

## Twenty Questions to Mgr. Escriva

A new explanatory booklet on Opus Dei seems in some respects rather unnecessary, since quite an amount of objective material is already available on the subject. However, this particular booklet could hardly be said to be new at all; it consists mainly of extracts from 'Conversations with Mgr. Escriva de Balaguer', a book which has been a bestseller in several countries for some time now.

'Conversations' is a collection of interviews given by the Founder and President General of Opus Dei to 'Le Figaro' (Paris), 'Palabra' (Madrid), 'L'Osservatore della Domenica' (Rome), 'Time' (New York), 'Telva' (Madrid) and the 'New York Times'.

In these interviews, Mgr. Escriva has covered a good deal more ground than even his questioners anticipated. He has spoken at length about a variety of topics, including Opus Dei, and in doing so, he has answered many of the questions people ask about this Association.

In this booklet I have drawn up twenty such questions and I have selected quotations from Mgr. Escriva's words which provide the answers. In this way, Mgr. Escriva's authoritative explanations, of the Association he founded, is condensed into the space of a few pages.

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# 1

## What is Opus Dei?

Opus Dei is an international lay organisation to which a certain number of secular priests belong, although they are a small minority.

Its members are people who live in the world and hold normal jobs. They do not join Opus Dei to give up their job. On the contrary, what they look for in the Work is the spiritual help they need to sanctify their ordinary work. Thus their work becomes a means to sanctify themselves and help others to do the same thing.

They do not change their status. They continue being single, married, widowed or priests. What they try to do is serve God and their fellowmen in their own state in life.

# 2

## Why did you found Opus Dei?

Why? The only explanation for things that are born of God's will is that He has wanted to use them as an expression of His desire to save all men.

From the first moment, the Work was universal, catholic. It was born not to solve the concrete problems facing Europe in the twenties, but to tell men and women of every country and of every condition, race, language, milieu and state in life (single, married, widowed or priests) that they can love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life and their normal social relations.

# 3

## How was it founded?

Without any human means. I was a twenty-six year old priest with nothing but God's grace and good humour. The Work was born very small. It was only a young priest's desire to do what God asked of him.

## 4

What is Opus Dei trying to do?

Opus Dei aims to encourage people of every sector of society to desire holiness in the midst of the world. In other words, Opus Dei proposes to help ordinary citizens like yourself to lead a fully Christian life, without modifying their normal way of life, their daily work, their aspirations and ambitions.

## 5

If you had to put in a nutshell the doctrine of Opus Dei, how would you do it?

Ever since 1928 my preaching has been that sanctity 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 sanctification of ordinary work.

## 6

Could you tell me what you understand by sanctification of work?

It is difficult to explain it in a few words, because the expression "sanctifying work" involves fundamental concepts of the theology of Creation.

What I have always taught, over the last forty years, is that a Christian should do all honest human work, be it intellectual or manual, with the greatest perfection possible: with human perfection (professional competence) and with Christian perfection (for love of God's will and as a service to mankind).

Human work done in this manner, no matter how humble or insignificant it may seem, helps to shape the world in a Christian way. The world's divine dimension is made more visible and our human labour is thus incorporated into the marvellous work of Creation and Redemption. It is raised to the order of grace. It is sanctified and becomes God's work, *operatio Dei, opus Dei*.

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 human work which he chose as His state in 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.

## 7

### **From what backgrounds do the members of Opus Dei come?**

People of all social conditions belong to Opus Dei: men and women, old and young, workers, businessmen, clerks, farmers, members of the professions, etc. It is God who gives the vocation, and with God there is no distinction of persons.

### **What commitments do they make?**

Opus Dei is not interested in vows or promises. It asks its members to make an effort to practise human and Christian virtues, as children of God, despite the limitations and errors that are inevitable in human life.

## 9

### **What has it to offer its members?**

Opus Dei's main activity consists in offering its members, and other people, the spiritual means they need to live as good Christians in the midst of the world. It helps them to learn Christ's doctrine and the Church's teachings. Its spirit moves them to work well for the love of God and as a service to other men.

