

The Apostolate Of Members Of Opus Dei In The Diocese Of Rome

By GIAMPAOLO BONANI

How to sanctify the ordinary things of everyday.

It is by no means easy to judge whether the present moment in the life of the Church, which each one of us is living as a more or less conscious protagonist, will go down in the annals of history as an epoch characterized by a prevailing pessimistic attitude. Certainly we can note signs of alarm and unrest which, in the face of the present powerful social changes, tell us that the solidity of the faith is being undermined and stress with concern the twilight of certain traditional methods of teaching and spreading the Gospel message.

If we could pierce with true insight through the many plate-windowed offices, at the platforms of our overcrowded buses, at the noisy careering of students on their motor-bikes, beyond the concrete skeletons of our building sites, we would discover there normal people; people just as they've always been, our colleagues and friends, people who are truly looking for God, who seek sanctity for themselves and for others; people who, with a spirit of selflessness are doing their utmost to enrich "in spirit and in truth" the Church with the only true value which men can possibly give it: with love.

They are people who don't like fuss, who don't try to draw attention to themselves and who do not share the trait of a technologically advanced society which continually thrives on the spectacular. They are people who, passionately loving

the world, endeavor each day to discover those things which are conducive to contemplation. It is a painstaking search which is the practical consequence of a decision regarding their life which has to be renewed every day, and which also takes into consideration the obstacles and their personal deficiencies.

It is, above all, a search made using those very things which seem to lead the majority of men away from the supernatural dimension of life, namely, work, leisure, social life, and friendships. These are, on the contrary, the precious material with which man constructs his loving relationship with God and expresses in practice his desire to transmit, directly and wholeheartedly, the message of the coming of the Lord.

There are many people who live this way: finding time to work, to pray, to do apostolate always being their natural selves without representing any official organization and considering themselves successful in so far as they are becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Such is the life of the members of Opus Dei who live in more than seventy countries the world over and who share the joy and toil of people of all kinds, regardless of economic conditions, race or culture. This is one of the most remarkable pastoral phenomena in the present-day Church. Each individual acts with spontaneity for the increase of the Christian family.

In this respect, Rome is no exception. There also the work of the members of Opus Dei has become very evident over these last years. The history of Opus Dei in the heart of Christendom began in the for-

ties. The Founder and President General of the Association, Monsignor Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, came to live in Rome in 1946. However, by the time he arrived, some

members of Opus Dei had begun to do apostolate in the city's working-class and student environments, which was giving slow but sure results. As in every other city, the apostolate of the Work in Rome began on a small scale and has grown, through the endeavors of men and women who have given the best part of their lives to this task, without having a pre-fixed plan but being guided by great faith.

The Spiritual Value of Work

The spirituality of Opus Dei has spread in the city of Rome—as in every other place—through an apostolate of friendship and confidence. From the very birth of the Association in 1928, Opus Dei has taught that this form of apostolate is a powerful instrument of evangelic fruitfulness. It is based on the example of our Lord's friendship with the Twelve Apostles, and that of the early Christians who in their conversations passed on the "wonders of God" as a joyous and precious discovery.

This is today, and always will be, the way of life and the presence in society of the members of Opus Dei, who, with the backing of a specific spiritual formation, take an active part in temporal affairs. They do not isolate themselves in any way. On the contrary, in all that is just and licit according to civil and ecclesiastical law, they strive positively—along with their equals—to establish all things in Christ" in the events of their daily lives.

In Rome, as elsewhere, Opus Dei prepares specific Christian vocations which are built on each individual's professional vocation, respecting its innate

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value and drawing from it all its apostolic and supernatural possibilities; whether it be behind a typewriter, in the university laboratory, at the lathe, on the legal bench, in the barracks, at school or in any other situation where people are naturally found together on account of their social obligations. Members of Opus Dei are present in all these places. They carry out the triple task of "sanctifying themselves in their work, sanctifying others with their work and sanctifying the work itself," making use of the small everyday opportunities to raise the spiritual "temperature" of the environment in which they work and live. As with any normal person, their activity understandably reflects their personal deficiencies and shortcomings sometimes evident, especially in the case of people in the public eye. In actual fact, these people try to be men and Christians who meet the demands of their professional vocation. They can be criticized rightly or wrongly for their actions, just as any one of their colleagues; however, their determination to serve God and society through their professional vocation is unquestionable.

