

THE GRACE FROM OUR DAILY BREAD

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This article highlights aspects of the spirituality of Opus Dei: divine filiation, the supernatural and human value of work, man's free response to God, unity of life, and the Christian's desire to imbue society with Gospel values.

PEOPLE WHO KNOW that I spent years working on Park Avenue and Wall Street with Citibank and Merrill Lynch often assume I had a "late vocation" to the priesthood and that I was fleeing the evil world of the masters of the universe for godly clerical work. I assure them I had already completely dedicated myself to God many years before as a layman and that it was possible, indeed imperative, for us all to seek holiness in the midst of everyday life whatever our professional or familial situation. That is the core message of the Opus Dei Prelature, to whose presbyterate I belong.

Indeed that message also lies at the heart of the Second Vatican Council. Contrary to many distorted interpretations, the council was not principally about the role of the layperson in the church but rather about the role of the lay Catholic in the world, an essential distinction and one with many profound consequences for both society and culture.

It is no secret that, while all the Roman pontiffs whose reigns have coincided with the growth and development of Opus Dei since 1928, have highly approved of its message and mission, John

Paul II, perhaps as a result of his varied work and educational background, has grasped its importance in a deeper fashion. The pope has played an essential role in encouraging its development through granting its definitive juridical status as a personal prelature, establishing the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and finally preparing to canonize its founder, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on October 6 next.

The soon-to-be Saint Josemaría's teachings are rooted in the concept of divine filiation, the reality that all men are children of God. Hence their rights and responsibilities before God, the Church and society. They possess an inalienable right to life and through God's grace the privilege of living a life here on Earth directed toward an eternal destiny. This teaching anticipates the pope's emphasis on the "dignity of the human person from conception to natural death" as the yardstick by which the health of any society can be measured.

The pope has defined work, as "anything useful to man". This is the hinge on which the spirituality of Opus Dei is based. For centuries, the worth of human work as an essential means for the ordinary Christian to grow in God's

grace was largely ignored in Catholic spirituality. The Catholic spiritual elite was the priesthood or religious life and the laity were relegated to second-class citizenship in the church; “to hunt, shoot and entertain” in the words of a Roman prelate to Cardinal John Henry Newman in the 19th century. Blessed Josemaría conceived of human work of any sort as ennobling, both as a means of service to family and society and as a way available to all to give glory to God. This spirituality has proved to be of interest to Christians and non-Christian alike.

Blessed Josemaría also placed a strong emphasis on the worth of human freedom as a God-given gift, abhorring any and all efforts to coerce the conscience of individual people. Like him, John Paul II has insisted on the importance of freedom and responsibility, always in the context of prudential action, respecting both the natural law and divine revelation.

True freedom consists in furthering the dignity of the human person inside the family. They would both agree with Lord Acton, who said: “No country can be free without religion.”

Addressing members of Opus Dei in 1979 soon after his election, John Paul II said that “Opus Dei anticipated the theology of the laity of the Second Vatican Council.” Blessed Josemaría Escrivá insisted that this elevation of the worth of work be integrated with one’s family and spiritual life in what he called a “unity of life”, a phrase also later integrated into the teachings of the Church

in its synodal document on the role of the laity, *Christifideles laici*.

In Blessed Josemaría’s words:

We cannot lead a double life. We cannot be like schizophrenics. If we want to be Christians, there is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life that has to become, in both body and soul, holy and filled with God. We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.

Blessed Josemaría’s greatest work is the reality of the Opus Dei Prelature itself, which reaches millions of people in all continents through its program of personal formation. It instills in them the perennial teachings of the Church along with the particular insights of Blessed Josemaría regarding the centrality of piety, work and Christian witness. In addition, there have arisen hundreds of initiatives undertaken by members of Opus Dei and their friends to remedy glaring social needs according to particular situations: universities, inner-city development programs, rural farm schools, etc., all done professionally but in a spirit of selfless service. Here in Ireland one can find these initiatives in Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Derry and Belfast.

It is said that Pope Leo XIII, the first ‘modern’ pope and the most eloquent exponent of the social teachings of the Church, had a premonition in the late 1880s that God would allow the forces of evil free rein for a century. We have seen the result and perhaps the collapse of communism in 1989 was the end of that century of unparalleled warfare and mass murder.

John Paul II believes that the message of Blessed Josemaría is a means to assure in God's providence that, as we pass beyond the millennium, the future will be more reflective of the goodness of God and the dignity of man. This and only this can prevent a slide into a high-tech barbarism.

Pope John Paul II played a crucial role in the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe. He now views as his final struggle the rescue of the formerly Christian West from a hedonistic materialism that threatens civilization as surely as Godless Marxism did. The ideology of the Bolshevik Revolution

having collapsed, the ideological excesses of the post-modern era must be the next to go. Blessed Josemaría's emphasis on a true spirituality of work and ordinary life can provide an energizing purpose in evangelization efforts in both East and West.

As Christopher Dawson put it:

A society which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture.

Only a nation that is firmly rooted in a strong religious belief which plays an important role in influencing personal behaviour can flourish or even survive.

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