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The Spiritual, Pastoral and Juridical Characteristics of *Opus Dei*

Introduction

THE recent beatification of Monsignor Josemaria Escriva, Founder of *Opus Dei*, has been widely publicized in the mass media. Even some publications which are normally indifferent to Catholic news, devoted space to comment on this ecclesial event, sometimes offering opinions that were not always favourable. The life of Monsignor Escriva, spanning seventy three years, is intimately linked to *Opus Dei*, which he founded when he was twenty six years old and three and a half years a priest.

Opus Dei aspires to incarnate the message that Monsignor Escriva preached ever since he received his vocation. According to Pope Paul VI:

The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, better known simply as *Opus Dei*, has arisen in our time as a living expression of the perennial youthfulness of the Church which is fully open to the demands of today's apostolate.¹

It brings a message of evangelization addressed to the laity proclaiming that they can and ought to seek holiness in the framework of their ordinary life. The lay person is, on account of the grace received in Baptism, the object of a divine choice and is called to sanctify his/her

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work and to carry out an apostolate within the ordinary structures of society. The Apostolic Constitution, *Ut Sit*, by Pope John Paul II, states:

From its beginnings, this Institution has in fact striven, not only to illuminate with new lights the mission of the laity in the Church and in society, but also to put it into practice; it has also endeavoured to put into practice the teaching of the universal call to sanctity, and to promote at all levels of society the sanctification of ordinary work, and by means of ordinary work. *Opus Dei* is a pastoral phenomenon that has grown, with the help of divine grace, to the extent that it has spread and works in a large number of dioceses throughout the world.²

The Spiritual Characteristics

Sanctifying work

Opus Dei is a spiritual reality. Its spirit is, in the first place, a spirit of sanctification of ordinary life; there is no separation between what is human and what is supernatural. The call to the fullness of Christian life is universal; it is directed to everyone. Christians, as Blessed Josemaria Escrivá used to say, have to place Christ at the summit of all human activities.

The aim of *Opus Dei* is, therefore, sanctification by means of the fulfilment of each one's work. The Founder of *Opus Dei* always preached this truth, which flowed from his intimate relationship with God. He spoke with firmness and conviction in defense of human work, for he knew that work can and should be work of God. As he wrote in his book, *Christ Is Passing By*:

It is time for us Christians to shout from the roof-tops that work is a gift from God and that it makes no sense to classify men differently, according to their occupation, as if some jobs were nobler than others.³

The starting point of *Opus Dei* is, then, that all human beings have been created to work,⁴ and, at the same time, that all men and women are called to become saints. *Opus Dei* finds people right where God has placed them: in human society where they are called to work for the good of all and in the Church where they are called to sanctity for the salvation of all. How is work sanctified? In the words of Blessed Escriva:

It is difficult to explain 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 and 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*".⁵

This understanding of work is something new and quite unprecedented in the history of spirituality. As Illanes writes in his book, *On the Theology of Work: Aspects of The Teaching of The Founder of Opus Dei*:

For, in the first place, it views work not as a mere ascetical device, nor just as the setting in which a person lives — but as something which can be sanctified. . . [In addition], the spirit of *Opus Dei* speaks not just of work, but of work in the world, carried out by people who are men and women of the world: everyday, professional, lay, secular work.⁶

Unity of life

This can be considered a central point in the spirit of *Opus Dei*. The faithful of the *Opus Dei Prelature* are encouraged and taught to live *the unity of the Christian life*, as it is stated in the *Decree of the heroic virtues of the Founder of Opus Dei*:

His vivid perception of the mystery of the Incarnation made him realise that the entire fabric of human existence is intimately linked, in the hearts of those reborn in Christ, with the whole economy of the supernatural life, and thus it becomes the very place and means to attain holiness. From the late 1920's onwards the Servant of God was a real pioneer of the intrinsic unity of Christian life, proclaiming the fullness of a contemplative life 'in the middle of the street', and calling all the faithful to take an active part in the apostolates of the Church from the place each one occupies in the world.⁷

The concept of *unity of life* is relatively new in theological language and even in the documents of the Church.⁸ In any case, the idea of *unity of life* has a tremendous importance in the present and future theology of the vocation of the laity, and in their spirituality. It may be enough here to make a few remarks, beginning with a quotation from the Founder of *Opus Dei*:

Have no doubt: any kind of evasion from the honest realities of daily life is for you, men and women of the world, something opposed to the will of God. On the contrary, you must understand now more clearly that God is calling you to serve Him *in* and *from* the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life. He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work. Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each of you to discover it.⁹

If we look at *unity of life* from the point of view of the Incarnation, we could give a parallelism to help explain the point better. We can consider that, just as the Holy Humanity of Christ is the united

instrument for His Divine Person to carry out the Redemption, so professional work and all connected human relations are the instrument for each Christian to collaborate in Christ's Redemption — united to God through grace and contemplation. Jesus Christ used His human nature to communicate with us, to suffer for us and to sanctify us through the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments. In a parallel manner, a Christian could use his or her own professional work, ordinary relationships with colleagues and friends, with family members and neighbours to draw them to God, to the Church and to the Sacraments.