Looking for God in the World

To understand the work of Opus Dei we might do worse than reflect a moment on the medieval cathedrals of Europe. Historians tell us how a common prayer used to precede the starting of work, and the building that resulted shows us how it was carried out with meticulous detail. So much so that the statues erected on the highest spires of medieval gothic cathedrals, which are almost invisible to the human eye, are so perfectly sculptured that they force us to conclude that they were "made so that only God could see them." The people of Opus Dei work with this spirit, beginning with God in prayer, and ending with Him, with a desire to do their work more perfectly than their professional duty strictly demands.

Opus Dei has come to tell this to the world: that all that is part of life can be an occasion for divine dialogue, nothing excluded, not even one's personal miseries. This is, in all the simplest and most evangelical one, that explains why we find people of the Work in so many different places and situations: among priests and laity, businessmen and students, politicians and trade-unionists, housewives and shop assistants, in all walks of life.

It was not on account of a predetermined plan that they are present in all sectors and at every level of society; rather it is due to the spirituality of the Work which shows how to find Christ in the little things and to speak with Christ as a living friend. It is a spirituality which adapts itself 'like a rubber-globe' to these people's everyday situation.

A Personal Apostolate

This leads us to another important consideration. It would be a misrepresentation, and from a certain point of view unjust to the Work itself, to consider that it acts principally as an institution; in other words, that it acts mainly through the more or less large-scale social initiatives which its members, conscious of the needs of society, have undertaken over the past few years, with the spiritual assistance of the Association.

This explains why people—no matter whether they be called 'professionals' of workers,—are ready to receive this essential doctrine. They see in the spirituality of Opus Dei an opportunity to give true value to their everyday life, without fleeing from reality or artificially complicating their lives. Some of these people, be they married or single, choose the way of complete dedication to the apostolate of the Work by becoming members of it. Others cooperate by means of their spiritual and material contributions and become part of the association of Cooperators of Opus Dei in which even non-

Catholics and non-Christians have found a place since 1947.

This vast movement towards a responsible Christianity—in Rome it includes several thousand people—is continually ready to make an essential contribution to the development of the Church in all its fullness, united with the Pope and the Hierarchy.

The extraordinary variety of activities undertaken by the members of Opus Dei is in no way due to ignorance of the fundamental needs of the Church or of the individual dioceses. It simply shows how much people can do in order to help the bishops carry their apostolic burden, which weighs at times oppressively on their shoulders. A whole new series of channels are opened up through which the teaching of the successors of the Apostles may find suitable means for its practical expression.

A single unbending monolithic organization cannot be the best way of meeting the task of spreading Christ's message today. Pluralism which is one of the characteristics of the People of God needs to be effectively fostered, following the guidelines of the Council. Opus Dei has trodden this path of pluralism since it began on the second of October 1928.

Personal apostolate takes pride of place in Opus Dei, but this does not exclude a common commitment of the members of Opus Dei and their friends to help in solving the most pressing social problems of our times. The structures organizations today have acquired a state of advanced material development and their own legal status. The activities carried out by the members of Opus Dei are always civilian not ecclesiastical, because their promoters are always ordinary citizens. Moreover, these undertakings always draw on the cooperation of people who do not belong to the Work (quite often they are in the majority) but nevertheless share the concern for the same problems of social wel-

fare, education, etc. A fact worth emphasizing is that these activities generally begin on a small scale and grow with the gradualness of living organism. They are the work of groups of ordinary citizens who shoulder them as their own personal responsibility, often without receiving any help from the public authorities, and so experience at first hand what a personal commitment to solve social problems involves.

It would be helpful to outline some of the things which these different activities have in common, within their great diversity which can be put down to the different environments in which the activities take place and to the singular mark which is imprinted on each of them by the mentality characteristic of each of the different sectors of human endeavor.

Doing Something for the Children

Adolescents from twelve to fifteen form a particularly crucial sector of the pastoral work with youth, as they do also in the education given at home and at school.

The apostolic and educational activities carried out by people of Opus Dei in this field are especially catered for in the various clubs for young people who are about to enter the 'liceo' (secondary school). These clubs have a clear educational purpose. They concentrate on the different study, cultural and recreational activities that school children take part in, such as making plane models, photography, excursions, athletics, music, drawing, literature, etc. The clubs are promoted by the parents of the members. The Work encourages the parents to take a keen interest in their children's education, not so much in terms of a protective attitude as in terms of a positive evaluation of their children's creativity and freedom. The parents bear the financial burden of renting and furnishing the club premises and they follow the club activities with keen interest. Together with the parents and

their children there are some members of Opus Dei (university students as a rule), who have particular aptitudes for this type of work.

