

SEEKING GOD THROUGH EVERYDAY WORK: A PROFILE OF THE FOUNDER OF OPUS DEI

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'God wants you to be a contemplative', a young married man, Victor G Hoz, was told by his confessor one day in 1941. He was amazed. He had always thought that 'to be a contemplative' was for holy people given to the mystical way of life, to be aimed at only by a chosen few, by people for the most part withdrawn from the world. 'But I,' he writes, 'was a married man, with three children then, and expecting to have more — which was indeed what happened — and I had to work hard to support the family.'

Who, then, was this revolutionary priest who was vaulting over the traditional barriers, offering mystical goals even to married people? It was Josemaria

Escriva de Balaguer, a secular priest who died in Rome in 1975 at the age of seventy three. He is best known as the founder of Opus Dei, an Association which is spread throughout the world. Newspapers give it a lot of coverage, but their reports are frequently quite inaccurate. What in fact the members of Opus Dei are, and what they do, has been explained as follows by the Founder: 'We are,' he said in 1967, 'a small proportion of priests, who have worked previously in a secular profession or trade. A large number of secular priests from many dioceses throughout the world; and a great multitude of men and women, of different countries, languages and backgrounds, who earn their living with their daily work. Most of them are married; many more are single. They share with their fellow citizens in the important task of making society more human and more just. They work, each on their own responsibility, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow men, experiencing with them successes and failures in the noble struggle to fulfil their duties and exercise their social and civil rights. And all this with naturalness, like any other conscientious Christian, without considering themselves in any way special. Side by side with their companions, they try to detect the flashes of divine splendour which shine through the most common everyday realities.'

In less eloquent words, the 'everyday realities' constitute the work which one does every day; and the 'flashes of divine splendour' are those things which lead to a holy life. Mgr Escriva, with Gospel in hand, constantly taught: God doesn't want us simply to be good, ... he wants us to be saints, through and through. However, he wants us to attain that sanctity, not by doing extraordinary things, but rather through ordinary everyday activities. It is the way they are done which should make them special. There, in the middle of the street, in the office, in the factory, we can be holy, on condition that we carry out our duties competently, for love of God and cheerfully, so that everyday work becomes, not 'a daily tragedy', but rather 'a daily smile'.

A lay spirituality

Some three hundred years ago St Francis of Sales taught something along the same lines. A preacher had publicly consigned to the flames from his pulpit a book in which St Francis had said that in certain circumstances dancing can be allowable; the book also contained a whole chapter on the 'worthiness of the marriage bed'. However, Mgr Escriva went further than St Francis of Sales in many respects. St Francis proclaimed sanctity for everyone but seems to have taught only a 'spirituality for lay people', whereas Mgr Escriva wants a 'lay spirituality'. Francis, in other words, nearly always suggests the same practical means as used by religious, but with suitable modifications. Escriva is more radical; he goes as far as talking about 'materialising' — in a good sense — the quest for holiness. For him, it's that very material work itself which must be turned into prayer and holiness.

The legendary Baron Munchausen tells a fable of a monstrous hare that had a double set of legs: four normal ones under his belly and four more on his back. Pursued by the greyhounds and feeling himself about to be overtaken, he turns himself over and continues running on the four fresh legs. For the founder of Opus Dei the life of a Christian would be just as monstrous if he were to have a double series of activities: one consisting of prayers, for God; the other made up of work, relaxation and family life, for himself. No, says Escriva, there is only one life, and it has to be made holy en bloc. That is why he speaks of a 'materialised' spirituality.

A good 'anticlericalism'