In a word, it helps them to behave like genuine Christians: being loyal friends, respecting the legitimate freedom of others, and trying to make our world more just.

## 10

### What do the members do?

Each member earns his living and serves society in the job he held before joining the Work and would hold if he did not belong to Opus Dei. There are miners, teachers, housewives, shopkeepers, university professors, secretaries, farmers, etc.

A member of Opus Dei can carry out any noble activity: no honest work is excluded.

## 11

### How does it supervise their work?

All the activity of Opus Dei's directors is based on a great respect for the member's professional freedom. This point is of capital importance. The Work's very existence depends on it, so no exceptions are admitted.

## 12

### What are the more outstanding moments in its development?

For me every time the Work helps a soul draw closer to God and therefore become more of a brother of his fellow men is an important milestone in the history of Opus Dei.

I could also mention some crucial dates. Although they may not be the most important, I will give you a few approximate ones by memory.

Early in 1935 we were ready to begin working in France, as a matter of fact in Paris. But then the Spanish Civil War broke out, and afterwards the Second World War, and we had to put off the expansion of the Work. But since expansion was necessary, the delay was minimal.

In 1940 our work in Portugal began. After a few preliminary trips in previous years, practically coinciding with the end of the hostilities it began in England, Italy, France, the United States and Mexico. Afterwards the rhythm of growth and expansion became more rapid.

From 1949/1950 on: in Germany, Ireland, Holland, Switzerland, Argentina, Canada, Venezuela and the other European and South American countries. Simultaneously we began in other continents: North Africa, Japan,

Kenya and the other East African countries, Australia, Phillipines, Nigeria.

I also like to recall the numerous occasions on which the Popes have shown more tangibly their affection for our Work. I have resided in Rome since 1946, so I have been fortunate enough to know personally Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI. All three of them have always shown truly paternal affection for us.

**How do you explain the expansion of Opus Dei?**

When an undertaking is supernatural its "success" or "failure" in the ordinary sense of the word is relatively unimportant. As Saint Paul said to the Christians at Corinth, what matters in the spiritual life is not what others think of us, or even our own opinion of ourselves, but God's opinion.

Undoubtedly the Work has spread all over the world. Men and women of close to seventy nationalities now belong to it. To tell the truth, it is something that surprises me. I cannot provide any human explanation for it.

The only explanation is the will of God, for "the Spirit breathes where He will" and He makes use of whomsoever He sees fit to sanctify men. For me it is an occasion for thanking, for humility and for asking God for the grace to serve Him always.

Why is Opus Dei talked about so much? Why is it branded as “a secret conspiracy?”

I detest everything that could sound like self-praise, but since you have brought up the subject I cannot fail to say that in my opinion Opus Dei is one of the best loved Catholic organisations in the world. Millions of people, and among them many non-Catholics and non-Christians, are good friends of the Work and help us in our apostolic activities.

Opus Dei is a spiritual and apostolic organisation. If one forgets this fundamental fact, or refuses to believe in the good faith of the members of the Work who affirm it, it is impossible to understand what we do. And this very lack of understanding can lead people to invent complicated stories and secrets which have never existed.

There are people who think that some become members seeking a position, a job, employment ....?

That is purely and simply an error.

Any advantage which is not exclusively spiritual is completely ruled out, because the Work **demand**s a **great deal** — detachment, sacrifice, self-denial, unceasing work in the service of souls — and **gives nothing**.

Nothing, that is, in terms of material advantages; because in the spiritual sphere it gives very much. It offers the means to fight and win in the ascetical struggle. It leads one along ways of prayer. It teaches one to treat Jesus as a brother, to see God in all the circumstances of one's life, to see oneself as a son of God and therefore to feel committed to spreading His teaching.

Anyone who does not progress along the way of the interior life, to the extent of realising that it is worth-while to give oneself in everything, will find it impossible to persevere in Opus Dei, because holiness is not just a nice-sounding phrase to be bandied about; it's a very demanding affair.