An apostolic spirit which aims to bring to maturity the Christian personality of the youngsters by means of catechetical formation adapted to their needs, and the palpable example of people behaving in accordance with their ideals, moves all those who cooperate in these clubs. The children themselves are told of this dimension of their club right from the beginning. The activities of a specifically religious nature, which of course demand a spontaneous and free participation, are included gradually among the activities, according as the children themselves feel the need for them and ask to take part.

Club 91

The Club which has its own premises in a flat in Via Vigliena, in the Prati district, began three years ago with a small group of young boys who used to go to the Centro Culturale Prati in via Orsini, where they had organized a basement for their activities of photography and plane modelling. At the end of last year, the parents of the Club's pioneer members and other friends interested in enrolling their children saw it was necessary to find an independent site.

The way the parents become involved might best be illustrated by the following episode. At the beginning of this year, a certain university student went to a German library to consult some publications. He met some German schoolboys and talked to them about Club 91, which he had heard of from a friend who works there. One of the lads was keen and went home to tell his parents. His father, a Lutheran, was diffident on hearing a Catholic association was involved. A mixture of curiosity and concern for his child led him to phone one of the Club's directors and fix an appointment with him. When

they met, their conversation went straight to the point. It ended thus:

"Your description of the Club sounds convincing enough. However, you had better know that we are Lutherans and we aren't willing to compromise on the principles of our faith."

"Well, all I can tell you is that Opus Dei looks after the moral and human formation of every one and so naturally educated Catholics to act in accordance with their faith. If your child were to attend the Club he would assuredly learn how to be a good Christian and to follow his own conscience."

"If that's the way things are, I've no objections. How much is the subscription fee for this year?"

"Ten thousand lire."

"Here's twenty thousand. The rest is for developing the Club. But look here, if I find out that this isn't something serious, I'll take my child away immediately."

"Don't worry, Herr Professor!"

After one month, the doubts of the German professor had totally disappeared as he saw the evident contentment of his son.

In the Suburbs

Greater Rome with its sprawling neglected suburbs is the setting of other activities undertaken by members of Opus Dei and their friends. The work carried out in the suburbs among working class people of all ages is not done on the basis of periodic visits by outsiders. The people of Opus Dei who choose to work in this area live there permanently. Like the rest of their neighbors, they live in vast modern blocks of flats, sharing many discomforts of life on the outskirts of a capital city.

The biggest project that has been shouldered by the members of Opus Dei to improve (perhaps "to make habitable" might be less euphemistic) the Roman suburbs, is to be found in the Tiburtino district in the

East end of the capital. It is called the "Centro Internazionale della Gioventu Lavoratrice" otherwise known as the Centro ELIS (from the initials which make up the name of the administrative body, "Educazione, Lavoro, Istruzione, Sport," that is: education, work, instruction and sport).

This center has grown from the pooling of efforts among a considerable numbers of members and friends of the Work, university men, workers, professional men included. Many of them have moved house and taken up residence in this district for this very purpose, some of them bringing their family along with them, in order to take part in an activity whose fruits, six years after the beginning of the Center, include numerous vocations to the Work, a noticeable influence in the life of the neighborhood, and above all, the creation of a focus of human and supernatural attention which for all those who live there is an authentic opportunity for cementing social relations, a community spirit and friendship.

The Center, which stands next to the parish church of Saint John the Baptist in Colatino, at present entrusted to a priest of Opus Dei, Don Mario Lantini, comprises residential and school buildings, along with extensive sporting facilities. The various activities of the Center may be summed up as follows:

a) **Internal educational activities:** secondary school, which is affiliated to a state school (thus ensuring state recognition), with day and evening classes; a professional training center, which prepares specialized workers in the fields of electromechanics and draftsmanship.

b) **Recreational and cultural activities for the neighborhood:** provided through the various recreational and cultural activities for both young people and adults, ranging from a Camping Club to the Bowling Club; also there are the cultural facilities of the

Residence (library and study rooms) as well as a library for public use.

c) **Sports:** organized through the various departments of the Sports Section, which trains boys in the technical aspects of the sports they practise. Up to now the biggest section, not surprisingly, is football. It includes a special section for the training of young professional football players.

d) **Touristic and cultural:** the Center includes a hostel for parties of tourists and pilgrims from all over the world, as well as groups of workers and students who gather in Rome to attend congresses and meetings.

