

Fifty Years Young

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It was recently reported in the national press that there was an Irish engineer among the sixty members of Opus Dei who were ordained to the priesthood on 15 August last. As Cardinal Koenig, the ordaining prelate, remarked in his homily: "Today, another link is added to the admirable chain of priestly ordinations of men who have years of experience in the most varied social and professional work. This unbroken series of ordinations is a great source of hope, especially in these times when the need for priests is felt keenly everywhere".

If it were only for the fact that, during his own lifetime, Mgr Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer had called nearly a thousand such men to the priesthood, the founder of Opus Dei would have been assured of an honoured place in the history of the Church. Yet when we consider that priests constitute less than two per cent of the total membership of the Association which he founded on 2 October 1928, we begin to understand a little more deeply the significance of the contribution made to the Church by Mgr Escrivá over the past fifty years.

VOCATION OF THE LAITY

Opus Dei (meaning Work of God) is an international Catholic Association which was founded in Madrid just fifty years ago.

"We have come", wrote Mgr Escrivá in 1930, "with the humility of one who knows he is of little account (. . .) but with the faith of one who allows himself to be guided by the hand of God, to preach that sanctity is not reserved for just a privileged few. All of us are called by God. He expects Love from all men, regardless of their state in life, their profession or trade. For their everyday life, ordinary and unassuming as it is, can be a means of sanctity". This was the core of Mgr Escrivá's spiritual message which he preached tirelessly from 1928.

While this teaching is now part of the common heritage of the Church, the opposition which his message encountered in the early years of the Work underlines the fact that he was indeed a pioneer in the field of lay spirituality. Subsequently, however, he had the joy of seeing his work of forty years of preaching on the fulness of the christian vocation of the laity confirmed by Vatican II. As Dr. Dominic Conway, bishop of Elphin, wrote on the first anniversary of Mgr Escrivá's death: "Opus Dei, has, of course, found its greatest support in the Second Vatican Council documents which 'canonise'

the basic principles of the Association calling for 'holiness right in the middle of the street' " (Irish Catholic, July 15, 1976). That this message was not simply a theoretical one is clear from the fact that at the time of his death in 1975, Opus Dei had more than 60,000 members, men and women, married and single, in all walks of life and from all parts of the world.

CHEERFULNESS AND DIVINE FILIATION

Josemaría Escrivá was born in 1902 in Barbastro, a small town near the southern foothills of the Pyrenean mountains. reared in a deeply christian home, afterwards he would often remember with gratitude and affection, the warmth of his family life and the human and christian virtues which he learned from his parents. In particular he admired the cheerfulness of his father who, despite the collapse of his small textile business and the subsequent financial strain on his family, retained to the end his sense of humour and his lightness of heart because of his filial trust in God. This was a quality which engraved itself in the heart and mind of the future founder of Opus Dei. The infectious good humour of Mgr Escrivá is one of the characteristics best remembered by those who had the good fortune to spend some time in his company. There was, however, something more to it than a very attractive sense of humour; his whole attitude to life was imbued with a deep awareness of God's fatherly providence. It was this sense of divine filiation which caused him never to lose his interior peace in spite of the external difficulties and misunderstandings he was to encounter when Opus Dei began to grow and spread. Only a few weeks before he died he opened his heart a little in conversation with a group of members of the Work on this very theme. "Whenever joy has come, the Lord has also made me feel the bitterness of being on earth. However, I have never been unhappy" (Profile, p. 167).

He pointed out this bitter-sweet aspect of happiness many years previously when he wrote in "The Way", "I want you to be happy here on earth. And you will not be happy if you don't lose that fear of suffering. For, as long as we are wayfarers, it is precisely in suffering that our happiness lies" (No. 217). He was saddened when he saw so many people try to satisfy their deep yearning for happiness in pursuits which could never satisfy and which often, in fact, degraded them. "People are unhappy", he commented in São Paulo in 1974. "They make a lot of noise, they sing and dance and shout, but they are weeping silently. Deep down in their hearts there is nothing but tears. They are not happy, they are miserable. And our Lord wants you and me to be happy" (Profile, p. 213).

