
The Founder of Opus Dei

Daniel Cummings

A year ago, on 26 June 1975, our Lord called to his side Mgr Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, founder and first president-general of Opus Dei. On 2 October 1928, when he was only twenty-six years old, with only 'the grace of God and good humour' – as he used to say – God opened up before his eyes the vast panorama of work, sufferings and joys which his providence held in store for him. From the year 1916 or 1917 on, he repeated an aspiration which rose, as an ardent prayer, from the depths of his heart. *Domine ut sit!*, 'Lord, that it may be!', that what you want may be done. Only in 1928, on that October 2, however, did he find out that what God wanted of him was something new and of vast extension, 'a sea without shores', at the service of the universal Church and of so many souls. Today men and women, single or married, priests, students or workers in industry and agriculture, strive to identify themselves with Christ in this path opened up by Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer through his most faithful docility to the inspirations of the Spirit and to the magisterium of the Church. With sincere humility, whenever anyone asked him, amazed at the supernatural fruitfulness of the association which God had asked him to found, his answer would be to refer to the work as 'the story of God's mercies'. As for himself, his incredible capacity for work and self-sacrifice, his boundless energy, he would not even take them into consideration. Conscious that 'the time for loving is short', he showed in his personal conduct what he had written in 1948 to the members of Opus Dei: 'it is in keeping with our vocation to die old, and well squeezed-out, like a lemon that can't give a drop more'. He dedicated himself with intensity, completely, to the sanctifying task of every moment and was, at the same time, 'caught up in God, absorbed by God, day and night', because he had reached, in a manner which was evident, the perfect unity of life on this earth.

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Christian sanctity is and always will be the same: the perfection of charity; the paths which lead to it, diverse, according to God's design manifested through history within his holy Church. Mgr. Escrivá de Balaguer preached unceasingly the need to sanctify temporal affairs, for those who have been called to form part of this civil world, the crossroads of all human professions. His teaching was not – is not – a call to adhere to a particular tactical approach but the proclamation of 'the eternal value of all noble human activity, in which any man or woman of good will is engaged. 'Opus Dei', he wrote, 'recognises the wonderful fact that any state in life and any professional work whatsoever, providing it is upright and remains so, can lead to God. And our work converts this possibility into a well-defined vocation: a personal dedication to God in the midst of the world, to transform our everyday living and professional and social activities into instruments of sanctification and apostolate, whatever the age or circumstances of each one may be.' And also, synthesizing it in one phrase, he wrote: 'the human vocation is part, an important part, of our divine vocation'.

It is teaching for ordinary Christians, grasped and lived by people of all walks of life: who do not have to 'get into' the world because the world *is* their normal living place, the proper place for their ascetical struggle and apostolic endeavour. To these Christians who find themselves '*nel bel mezzo della strada* – right in the middle of the street', as he used to say in Italian, even when speaking in other languages – he would remind them that 'the true setting for our Christian living is everyday life'. The founder of Opus Dei received, together with the foundational grace, the great theological truth that there are not two histories of the world – the Christian one and the pagan one – which run parallel, ignoring one another and oblivious of the existence of each other. This mistaken dualism can only exist if among Christians there is a corresponding, equally erroneous, dualism in the intimacy of the human heart. For this reason he taught in his ever-forceful style: 'No, my children! We cannot lead a double life. We cannot be schizophrenics if we want to be Christians. There is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life which has to become, in both soul and body, holy and filled with God.'

There is no room – there should be no room – left in the behaviour of a Christian for instrumentalizing divine things nor for vain exaltation of what is merely human. Whenever human

weakness has tried, with strategic calculation, to mix up human things with divine things in a confusion of dimensions and ideals, the result, frequently, has been a loss of the sacred, which disappeared from men's consciences and conduct. The founder of Opus Dei took as his starting point the real, divine value of noble temporal affairs, the activities in which man is engaged until he dies. At the same time, however, and precisely in order to prevent the life-giving participation of the Christian in the world from losing its strength, Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer has always preached the need for personal sanctity, the permanent and constant orientation of one's whole life towards God, our creator and Father. 'The Christian who is fully engaged in the affairs of the world can only be evangelical salt and light if his heart is fully set on God.'

Three months before his death, on the eve of the day he was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his priestly ordination, he expressed once again this idea which outlines the radical disposition of the Christian in the face of earthly affairs: 'We have to be – and I am aware of having said this to you many times – both in heaven and on earth. Not between heaven and earth, because we belong to the world. In the world and in paradise at one and the same time! That could be the formula to express how our lives should be while we remain "*in hoc saeculo*". In heaven and on earth, filled with God; but knowing that we are of the world and that we are clay: earthenware vessels that our Lord has wanted to make use of for his service.'

The sanctity which the Christian vocation demands is what Jesus Christ asks of all the faithful, indiscriminately: whatever their state in life, to all of them is directed our Lord's commandment. 'Be ye perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect' (Mat. 5:48). All the ordinary faithful – lay Christians who have made of the world their daily meetingplace with God – are therefore urged by the founder of Opus Dei to be 'contemplatives in the middle of the world; because if you want to give yourself to God in the world, rather than being scholarly you must be spiritual, closely united to our Lord by prayer: you must wear an invisible cloak that will cover each and everyone of your senses and faculties: praying, praying, praying; atoning, atoning, atoning' (*The Way*, 946). It is the intense life of prayer, the assiduous participation in the Eucharist, the continuous dialogue with Jesus Christ which unites – leaving behind any kind of impatient restless activism – a calmly active life of daring apostolate, tireless work,

constant happiness. Only there, in the heights of supernatural grace, is the earthly city sanctified, 'the city which is each one of us', Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer used to say, 'with so many things which come and go within ourselves, with so much movement and at the same time so much tranquillity, with so much disorder and so much order; with so much noise and so much silence; so much war and such great peace'.

This is the great inheritance which Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer has left: his exemplary life crowned with fruitfulness, his faithfulness and love for the successor of Peter; and his foundation with a well-defined spirit of clear theological content and precise juridical outlines. The supernatural effectiveness of this inheritance can only be explained by the infinite mercy of God, only author of all sanctity, who in the course of history chooses his instruments to carry out his works of love among men.

The day Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer went to heaven brought the foundational period for Opus Dei to completion and there began another stage, that of continuity, the meaning of which Fr Alvaro el Portillo – the founder of Opus Dei's successor – summed up in a single word: faithfulness. Because faithfulness, when applied to a spirit, is not a static concept, a merely formal expression; but rather it implies conforming one's mind, one's actions and one's life in an active way to the sanctifying potential of service of God, of the Church and, consequently, of all men which the founder, with the grace of God, infused in that spirit.