The Director of the Centro ELIS is Dr. Gino di Carlo. He is assisted by the different section heads: Dr. Vittorio Aloia, Director of the Residence; Prof. Matteo Fiorenza, Principal of the Secondary School; Prof. Fiorentino Mattias, Director of the Professional Training Center and Dr. Mario Romano, Manager of the Sports Section.

The best way to describe the aims which the members of Opus Dei are trying to achieve with their effort in the Tiburtino district is through the words of the Pope:

"This enterprise," Pope Paul VI said during his visit in 1965, "like all charitable activities of the Church has no temporal pretensions; rather it is something that springs from the heart, a work of Christ and of the Gospel whose sole aim is to benefit those who make use of it. It is not just a hostel, nor just a workshop, nor only a school, nor only some sports grounds. Rather it is a center where friendship, trust and cheerfulness fill the atmosphere; a place where life acquires its dignity, meaning and hope. This is the Christian way of life affirming its value, living itself out, intent on putting in to practice many things which are particularly important for our times."

The Women's Section of Opus Dei.

When we talk of "people of Opus Dei" we take in equally both the men and the women who belong to the Work. Opus Dei is composed of two sections, whose government and apostolates are separate. The projects carried out by the Women's Section have an equal, and at times greater scope than those of the Men's Section. It is a fair claim that the Work, in these first forty years of its existence, has fought for the full recognition of the complete dignity of women, even in those cases where they have a humble professional calling or are simply devoted to domestic life.

The Founder of Opus Dei has said in an interview published in a women's magazine: "As far as I am concerned the work of one of my daughters in Opus Dei, who works in domestic employment is just as important as that of one who has a title. In either case all I am concerned about is that the work they do should be a means and an occasion for personal sanctification and the sanctification of their neighbor. The importance depends on whether a woman in her own job and position in life is becoming more holy and fulfilling with greater love the mission she has received from God." He adds: "Before God all men have the same standing, whether they are university professors, shop-assistants, secretaries, laborers, or farmers. All souls are equal. Only at times the souls of simple and unaffected people are more beautiful; and certainly those who are more intimate with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are always more pleasing to our Lord."

In Rome, the activities of the women members of Opus Dei, which are undertakings promoted and carried out for the professional, cultural and spiritual formation of women, are based on these considerations. The "Scuola Alberghiera

Femminile Internazionale" (International Hotel Staff Training School), also situated in the Tiburtino district, provides residential courses in hotel and home management. The students are prepared as hotel staff, with a two-programme of studies, and on this basis they can also be employed with private families. The courses are recognized by the "Ministero del Lavoro e della Previdenza Sociale" (Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare) and include three diploma courses: cooking, household management, laundry and textile care.

Along with the professional qualifications, the girls are offered a human and Christian formation which enables them to cope maturely with their responsibilities in their profession and in their family. The activities of a specifically religious character, such as the talks on Christian doctrine, days of recollection, etc., are organized in such a way that the students may take part in them freely realizing that it is entirely up to them to decide.

A Parish

A whole neighborhood is centered around the Church of Saint John the Baptist in Colatino, in Casalbruciato, not far from the Via Tiburtina. The parish, as we have mentioned, has been entrusted to priests of Opus Dei who carry out a task of preaching and pastoral work in the district, which possesses all the contrasting aspects that go to make up the social environment of the underprivileged areas of Rome. The acceptance of the priest in the family circle in these parts is not easy, given the unstable economic and cultural condition of a large part of the population who are recent immigrants and often are without the most elementary necessities of living.

This is the case, for example, of the former flood victims from the Prima Porta slums who were transferred en masse some years ago into the

blocks of flats that surround the parish church. Don Mario Lantini, the parish priest, and Don Salvador Longo, his assistant, have carried out a systematic visit of all the families in the area. These number more than 1,500 and their numbers are increasing. The main object of these visits could be a source of division between the people and the parish clergy. The new dwellers have been making all kinds of new discoveries and shedding possible prejudices; and the result has been that many people have come back practising their religion, to receiving Christian doctrine and to frequenting the Sacraments, which they do in increasing numbers.

The Students

A generation which is increasingly exigent from the intellectual point of view has entered the secondary school in these last few years and is now on the threshold of the university. It is a generation already accustomed to spontaneous and mass movements, to radical critical criticism and to debating the principles underlying authority.

In short, it is a generation which complains it has been left without definite principles to guide its behavior, as on the part of adults, of an already heightened crisis in the structures of public education and also of an atmosphere of general cultural instability. Boys and girls are looking for something worthwhile to pour their energies into. Their flight from any constructive proposals towards solutions of protestary nature is in itself due in large part to the fact they often they do not find in adults the examples of trust and experience that they have a right to expect, but fail to find in them.

