

# Personal Prelatures and Opus Dei

John Flader\*

A perusal of Part I, 'De Christifidelibus', of Book II, 'De Populo Dei' of the new Code reveals a new institution not found in the former Code: the personal prelatures.

Indeed, personal prelatures were first mentioned in the Second Vatican Council in the Decree 'Presbyterorum ordinis', No. 10, 'to answer better to the pastoral needs of today', and 'to facilitate specific pastoral activities with different social groups in some regions or nations, or indeed worldwide'.

Later, the juridical bases established by the Council were to be authentically interpreted and applied by Pope Paul VI in the *Motu proprio* 'Ecclesiae Sanctae', of the 6th August 1966, and, as regards the dependence of the prelatures on the Holy See, in the Apostolic Constitution 'Regimini Ecclesiae Universae', of the 15th August 1967.

In 'Ecclesiae Sanctae', Part I, No. 4, Paul VI explains that personal prelatures 'would consist of the secular clergy specially trained and under the rule of a prelate of their own and governed by statutes of their own', and that 'there is no reason why laymen, whether celibate or married, should not dedicate their professional service, through contracts with the prelate, to its works and enterprises.'

The incorporation of laymen into personal prelatures, in the words of Mgr Marcello Costalunga, Undersecretary of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, 'is in perfect harmony with the opening of the ecclesial horizons brought about by the Council, in underlining the fact that the apostolic mission of the Church cannot be reduced to the actions of the hierarchy, and it thus recognized and encouraged the role of the laity in the unity of this mission.'<sup>1</sup>

The norms laid down in 'Ecclesiae Sanctae' form the basis for the four canons on personal prelatures in the new Code. Personal prelatures are to be erected by the Holy See, after having heard the views of the respective Episcopal Conferences (Can.294). They are governed according to statutes sanctioned by the Holy See, and are presided over by a Prelate as their proper Ordinary, who may incardinate priests and must look after their

\*Rev Father John Flader, B.A., D.C.L., is a chaplain of Warrane College, U.N.S.W.

1. Mgr M. Costalunga, 'The establishment of Opus Dei as a personal prelate', in

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spiritual and temporal welfare (Can.295). Lay people can dedicate themselves by means of a contractual agreement, to the apostolic activities of the prelature (Can.296). And the statutes are to determine the relations of the prelature with the Ordinaries of the places in which the prelature works, with the prior consent of the Ordinaries (Can.297).

### The First Personal Prelature Erected

Although the norms governing personal prelatures were laid down in 1966, for the next sixteen years they were to remain as a mere possibility contemplated by the law. On the first Sunday of Advent, 28 November 1982, they were applied for the first time to an existing institution, with the erection of Opus Dei as the first personal prelature.

This step was taken only after a long and thorough study, as is only to be expected in a decision which has been called 'a milestone in the growth promoted by the Council in doctrinal and juridical matters'.<sup>2</sup>

The study was begun in 1969, when Pope Paul VI advised the Founder of Opus Dei, Mgr Escriva de Balaguer, to convoke the Special General Congress which set in motion the study necessary to transform Opus Dei into a personal prelature. Following the death of Mgr Escriva in 1975 and of Paul VI in 1978, these studies were expressly confirmed and encouraged by Popes John Paul I and John Paul II.

In 1979 Pope John Paul II entrusted the matter to the competent Congregation of the Roman Curia, the Sacred Congregation for Bishops. Over the next two years all the relevant historical, doctrinal and pastoral aspects of the problem were gone into attentively. The results of this study, collected in two volumes totalling 600 pages, were then submitted to the examination and collegial decision of a committee of cardinals. On the basis of the advice of this committee, Pope John Paul II in November 1981 ordered the opportune steps to be taken to erect Opus Dei as a personal prelature.

Following the norm of the 'Ecclesiae Sanctae' that 'such prelatures shall not be erected without first hearing the views of the episcopal conferences of the territory in which they will serve',<sup>3</sup> the Pope then directed that, before the practical application of the decision, an explanatory notification be sent to more than 2,000 diocesan bishops in the countries in which Opus Dei has erected centres, so that the bishops could present their observations and suggestions. Although the majority of the replies manifested satisfaction, those which contained observations or requests for clarification were all taken into due account and requests for further explanations were satisfied.<sup>4</sup>

Following this consultation of the bishops a new detailed study of the statutes of Opus Dei drawn up by Mgr Escriva was carried out, which 'confirmed their validity and soundness, and showed clearly the foundational

2. M. Costalunga, op. cit.

3. Pope Paul VI, *Motu proprio* 'Ecclesiae sanctae', 6 August 1966, No. 4. Cfr. also C.I.C., Can. 294.

4. Cfr. Costalunga, op. cit.

charism of the Servant of God and his great love for the Church.’<sup>5</sup>

The announcement of the papal decision to erect Opus Dei as a personal prelature was made on 23 August 1982. A Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops on the new prelature was dated the same day, and finally the Apostolic Constitution ‘Ut sit’ of Pope John Paul II, which formally erected the prelature, was signed on 28 November 1982.