He had a gift of getting to the hearts of people. He had a way of talking with such affection, and at the same time with such deep truth in his words, that he evoked in others not only a similar warmth of feeling but also, and more importantly for Mgr Escrivá, a practical commitment to be a better christian. His vocation and his message, simply put, was that we could not expect to be really happy on this earth unless we were making a determined effort to find Christ in our lives through the sanctification of our daily work and of our family life.

EARLY HISTORY

Mgr Escrivá used to recall that in the early years of his priestly ministry he spent many thousands of hours hearing children's Confessions in the poorer districts of Madrid. At that time, in the late twenties and the early thirties, he was chaplain to a charitable foundation which looked after fifty eight schools with 12,000 children in the poorer areas of the city. The records of this foundation show that in some of those years there were often as many as four thousand children making their First Communion. During the same period he found time to do regular visitation of the sick poor in their homes and to look after the patients of two large hospitals in Madrid. One of these was an institution for people suffering from diseases which at that time was incurable, many of them consumptives. He heard the confessions of the patients, shared his good humour with them, and taught them the supernatural value of suffering. He never had the slightest hesitation about visiting these hospitals, at any hour of the day or night, whenever his priestly service was needed. And he did all this in addition to the work that was involved in founding and setting up the association Opus Dei. As one reads in the Newsletter which gives information on the life, teaching and apostolic fruits of the Founder of Opus Dei, he later recalled, "These were very intense years in which Opus Dei was growing on the inside without our realising it. But I have wanted to tell you that the human strength of the Work has been the sick people in the hospitals in Madrid: the most forsaken ones . . . Those were the ambitions of Opus Dei, those were the human resources we used: incurably sick people, outcasts, children with no family or education, homes without heat, or human warmth or love. And, hand in hand with that, I was training the first people who came along, telling them with total confidence all the things we were going to do, as if they had already been done. . . . (Newsletter No. 2, p. 6).

SANCTIFICATION OF DAILY WORK

The sanctification of work is the key feature of the spirituality of

Opus Dei. The constant preaching of the founder of the Work was that, for ordinary men and women in the world, holiness was to be found in and through their daily work, in the way they imitated the thirty years of the hidden life of Jesus Christ. "Our Lord", he commented in 1966 in an interview with the New York Times, "gave rise to Opus Dei in 1928 to remind Christians that, as we read in the Book of Genesis, God created man to work. We have come to call attention once again to the example of Jesus, who spent thirty years in Nazareth, working as a carpenter. In his hands, a daily occupation similar to that carried out by millions of men in the world, was turned into a divine task. It became part of our redemption, a way to salvation".

"The spirit of Opus Dei", he continues, "reflects the marvellous reality (forgotten for centuries by many Christians) that any honest and worthwhile work can be converted into a divine occupation. In God's service there are no second-class jobs; all of them are important. To love and serve God, there is no need to do anything strange or extraordinary. Christ bids all men without exception to be perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect. Sanctity for the vast majority of men implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it. Thus they can encounter God in the course of their daily lives" (Conversations, p. 65).

UNIVERSALITY

Opus Dei was founded in Madrid, Spain, and from the very beginning it was, so to speak, moving outward. In 1935 plans were ready to begin the Work in France, but the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, followed by World War II, delayed this development. However, in 1940 apostolic work began in Portugal and, shortly after the war, the apostolate of Opus Dei was established in England, France, Italy, United States and Mexico. The first people of the work arrived in Ireland in 1947 and Nullamore University Residence in Dublin was one of the first centres of Opus Dei set up in this country. Apart from the Dublin based centres there are also corporate apostolates in Galway and conference centres near Navan (Lismullin) and Tuam (Ballyglunin). In addition there are a number of city youth centres and clubs where the spiritual formation is provided by Opus Dei. More important, however, is the personal work of each of the members. They try to become holy and do apostolate in and through their jobs and in the carrying out of their family and civic duties. From 1950 onwards the geographical spread of Opus Dei continued: Holland, Argentina, Canada, and other countries of Europe and America as well as Kenya, Japan, Australia, the Philippines and

Nigeria. In 1946 Mgr Escrivá moved to Rome where he set up the central government of the Association, residing there until his death in 1975.