The apostolic activity of the members of Opus Dei is fully at home with those waves of youthful protesters, because it has got to the heart of the matter. Parents who care for

their children full of christian hope, teachers of all levels who can testify with their living example that it is possible to establish a worthwhile relationship between themselves and their pupils, students who do not want to go through their school or university without developing and establishing friendship fully. These are the types of people who find in the Work the specifically supernatural support which enables them to bring new life to groups, center, or projects which provide the new intellectual generations with the doctrinal formation and the opportunities to practise with a selfless spirit their life of piety.

When a young person realizes that his life can be of use to others; that someone has understood this before he has and has followed this through to all its consequences; and that all this is due exclusively to his desire to get to know Our Lord better and more deeply, a small miracle may take place. Conversions, even of the very young, are nothing rare along the road that brings people to the Work—a friend, a colleague at work, a parent—from the level of friendship to that of a heart to heart talk, just as our Lord would have spoken with his friend Lazarus, about the most important things in life.

Activities for Priests

It would be impossible to give a complete description of all the work done by Opus Dei in the bulging expanse of Rome, especially because, as has already been pointed out, what is most important is the personal apostolate, not the institutional activities.

Before concluding this brief review, we cannot omit some reference to the activities for the secular clergy. These activities are organized for the clergy of Rome and also for the hundreds of other priests from every corner of Italy and from the world over who are living in Rome for reasons of study or pastoral work of va-

rious kinds. This service is one of the most important of those which the Work offers in the Diocese of Peter. The common ties of work and friendship of the common Presbyterium of the Diocese, as well as the concern for the sanctity of secular priests which the Founder of Opus Dei has always felt, have given rise to the "Centro Romano di Incontri Sacerdotali." This initiative has arisen to meet a widely felt need, to which several priests of the Work have decided to give a reply to try to meet.

One of the unnoticed and humble efforts which best demonstrates the solidity of the ideals of fraternity of which we have spoken, is the help which the priests in contact with CRIS try to give to sick priests or to those in old age. Information is sought regarding priests who are confirmed to be in the hospitals of Rome, in clinics, and in private homes.

The priests of CRIS have a particular affection for this natural activity. They have seen that it has a much more deep human and Christian meaning than the very many gratuitous statements on the incommunicability among the different generations of priests. Further, as one of the priests of the Center said to me, these visits have a "self-interest" for one really comes to believe in the value of prayer and suffering, in the merits derived from an entire lifetime spent in the service of the Church and in the effectiveness of the intentions of that elderly parish priest, whose name perhaps nobody even remembers anymore. The young priests too have this "self-interest," that is, to obtain the prayers of their older brother-priests for the faithfulness and the sanctity in their own recently received ministry in the service of God and man. One of them on returning from a certain hospital on the Via Salaria, said to another: "Listen, when you see that friend of

ours again who speaks so much about the priest's 'image' and who discourses on the sociological problems of the old and the young clergy, advise him to pay a visit here to Acquaviva di Nerola . . . I think his eyes will be opened."

So, the people of Opus Dei are found in many sectors, along "all the divine ways of the earth," as Mons. Escriva de Balaguer usually says. The complexity of a city like Rome offers an opportunity for a multiplicity of services which will always go on increasing. Each one of these will demand a great effort, but the experience of all these years tells the members the Work that they will never lack the ready support for a disinterested undertaking, if hearts are brought to love Our Lord.

On the 15th of November of last year in the early Christian Basilica of Saint Alessandro, 13 kilometers from Rome on the Via Nomentana, His Excellency Mons. Ugo Poletti, Viceregent of the Diocese of Rome, celebrated a Mass on the opening of a new initiative promoted by people of the Work along with others who have received its spirit. It is a center for spiritual activities and retreats. There is projected, in the precincts of the ancient Basilica, a residential block for accommodating a vast range of people of every age and profession.

Those present at the eucharistic celebration precisely represented the types of activities which people of Opus Dei have promoted in every part of Rome. Among the hundreds, there were to be found entire families in whose bosom a spontaneous hope has arisen which the Church can nourish for the spreading of the message of Christ and for her own expansion.

Showing how to sanctify the ordinary life of every day, which is the prime objective which the members of Opus Dei pose themselves in order to give meaning to their

Christian existence, is a task itself of every day. Opus Dei is a group of people who realize the every-day nature of this effort. They are thousands of people who are trying to Christianize their surroundings acting with naturalness, spontaneity, and in freedom. ❀