### Reasons for the decision

As is well known, Opus Dei, which was founded in 1928 and has since spread throughout the world, is composed of ordinary lay men and women and secular priests who strive to sanctify themselves and to do personal apostolate in and through the ordinary circumstances of their life. They are of all walks of life and most of them are married. At present they number some 73,000, of 87 nationalities.

Their dedication to Opus Dei, which involves a specific divine vocation and lifetime commitment, does not change their status of ordinary lay faithful or secular priests.

This distinctly secular vocation demanded a secular juridical configuration, which until the Second Vatican Council was not possible in the law of the Church for the simple reason that it did not exist.

As has often happened in the history of the Church, the Holy Spirit acts first, giving rise to new forms of life, and only afterward does the law come to protect and assist what already existed in fact. Only when the law is adapted to the foundational charism can each institution develop its full apostolic potential in the service of the Church.

In the above-mentioned Apostolic Constitution ‘Ut sit’, the Pope outlines how Opus Dei, founded ‘by divine inspiration’ in 1928, has since grown and spread throughout the world, so that now ‘it has become necessary to give it a juridical configuration which is suited to its specific characteristics.’

He goes on to say that, from the time when the Second Vatican Council first introduced the figure of the personal prelatures into the legislation of the Church, ‘it was seen clearly that this juridical figure was perfectly suited to Opus Dei’.

And so the papal decision finally gives Opus Dei a clearly secular juridical configuration in keeping with its foundational charism. In so doing it ‘makes the insertion of the institution in the organic pastoral activity of the universal Church and of the local Churches even more perfect, and in that way renders its service more effective’.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the decision not only solves the institutional problem of Opus Dei, but also ‘is directly aimed at promoting the apostolic activity of the Church,

5. Ibid.

6. Declaration of the S. Cong. for Bishops, 23 August 1982, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 17 January 1983.

inasmuch as it puts into operation a new pastoral instrument, which up to now was only foreseen and desired in the law of the Church, and it does so through an institution which offers proven guarantees of apostolic vigour, discipline and faithfulness to the teaching of the Church'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Structure of the prelature**

Since *Opus Dei* is the first personal prelature to be approved, a brief examination of the principal features of its juridical structure will be of interest.

The prelature is composed of the prelate, the clergy, and the laity of the prelature.

The prelate has ordinary power of jurisdiction limited to what refers to the specific finality of the prelature.<sup>8</sup> As well as the government of the clergy of the prelature, the jurisdiction of the prelate includes the general direction of the formation and of the specific apostolic and spiritual attention of the laity, to help them live a more intense dedication in the service of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

The clergy incardinated in the prelature, who at present number somewhat more than 1,000, are derived from the laity incorporated in the prelature, so that no candidate for the priesthood is withdrawn from the local Churches.<sup>10</sup>

The incardinated clergy belong to the secular clergy to all effects, and therefore maintain close relations with secular priests of the local Churches.<sup>11</sup>

The laity who dedicate themselves to the service of the apostolic purpose of the prelature, with a serious commitment, do so in virtue of a clearly defined contract, and not by vows.<sup>12</sup>

Their incorporation in the prelature does not alter their personal situation, canonically or theologically. They continue to be ordinary lay faithful and act accordingly in all matters, and, specifically, in their apostolate.<sup>13</sup>

In the aims and spirit of *Opus Dei*, stress is laid on the sanctifying value of ordinary work, that is to say, on the obligation to sanctify work, to sanctify oneself in one's work, and to turn it into an instrument of the apostolate. Therefore, the work and apostolate of the members are normally carried out in the structure and environment of secular society.<sup>14</sup>

As regards decisions in professional, social, political matters, etc, the lay faithful of the prelature enjoy the same freedom as other Catholics, their

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, III(a).

9. *Ibid.*, III(b).

10. *Ibid.*, I(b).

11. *Ibid.*, II(a).

12. *Ibid.*, I(c).

13. *Ibid.*, II(b).

14. *Ibid.*, II(c).

fellow citizens. Hence the prelature does not make itself responsible for the professional, political or economic activities of any of its members.<sup>15</sup>

### Relations with the local Church

Cardinal Baggio, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, in an article on the new prelature, explains that this act of the Pope 'perfects further the harmonious insertion of Opus Dei in the organizational structures of the universal Church and in the organic pastoral activity of the local Churches, ensuring a most careful respect for all the legitimate rights of the diocesan bishops'.<sup>16</sup>

How does the prelature relate to the local Church?

At the outset it must be made clear that personal prelatures are based on the principle of insertion into the local Church. In this they differ essentially from the personal dioceses, such as those constituted for the faithful of a particular rite, and from the military vicariates, which are both based on the principle of independence or autonomy in regard to the local Churches.<sup>17</sup>

A first consequence of this principle is that the members of Opus Dei, far from being exempt from the jurisdiction of the local Ordinary, are subject to him in the same way as are all the other faithful of the diocese. They are in the diocese and members of the diocese in the same way as their fellow Catholics. This is very important for a proper understanding of Opus Dei for only in this way are the members seen to be ordinary Catholic faithful.