If we look at *unity of life* from the point of view of the theology of the Holy Trinity, we could consider another parallelism. The Divine Persons, in the unity of their *operationes ad extra*, carry out the works of Creation, Redemption and Sanctification, with a special part played in each of them by each of the Persons. In a similar way the Christian finds in his or her daily work an opportunity to collaborate with God the Father in the work of Creation; in the daily sufferings and Cross, an occasion to collaborate with the Son in the work of Redemption; and in the joyful relationships with his or her fellow human beings, a chance to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in the work of Sanctification. We do not intend to develop here the rich theological content of the *unity of life*. It is enough to say that as this doctrine finds its place in the daily life of an increasing number of Christians, the fruits for the good of humankind will be immense, as Pope John Paul II has pointed out.¹⁰ Illanes further states in, *On the Theology of Work: Aspects of the Teaching of the Founder of Opus Dei* that:

The spirit of *Opus Dei* "does not speak of a life of work and a life of holiness regarded as two different worlds, set on different planes, but of a genuine *unity of life*: it is through work itself, through the job which each person carries out, that he or she meets God."¹¹

Divine Filiation

It would be enough to open the books of Monsignor Escriva to see the tremendous importance he always gave to the sense of divine filiation. As the *Decree on the heroic virtues* states:

Constantly immersed in contemplating the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, he placed a sense of divine filiation in Christ as the foundation of a spirituality in which the fortitude of faith and the apostolic daring of charity are harmoniously united with filial abandonment to the Father.¹²

By considering frequently this fact, Christians are led to a deep awareness of the presence of God, to a great love for the world created by God and to the affairs of God in the world — the sanctification and salvation of all men and women. It gives them a sense of personal freedom and responsibility and fills them with serenity, optimism and peace in their daily acceptance of the will of their Father, God. It leads them to the imitation of Christ and to the offering of their work, in and through the sacrifice of Christ renewed in the Holy Mass, to God for the salvation of the world.¹³ As Blessed Escriva stated in a homily in 1952:

Divine filiation is a joyful truth, a consoling mystery. It fills all our spiritual life, it shows us how to speak to God, to know and to love our Father in heaven. And it makes our interior struggle overflow with hope and gives us the trusting simplicity of little children. More than that: precisely because we are children of God, we can contemplate in love and wonder all things, which have come from the hands of our Father, God the Creator. And so we become contemplatives in the middle of the world, loving the world.¹⁴

Some Pastoral Characteristics of the Apostolate of *Opus Dei*

The aims of the *Opus Dei Prelature* have been described as *doubly pastoral*: in *20 Questions to Msgr. Alvano del Partillo, Prelate of Opus Dei as follows*:

The Prelature and his clergy carry out a particular pastoral work in the service of the laity of the prelate, who are clearly defined;

while the whole prelature, clergy and laity together, engage in a specific apostolate in the service of the universal Church and of the local Churches.¹⁵

This specific apostolate is carried out personally by the members of *Opus Dei*, each one in his or her own “place” in life — that is to say, in their work and family, and in every circumstance of their lives. *Opus Dei* gives them spiritual and doctrinal training and encouragement to persevere in their search for sanctity and in their apostolic work among their fellow people. This opens up new perspectives to the Church’s pastoral activity as each member of the prelature becomes a pastoral agent, who in a “natural” way, is called to bring Christ to every corner of his or her life. This is the main apostolic impact of *Opus Dei*; an impact that is not easy to visualize, just as life itself escapes quantification.

To facilitate this personal apostolate, the prelature encourages its faithful to set up *corporate undertakings*. The Bishop Prelate of *Opus Dei* once said in an interview:

These are activities of a civil nature: initiated and carried out in a professional way by members of *Opus Dei* together with other citizens, including non-Christians. *Opus Dei* takes part exclusively in the spiritual and doctrinal formation of the people involved in those activities, because they ask the Prelature to take part in it. ¹⁶

A number of such institutions in the fields of education, social welfare, professional and technical training, with a strong preference towards assisting the less privileged, are well known in Africa.

