

## BOOK REVIEW

Gerard Casey

*What is Opus Dei?* by Rev Dominique Le Tourneau

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church *should* be telling him is that he should make good tables. Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly — but what use is all that if in the very centre of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, would anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself . . . [The Church] has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred. Forgotten that a building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; that a painting must be well painted before it can be a good sacred picture; that work must be good before it can call itself God's work.

This passage from Dorothy L. Sayers (*Creed or Chaos*, New York, 1949) expresses in a succinct manner both the spirit and the name of Opus Dei. This is somewhat surprising for there is no reason to believe that Dorothy Sayers knew of the existence of Opus Dei. Moreover, her belief that work and the secular vocation are in themselves something sacred is not one that has been popular in the Church at large for some time.

As expressed by Rev Le Tourneau the central insight of Mgr Escriva, the Founder of Opus Dei, is that 'everyone is called to holiness and apostolate, without leaving the world, by elevating to a supernatural plane, the temporal realities in which he or she is immersed, particularly his or her everyday work, family responsibilities and social duties' (p. 25). The loss of the Christian notion that work is something good in itself, something that can be both the object and the means of sanctification, is traced by Le Tourneau in the second chapter of his book. At best, as in St Francis de Sales for example, lay people were considered to be able to attain to some measure of sanctity in their lives by adopting and adapting religious modes of life to their own circumstances; at worst, as in Melchior Cano, lay people were thought not to be able to

aspire to Christian perfection at all.

The spirituality expressed in the central insight of Opus Dei is at once both old and new. It is old in being a return to the condition of the members of the Early Church who were, as we are counselled to be, in, but not of, the world. It is new in being a dialectical restoration of that spirituality to the modern Church. It is a measure of the success of the apostolate of Opus Dei that its central insight should now appear to us to be something of a truism. Mgr Escriva's attitude to work can be summed up in this formula: one must sanctify work, sanctify oneself in one's work and sanctify others through one's work.

Chapter 4, on the members of Opus Dei, will perhaps be of most interest to many readers. All members of Opus Dei share the same supernatural vocation, but within this single vocation there are different types of members: numeraries (celibate and living in Opus Dei centres), associates (celibate and living at home), supernumeraries (single or married and living at home), and cooperators (not strictly speaking, members, who may be Catholic, non-Catholic and even non-Christian). The priests of the prelature are drawn from its lay members. As of June 1987 Opus Dei had 1,342 priests and 74,370 lay members, from 87 countries and encompassing the entire range of social levels, occupations, and cultural traditions. The minimum age for joining Opus Dei is 18 years. One joins by making a contractual declaration (N.B. not a vow) in the presence of two witnesses. This contract may be for a specified time, or for life. In any event, no one is compelled to remain in the prelature against his will.

The contractual commitments are of three kinds: ascetical, formational and apostolic. The ascetical commitments comprise daily Mass and Communion, weekly confession, mental prayer, spiritual reading, Rosary, examination of conscience, etc. A spirit of mortification should be maintained, according to age, health and circumstances, including corporal mortification, but avoiding all excesses. The formational commitment comprises doctrinal training, given to all according to capacity and finally, the apostolic commitment requires members to bring the teaching of Christ to those who do not already know it and to encourage all Christians to respond to the call to holiness.

Members of Opus Dei neither make a parade of their membership, nor do they conceal it. The corporate works of Opus Dei, which are astonishingly numerous and varied, are organised from centres which are officially and publicly known to be such. Finally Opus Dei does not form a quasi-political party. All its members are free, within the limits



of a Christian conscience, to adopt whatever social and political stances they wish. Opus Dei does not interfere in the work of its members, nor does it use the influence of its members to obtain special privileges for itself.

The book contains chapters on the life of Mgr Escriva and the canonical status of Opus Dei, on both of which topics it is interesting and informative. However, considerations of space do not permit me to discuss them in any detail so I shall leave it to the interested reader to peruse them for him or herself.

This very detailed yet concise work gives names, addresses, details of corporate activity, finance, and so on. The myth of Opus Dei as a secretive, sinister conspiracy is shattered forever. So, the next time you run across ignorance of, or prejudice towards, Opus Dei, you can simply refer the ignorant or prejudiced person to this book. Better still, give him or her a copy.

*Gerard Casey lectures in the Department of Logic and Psychology,  
University College, Dublin.*