Mgr Escriva also speaks about a good and necessary 'anticlericalism', in the sense that the lay people should not imitate the methods and roles of the priests and religious, nor vice versa. I think he must have got this 'anticlericalism' from his parents, and especially from his father, who was a thorough gentleman, hard working, and a convinced Christian, very much in love with his wife, and always with a smile on his lips. 'I remember that he was always very calm,' his son wrote, 'I owe my vocation to him, and for that reason I am a "paternalist"'. Another stimulus to his 'anticlericalism' probably came from his research for his doctoral thesis in canon law. It was about the Cistercian abbey of nuns of Las Huelgas, near Burgos. The abbess there was at one and the same time a duchess, a mother superior, a prelate and the temporal governor of the abbey and the hospital, as well as of the convents, churches and dependent villages, with powers and jurisdiction which were regal and quasi-episcopal. Here was another 'monster' due to so many conflicting and superimposed duties. These tasks, heaped one on top of the other, could not be — as Mgr Escriva would have them — works of God. Because, he would ask, how can work be 'God's work' if it is done badly, in a hurry, incompetently? How can a bricklayer, an architect, a doctor or a teacher become holy if he is not also trying, as best he can, to be a good bricklayer, a good architect, a good doctor or a good teacher? Gilson has something along the same lines to say in 1949: 'It is said that the cathedrals of the Middle Ages were built with faith. Agreed, ... but geometry also played its part.' Faith and geometry, faith and competent work go hand in hand for Mgr Escriva. They are the two wings of sanctity.

His greatest achievement: Opus Dei

St Francis of Sales left his teaching in writing. Mgr Escriva did likewise, using little scraps of time to do so. When an idea or a significant phrase would strike him he would take his diary out of his pocket and, continuing his conversation, he would quickly jot down a word or a phrase, which he would later use in his writings. Apart from writing books (which are very widely read to-day), he dedicated himself energetically and tenaciously to promoting his great

project of spirituality: organising the Association Opus Dei. There's a proverb which says, 'Give a man from Aragon a nail and he'll hammer it in with his own head.' Well, Mgr Escriva has written, 'I'm from Aragon. I'm very stubborn.' He didn't waste a minute. In Spain, before, during and after the civil war, he used to give classes to university students and then set about cooking, washing floors, making beds and looking after the sick. 'I realise – and I say it with pride – that I have dedicated many, many thousands of hours to hearing children's Confessions in the poor districts of the city. They used to come with running noses. First I had to clean their noses, before beginning to clean their poor souls.' These words are his and they show that he really lived the 'daily smile'. He also wrote, 'I used to go to bed dead tired at night. When I was getting up in the morning, still tired, I would say to myself, 'You can have a little snooze before lunch'. Then, when I got out onto the street and saw all the work that awaited me that day, I would add, "Josemaria, I have fooled you once again" '.

His greatest achievement was, undoubtedly, the founding and directing of Opus Dei. The name – Opus Dei – came about by chance. Someone once said to him, 'We've got to give our all, this is a work of God'. 'That's the right name, he thought, not my work, but God's, Opus Dei.' He saw this work grow before his eyes until it had spread to the five continents. Then he began to travel to different countries to foment new apostolates and to give doctrinal talks to very many thousands of people. The extension, number and quality of the members of Opus Dei, may have led some people to imagine that a quest for power or some iron discipline binds the members together. Actually the opposite is the case: all there is is the desire for holiness and encouragement for others to become holy, but cheerfully, with a spirit of service and a great sense of

freedom.

'We are ecumenical, Holy Father, but we haven't learned ecumenism from Your Holiness,' Mgr Escriva allowed himself to say to Pope John XXIII on one occasion. Pope John chuckled knowingly, because he was aware that since 1950 Pope Pius XII had authorised Opus Dei to receive as Cooperators in the Association people who are not Catholics nor even Christians.

In his student days, Escriva smoked. But when he went to the seminary he gave his pipes and tobacco to the porter. He never smoked again. However, on the day that the first three priests of Opus Dei were ordained, he said: 'I don't smoke; none of you three do either. Alvaro, you will have to take up smoking, because I don't want the others to feel that they are not free to smoke if they want to.' It happens from time to time that one of the members of the Association is appointed to some important post in society. However, since the members of Opus Dei make their own free and responsible choices in everything they do, their achievements are their own affair and have nothing to do with Opus Dei. On one occasion in 1957 when an important person congratulated Mgr Escriva because a member of the Association had been appointed a government minister, he received a rather curt reply, 'I don't mind whether he is a minister or a road sweeper. What I am interested in is that he should sanctify himself in his work.' That reply gives us a clear picture of Mgr Escriva and of the spirit of Opus Dei: each person should sanctify himself in and through his work, including the government minister, if he has been put in that position. What is truly important is that he should really seek holiness. The rest matters little.

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