The pastoral activity of the prelature fits with the African culture, or any other culture, since it is carried out mostly by lay people who are the protagonists of that particular culture. The faithful of *Opus Dei* involved in its corporate activities ensure that the local cultures are respected. “*Opus Dei* is open to people of every political, social, cultural and economic option that a Christian conscience can accept” said Monsignor Escrivá.¹⁷

In this way, close collaboration arises between the Prelature and the dioceses. Blessed Escriva liked to repeat that *Opus Dei* works in the same direction as the diocesan bishop, “pulling the cart together”. It gave him great joy to realize that most of the fruits of the apostolic efforts of the work remained in the very same diocese. The priorities of the bishops are the priorities of the Prelature: in this there is no overlapping of responsibilities. So, as an example: What is the approach of *Opus Dei* towards the Small Christian Communities, the pastoral priority of the AMECEA bishops? The answer is simple: whatever the Bishops decide. The lay members play their own part in the parish or diocese, helping to build up the local church.

A characteristic of the pastoral activity of the laity of the Prelature is that they do not act as a group. The faithful of the Prelature take their own decisions in free matters, within the limits of the Church’s teachings. This also applies to the vast range of apostolic options within the Church, following the specific apostolic spirit of the Founder. This is part of the Christian freedom they have in all aspects of their human activities (professional, cultural, political, etc.).

As a concrete example of the above: a married man, head of a family, participated in a retreat organized by *Opus Dei* — one of his resolutions at its conclusion was to attend the meetings of the Parish Council he belonged to.

An important aspect of the pastoral work of the Prelature is its social activity with the less privileged in line with the Gospel precept of charity. Blessed Josemaria Escriva never forgot that *Opus Dei* was born among the poor and marginalized of the Madrid of the 1920’s. In the words of the present Bishop Prelate of *Opus Dei*:

It cannot be ignored that the mission Christ entrusted to his disciples has immediate social relevance. This is a constant teaching of the Founder of *Opus Dei*. It is within Christianity — he said — that we find the good light that will enable us to find an answer to all problems: all you have to do is to strive sincerely to be Catholics.¹⁸ This is beyond doubt. A well-lived Catholicism makes a powerful contribution to the solution of all human problems, including those

of major social import. Moreover, this is the one radical condition for any authentic solution. As Msgr. Escriva wrote in *The Way* (no. 301), 'these world crises are crises of saints'. . . From this perspective it is easy to foresee the immense social bearing of his teachings on the sanctification of ordinary professional work.

As a result, the Bishop Prelature continues:

Blessed Escriva brought a multitude of people to take seriously their personal responsibility in facing the gravity of social matters. He always recommended that such matters should be tackled with professional competence and not in an improvised or amateurish manner. He also insisted that each person undergo interior reform in order to provide an effective solution to social problems; social structures are to be reformed whenever necessary, and they should always be imbued with the spirit of Christ.¹⁹

More specifically, how does *Opus Dei* help in the social work of Christians? First of all, by aiming to give its faithful and many other persons a solid and complete Christian training, which includes the Social Teaching of the Church. This formation, leads them, among other things, to become aware of their social responsibility. However, when the time for action arrives, each member acts with personal freedom and responsibility. If they wish, they may join other persons or groups: political, social, cultural, etc. which they consider to be close to their own ideas. "That is why", the Bishop Prelate adds, "it is not possible to give an account of the results of the impressive social work of such a multitude of persons that is carried out in the fulfilment of their family, professional and social duties".²⁰

By way of example, in 1989 some members of the Prelature developed a self-feeding programme (including setting up a farm) in a rural day primary school in Kiambu District (Kenya). The purpose was to enable the pupils to have lunch in the school. The project was highly commended, by the NGO that funded it, for its originality, suitability and its successful completion.

Secondly, *Opus Dei* helps in the social work of Christians by the direct social impact of the above mentioned *corporate undertakings*. This impact can be seen more easily, since the results can be measured in terms of the education qualifications obtained, scholarships, jobs secured by past students, self-reliance, involvement in social projects, etc. A moving illustration of such an endeavour is *Montefalco*, in rural Morelos, Mexico. The people of the Amilpas Valley have a long experience in the struggle for existence. "Many old peasants", a journalist once reported, "fought in support of Zapata's revolution, and are still poor". A visitor can now easily verify the present development of that formerly abandoned and distressed area. This change has been achieved, thanks among other factors, to the educational activities carried out by a *corporate undertaking* operating from an *hacienda* destroyed during one of the revolutions.