LOVE FOR THE POPE

Reference to Rome inevitably recalls Mgr Escrivá's love for the Pope — "the sweet Christ on earth", as he used to refer to him in the words of St. Catherine of Siena. Although it was not until 1946 that he had the opportunity of making his first visit to Rome, some twelve years earlier he had written in "The Way", "I want you to be very Roman. And to be anxious to make your 'path to Rome' *videre Petrum* — to see Peter" (no. 520). One can imagine the joy and the expectation which must have filled his heart at his first glimpse of the Eternal City. The veranda of his apartment opened on to St. Peter's Square; there he spent the whole of his first night in Rome in prayer, looking towards the residence of the Vicar of Christ on earth. This incident merely reflected what Mgr Escrivá lived with all his heart, and what he has inculcated in all his sons and daughters in Opus Dei. "When you are old", he remarked on one occasion to some of his sons in Opus Dei, "and I have already rendered my account to God, you will tell how the Father loved the Pope with all his soul, with all his strength" (Profile, p. 90). On the morning of June 26, 1975, less than two hours before he died, he spoke to the students of a graduate college of the Women's Section of Opus Dei in Castlegandolfo. Approximately his last words to them were an encouragement to love the Church and the Pope very much.

HIS WRITINGS

Even a brief commentary on the life of Josemaría Escrivá would be incomplete without some reference to his writings. We have already quoted from "The Way", which has now become a best-seller in the field of spiritual literature, having sold more than two and a half million copies in 34 languages. His commentary on the fifteen mysteries of the rosary, entitled "Holy Rosary", has also been published in many languages. In 1968, the texts of some interviews given to journalists from a number of countries were gathered together in "Conversations with Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer". As one would expect fifty years of preaching has produced a great deal of material. The first volume of Mgr Escrivá's homilies was published in 1974 under the title "Christ is Passing By" and a second volume entitled "Friends of God" is already in preparation. The style is simple and direct, and if read with an open mind his writings confront one squarely with the responsibility of doing something practical to

improve one's life as a Christian. The approach is always positive, and the theological depth is elegantly disguised by the warm richness of his humanity.

DEVOTION TO OUR LADY

In a year which sees the opening of the centenary celebrations to honour Our Lady of Knock it seems fitting to recall the encouragement which Mgr Escrivá gave to devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Here again he showed the way with his example. He made frequent visits to shrines of Our Lady and encouraged countless thousands to do likewise. On many occasions he commented that Our Lady had been the great protectress of Opus Dei from its foundation in 1928, and even before. At a time of painful persecution, in an act of filial homage and trust, he consecrated Opus Dei to the Most Sweet Heart of Mary at the shrine of our Lady of Loreto on the feast of the Assumption 1951. His devotion to our Lady was doctrinal, based on twenty centuries of magisterial Church teaching on the role of Mary in the Redemption. Yet, at the same time, it expressed itself with all the confidence and affection proper to a loving son. "Say to her", he tells us, "Mother, my Mother — yours, because you are hers on many counts — may your love bind me to your Son's Cross: may I not lack the Faith, nor the courage, nor the daring, to carry out the will of our Jesus" (The Way, no. 497).

THE FATHER

It was in a sense appropriate that the man whose special vocation it was to teach us the sanctifying value of daily work should be taken from this world in the room where he normally worked. He is buried in the crypt of the oratory of Our Lady of Peace in the central offices of Opus Dei in Rome. During the past three years since his death on 26 June 1975, a daily stream of people from all parts of the world have come to pray beside his tomb, covered with a plain marble slab, on which is inscribed just two words, "El Padre", The Father, as he was known to all his sons and daughters, and to countless others who benefited from the warmth of his spirit. Mgr Escrivá, a man who avoided publicity all during his life, cannot now prevent his reputation for sanctity making itself known. In the short period since his death private devotion to him has spread throughout the world and, increasingly, people are writing to acknowledge favours revived through his intercession. Favours of all sorts, material and spiritual, particularly the grace of people making their peace with God, sometimes after many years absence from the sacraments. It is only

fitting, I suppose, that a man who preached so much about the sacrament of Penance should be particularly effective in obtaining for many the favour of a return to the life of grace, the only life, which, he so often reminded us, is appropriate for a Christian.

RETREATS

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