## 16

**Why do the members of the Work not publicise their work?**

Because they are ordinary faithful, the same as anyone else. They do not change their status when they join Opus Dei. It would be repulsive for them to carry a sign on their backs that said, "Let it be known that I am dedicated to the service of God" That would be neither lay nor secular.

But those who associate with members of Opus Dei and are acquainted with them realise that they belong to the Work, for, even if they do not publicise their membership, neither do they hide it.

## 17

**How is Opus Dei run? How is Opus Dei organised?**

Since, as I have just said, the vocation to the Work finds a man or a woman in his or her normal life, in the middle of their work, you can understand that Opus Dei is not built up on the basis of committees, assemblies, meetings, etc.

On occasion, to the surprise of some people, I have gone so far as to

say that Opus Dei in this sense, is **organised unorganisation**. The majority of the members, practically all in fact, live in the same place as they would have lived had they not been members of Opus Dei: in their home, with their family, in the place where they work.

The General Council, which is independent for each section – the men's and the women's – resides in Rome. A corresponding organisation exists in each country, presided over by the Counsellor of Opus Dei in that nation.

But do not imagine a powerful organisation, spread out like a vast network to the farthest corners of the world.

The work of the Directors is to see that all the members receive the genuine spirit of the Gospels (a spirit of charity, of harmony, of understanding all of which are absolutely foreign to extremism) by means of a solid and appropriate theological and apostolic training.



## What are the more important apostolic works?

I want to stress that the essential apostolate of Opus Dei is the apostolate each member carries out in his own place of work, with his family, among his friends – an apostolate which does not attract attention, which cannot easily be expressed in statistics but which yields holiness in thousands of souls who keep on following Christ quietly and effectively during their ordinary everyday work.

But I can add something about the apostolic activities the members of the Work run in different parts of the world – activities with spiritual aims in which they work with dedication and with **human perfection also**, and in which so many other people also co-operate: they may not be members of the Work but they appreciate the supernatural value of this activity – or its human value, as in the case of so many people who are not Christians and are such an effective help.

These are always lay, secular activities, the initiative of ordinary citizens using their civic rights in accordance with the law of the country; and they are always tackled in a professional way. In other words, they in no way

depend on privilege or special favour.

I am sure you know one of the projects of this kind being carried out in Rome: the ELIS Centre which gives technical and general human training to young people by means of schools, sports and cultural activities, libraries, etc. It is an activity which meets needs in Rome and in particular in the Tiburtino area. The same sort of thing is being done in Chicago, Madrid, Mexico and many other places.

## 19

**Is there any policy that would guarantee the continuity of the Work?**

The work is based not on enthusiasm but on faith. The early years were long years, and they were very hard. All we could see before us were difficulties. Opus Dei went ahead by the grace of God and by the prayer and sacrifice of the first few, despite the lack of material resources. All we had was youth, good humour and a desire to do God's will.

The guarantee against any cooling-down is that my sons and daughters should never lose this spirit. I fully realise that human undertakings get worn out with time, but this doesn't happen to divine undertakings unless men debase them.

Corruption and decay come only when the divine impetus is lost. In our case one can see clearly the Providence of the Lord which — in so short a time, forty years — has seen to it that this specific divine vocation should be received and lived by ordinary people (they're just the same as their fellow men) in so many different countries.

Undertakings inspired by God move at the pace of divine grace and in these my one and only recipe is this: to be saints, to want to become saints, with personal sanctity.

## 20

**How do you see the future of Opus Dei?**

The task that awaits us is immense. It is a sea without shores, for as long as there are men on earth, no matter how much the techniques of production may change, they will have some type of work that can be offered to God and sanctified. With God's grace, Opus Dei wants to teach them how to make their work an act of service to all men of every condition, race and religion. Serving men in this way, they will serve God.

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**Other works by or about Mgr. Escriva de Balaguer**

**The Way** A collection of 999 points of Christian spirituality.

**Holy Rosary** Meditations on the Holy Rosary and its fifteen mysteries.

**Christ is passing by** A collection of homilies delivered by Mgr. Escriva.

**Conversations with Mgr. Escriva** Interviews with noted international journalists given by Mgr. Escriva.

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