To sum up, the members of the *Opus Dei Prelature* work with the conviction that "if we Christians really lived in accordance with our faith, the greatest revolution of all times would take place".²¹ The pastoral activity of *Opus Dei* can be summarized in its founder's words: "to sanctify work, to sanctify oneself in work, and to sanctify others through work".

The Legal Structure of *Opus Dei*

A word now on the juridical reality of *Opus Dei*, which is of interest to everyone, but especially to experts in Church Law. *Opus Dei* is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church. It is international with its central offices in Rome. The Prelature is made up of a Prelate with his own clergy (at present more than a thousand priests), and the laity who, in response to a divine vocation, freely join the Prelature. The clergy who are incardinated in the Prelature are drawn from the ranks of the laity incorporated into *Opus Dei*. The juridical history of *Opus Dei* has been the subject of deep study.²²

What is a personal prelature? It is a jurisdictional structure of the Church, set up by the Supreme Authority — the Holy Father and the College of Bishops — as part of the hierarchical organization of the

Church in order to carry out specific pastoral activities in the service of the universal Church and of the local churches. In the words of an expert in Church Law, personal prelatures:

Develop from the sacred power present in the *structures of the universal Church* and therefore they share in the essential purpose of that Church. [Prelatures] serve the communion of all the Churches by carrying out their mission, and in doing so show a most profound respect for the authority of the Bishop in his Church.

Depending on pastoral needs and on the Apostolic See's discernment in establishing these prelatures, this *raison d'être* of theirs can lead to their being prelatures which vary a great deal in the jurisdiction they are given. For example, they could range from . . . prelatures that look after immigrants to veritable mobilizations of priests and lay people — pastoral enterprises working throughout the world. But, whatever form they take, they are an expression of the universal mission of the Episcopal College and of its head. . . ; at the same time, their actual pastoral work is carried out within the particular Churches, and in doing their work these prelatures not only respect the theological and pastoral integrity of these Churches but make a real contribution to the Christian life of these Churches, making them conform better to the model of the universal Church.²³

Inseparably united to the *Opus Dei Prelature* is the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, whose President General is the Bishop Prelate of *Opus Dei*. Membership to it is open to priests incardinated in dioceses who wish to seek holiness in the exercise of their ministry, in accordance with the spirituality and practice of *Opus Dei*. This membership does not in any way affect their dependence on their own diocesan bishop, who continues to be their only superior.

Finally, *Opus Dei* also has Cooperators (some of whom are non Catholic or non-Christian) who, without being incorporated into the Prelature, cooperate in its apostolic activities with their prayer, work and almsgiving.²⁴

Let each wayfarer make his/her own way

These words, sometimes quoted by Blessed Escriva, give a good perspective to the conclusion of this paper. It is no secret that criticism has been levelled against *Opus Dei Prelature* and the beatification of its Founder. *The Decree of heroic virtues* states, “the Lord allowed him to suffer the weight of contradictions. He always forgave those involved, and indeed came to consider his detractors as benefactors”.²⁵ What was his attitude? To forgive and to keep on working, allowing others to work, and following the evangelical practice of brotherly correction (*Mt* 18:15) when necessary. Each one should work in the Church respecting the work of others: “let each wayfarer make his own way” — and collaborating whenever the occasion calls for it.

He prayed daily for unity within the Church, realizing that much energy is wasted whenever unity is not lived. Christians can easily fall victim to the proven tactic: “Divide and rule” — widely used by colonizing powers.

His frank openness to every kind of evangelical initiative won many friends for him and for *Opus Dei*, as well as the appreciation of bishops all over the world. *Opus Dei* spread slowly but steadily to all continents. In Africa, it is present in Kenya, Nigeria, Zaire, Ivory Coast and Cameroon. The devotion to Blessed Escriva is widespread, as is shown in the many letters of gratitude received in the Office of the Vice-postulator in Nairobi: some of these accounts can be read in the *Newletter* published by that Office.

Activities of the *Opus Dei Prelature* in Kenya include retreats and seminars, days of recollection, talks of formation, spiritual guidance from its priests, etc., held in Nairobi and Mombasa. Some of the *corporate undertakings* are well known educational institutions, such as Kianda College, Strathmore School, Kibondeni School of Institutional Management, or new initiatives like Kimlea Agricultural School — all in Nairobi and the surrounding areas.

Opus Dei looks forward to making its contribution to the evangelization of the Third Millennium, always respecting and fostering fidelity to every charism in the Church.

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