prayer, a man who gladly and unashamedly confesses his great devotion to Our Lady and his love for the Church and the Holy Father.' I have been told that on 26 June 1975, when he was talking to a group of his daughters at a center of the Women's Branch of Opus Dei in Castelgandolfo, he said, 'How much we have to love the Church and the Pope, whoever he may be; pray to God that our service to the Church and the Holy Father be effective.' These were practically his last recorded words, for an hour later, simply and suddenly, he died in Rome after a full morning of pastoral work.

Since his death I have continued to 'meet' Monsignor Escrivá through the wonders of modern technology. I have seen him in movies, standing in the middle of crowded halls of Europe and America, exuding compassion and humour, reassuring his questioners that the Church, the Bride of Christ,

remains forever the pillar of truth. The way to sanctity, he tells the audience, the means to grow in interior life, are the same as ever: the sacraments, prayer and sacrifice, the sanctification of daily work and the fulfillment of the Christian's ordinary duties in the midst of the world.

One of those get-togethers was filmed in Canete, high in the Peruvian Andes, before a large audience of people of different races and social conditions. Someone asked about the significance of Opus Dei within the Church. 'The Lord has told us all to be saints,' he answered, 'even as your heavenly Father is perfect. And he was not just talking about monks and nuns and priests; he was talking to you also, and to that woman over there, and to that other man, to everyone. This is what Opus Dei has come to say.'

In fact, Monsignor Escrivá had been preaching since 1928 on the universal call to sanctity, on sanctification *in* and *through* the realities of daily earthly life, aspects of lay spirituality that many years later were incorporated into the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

I have also continued to 'see' him in Rome where I like to revisit the house where we first met. There, in a lovely crypt, a dark green marble slab bearing the inscription 'El Padre' ('The Father') marks the place of his burial. All around me there are young people who kiss the tomb with devotion. There are also housewives and workers in the crypt who silently confide to him their needs. But as I notice them, I too ask the Father to pray for me and for all the souls entrusted to my care, and that he continue to blaze those trails of sanctity in secular life that he opened up in 1928, fifty years ago this coming second of October.