Nor are the members subject to a double jurisdiction — that of the local Ordinary and that of the Prelate — in any one matter. They are subject to the Ordinary in everything that is of the competence of the local hierarchy, and to the Prelate only as regards their commitments to the aims of the prelature.

The aims of the prelature are twofold: the spiritual and apostolic formation of its members and the apostolate which all the members of the prelature carry out of 'helping to bring about — in all sectors of society — a deep consciousness of the universal call to sanctity and apostolate and, more specifically, of the sanctifying value of ordinary work'.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, it is only as regards their personal formation and their apostolate that the members of Opus Dei are subject to the jurisdiction of the prelate.

Moreover, in the words of the Prelate of Opus Dei, Mgr Alvaro del Portillo, 'Their being subject to the Prelate of Opus Dei, in regard to the spiritual and apostolic commitments assumed on incorporation to the Prelature, strengthens their union with the diocesan Bishop, since the Work helps them to strive to be exemplary Catholic faithful and citizens'.<sup>19</sup>

15. Ibid., II(d).

16. Card. S. Baggio, 'A Benefit for the Whole Church', in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed., 17 January 1983.

17. Cfr M. Costalunga, op. cit.

18. Mgr. A. del Portillo, interview with *ABC*, Madrid, 29 November 1982, p. 26.

19. Ibid.

The new juridical configuration of Opus Dei leaves unchanged the institution's relations with the local hierarchy.

The prior permission of the diocesan bishop is required for the erection of each centre of the prelature, and the bishop is informed regularly about the activities of those centres. In each country the prelature is to maintain regular contact with the president and with the organisms of the episcopal conference, and have frequent contact with the bishops of the dioceses in which the prelature is established.<sup>20</sup>

### A service to the Church

An attentive reading of the official documents on the new prelature and, indeed, an understanding of the spirit of Opus Dei, leaves very clear that the desire of serving the local Churches and co-ordinating in a more effective way the activity of the prelature with the pastoral activity of the dioceses is a principal aim of the prelature.

The Founder of Opus Dei loved to repeat that Opus Dei wants 'to serve the Church as the Church wants to be served'.

This it does primarily by the efforts of its members to strive for personal holiness and to help others to discover the universal call to holiness.

This apostolate is carried out principally by the members acting *as individuals*, on their own responsibility, each one in his or her own family, professional or social environment. Scattered throughout the diocese, throughout the secular environment of factories, offices, schools, societies, etc, like leaven in the dough, they endeavour to make Christ present to their fellow citizens.

They are prepared for this apostolate by an intense and lifelong specific formation given by the prelature. This formation, which is given both individually and in small groups, covers doctrinal, ascetical, human and apostolic aspects.

In addition to giving formation to its members, the prelature through its various centres, also offers numerous formative activities for people who are not members of Opus Dei, thus helping them as well to strive for holiness and to be more apostolic.

The Prelate of Opus Dei recently summed up this contribution to the local Churches: 'It is a great blessing from God for any diocese to be able to count on a good number of Christians, highly respected in their professional work, who try to live a life of intense prayer and to give a sincere Christian witness, despite their personal limitations. Keep in mind also that these men and women try to transmit their ideals to their relatives, colleagues and friends. They bring them to the sacraments, to the life of grace, and to a more intense participation in the activities of their respective parish communities.'

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20. Declaration of the S. Cong. for Bishops, op. cit., V. (a) and (c).  
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'The dioceses benefit from the Christian families that those men and women form, and from the vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life that come from those homes. Society also stands to gain because of the educational undertakings and welfare activities initiated by members of Opus Dei all over the world, in co-operation with many other people, including non-Catholics and non-Christians.'<sup>21</sup>

Amongst these educational and welfare undertakings are universities, university colleges and residences, primary and high schools, schools for farmers and tradesmen, etc.

In addition to the formation given to the laity of the diocese, Opus Dei also conducts activities for the diocesan clergy: retreats, days of recollection, etc.

Moreover, diocesan priests who wish to strive for sanctity in accordance with the spirituality of Opus Dei may form part of the Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross, an association inseparably united to the prelate. These priests do not form part of the clergy of the prelate, and remain fully under the jurisdiction of their local Ordinary.<sup>22</sup> They are helped by the association to deepen their spiritual life and thus to be more effective in their priestly ministry.

As is clear, the institution of the personal prelate can be a very effective instrument in the service of the Church. It is one more sign of the action of the Holy Spirit in giving rise to new juridical structures to respond to the new pastoral needs of the Church of each age.

21. Mgr. A. del Portillo, *op. cit.*

22. Declaration of the S. Cong. for Bishops, *op. cit.*, VI.