

Alvaro del Portillo

OPUS DEI – A PERSONAL PRELATURE

Extracts from two interviews with Monsignor Alvaro del Portillo,
Prelate of the Opus Dei Prelature

1. In recent months much has been written about the change in the juridical status of Opus Dei. Could you give us a brief description of what in fact has taken place?

To put it briefly, it amounts to no more than a juridical ‘change of clothes’. Up to very recently the Work was *de jure*, though not *de facto*, a Secular Institute. Now the Pope has decreed that Opus Dei should have a juridical status which is in keeping with its spirit and its social reality. He has established it as a personal Prelature in accordance with norms issued by the Second Vatican Council in

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the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 10. These norms were subsequently interpreted and elaborated in two later pontifical documents: the Motu Proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (6 August 1966) and, regarding governmental dependence on the Holy See, the Apostolic Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae* (15 August 1967).

It is foreseen in these norms that the Holy See may deem it desirable to establish personal Prelatures to look after special pastoral and apostolic needs. One might ask what are these Prelatures. They are ecclesiastical institutions of a jurisdictional nature (i.e. they are governed by a Prelate or Ordinary who has the power of jurisdiction) which, without infringing in any way on any of the rights of diocesan bishops, have the faculty of incardinating secular priests and incorporating lay people by means of a contractual bond. Both priests and laity dedicate themselves to the specific pastoral aims of the Prelature in accordance with its own Statutes, approved by the Holy See, and under the authority of the Prelate.

Priests and laity

2. What is the structure of the Opus Dei Prelature, and what is its object and purpose?

The Opus Dei Prelature is a personal Prelature of international extension, with central offices in Rome, depending on the Sacred Congregation for Bishops.

It is composed of a Prelate, the clergy of the Prelature (priests incardinated in Opus Dei), and laity who have chosen to become incorporated or who will become incorporated in the future.

The priests are drawn exclusively from among the laymen of Opus Dei, who receive Holy Orders after having completed the required ecclesiastical studies. Therefore no priests or candidates for the priesthood are taken away from any diocese.

The laity of the Prelature are men and women, married or single, of all nationalities and walks of life, without any provisos regarding health, mature age, work or family circumstances. Naturally it is a prerequisite that each person would have received from God the specific vocation to dedicate himself, or herself, to the aims of Opus Dei. They must also be capable of undertaking responsibly the commitments which this dedication brings with it.

As for the purpose of the Prelature, a document of the Holy See describes it as 'doubly pastoral', and then explains:

'In fact, the Prelate and his clergy carry out a particular pastoral work in the service of the Prelature's laity; and the whole Prelature, clergy and laity together, engage in a specific apostolate in the service of the universal Church and of the local Churches.'

There are, therefore, two fundamental features to the structure and purpose of the Prelature, which explain its *raison d'être* and show how it fits naturally into the whole of the pastoral and evangelising activity of the Church:

- a) on the one hand, there is the particular pastoral work which the Prelate with his clergy undertake in looking after and supporting the laity incorporated into Opus Dei in the fulfilment of the spiritual, formative and apostolic commitments they have undertaken, which are particularly demanding;
- b) on the other hand, there is the apostolate which the clergy and laity of the Prelature, inseparably united, carry out in helping to bring about in all sectors of society a deep consciousness of the universal call to holiness and apostolate and, more specifically, an awareness of the sanctifying value of ordinary work.

Clarifying some misconceptions

3. *In some quarters recently there was a certain amount of perplexity regarding the study being carried out with a view to changing the juridical status of Opus Dei. Some people even went so far as to say that Opus Dei might become a 'parallel church', or a 'church within the Church'. Would you like to comment?*

Your question allows me to clear up a number of mistaken notions which have arisen over the past three years in the minds of a limited number of people. I must first of all state, however, that I have no wish to get involved in polemics.

In my opinion, the erroneous affirmation that we wished to become independent of the bishops stemmed from the fact that the juridical change was difficult to understand unless one had, in addition to some knowledge of canon law, the necessary familiarity with the documents of the Second Vatican Council and of the Holy See which deal with the new personal Prelatures.

Let me try to make the point clearer: it would seem that some of the people who disagreed with the petition for a change in the

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juridical status of Opus Dei were thinking that only one type of Prelature existed, the territorial Prelatures, which are also called *nullius dioecesis* and which are the only ones envisaged in the Code of Canon Law of 1917. Such Prelatures are in fact absolutely independent of diocesan bishops. The people I mention either did not know or overlooked the fact that the Second Vatican Council had opened up the way for a different type of Prelature which is not territorial but personal, and which would be set up to carry out specific apostolic tasks, while safeguarding all the rights of the bishops in the places where it would operate.

Others, probably the majority, did not know exactly what Opus Dei had asked for, and they dreamt up imaginary petitions which had no real existence: for example, a petition for a Prelature *nullius dioecesis* or for a personal diocese, with total autonomy with respect to the diocesan bishops. And so what they were attacking was no more than a creation of their own imaginations.

I presume that by the term 'parallel church' they wished to refer to the possibility of a group exempt from the authority and control of the diocesan hierarchy: a sort of 'worldwide personal diocese', or 'microchurch' on a universal scale. It is quite clear that these expressions bear no relationship whatsoever either to the path opened up by the Second Vatican Council when it approved this new type of Prelature, or to what Opus Dei has been up to now, or to what Opus Dei had asked of the Holy See.

It is true that some people spread the rumour that Opus Dei wanted to become completely independent of the bishops. The facts have given the lie to this slanderous accusation which we denied so often, through official press releases, declarations, and so on, and above all through the witness of our lives and our service to the Church.

4. With the new juridical status, does Opus Dei become more autonomous with respect to diocesan bishops?

We never sought that, because God does not want it, the Holy See would not have tolerated it, and we neither desire nor need it. Since 1947, Opus Dei has been an institution of pontifical right with a central government, international in extension and

character, and with the necessary internal autonomy and jurisdiction required to carry out its work in the service of the Holy Church and, therefore, of the diocese.

Our Statutes have not changed at all in this respect, and Opus Dei keeps the same relationship with diocesan bishops as up to now. For instance, the prior permission of the local bishop is needed to set up a centre of the Prelature; the priests of Opus Dei, as before, must obtain the necessary faculties from the local bishop to carry out their ministry with people not incorporated into the Prelature, and so on.

I would like to point out that, in keeping with our Founder's wishes, we expressly requested the Holy See to leave these points unchanged in the Statutes of the Prelature. With God's help, we take a holy pride in always loving, venerating, respecting, obeying and praying for the legitimate Pastors of the Church, namely the Pope and the bishops in communion with the Holy See. And I am very happy to be able to tell you that we have always (and I include the recent period of misunderstanding which I have just mentioned) enjoyed the constant encouragement and affection of the Holy See and of thousands of bishops who know and appreciate our spirit of loyal service.

5. Isn't Opus Dei now more directly linked to the Holy See? In recent months there has been talk of it being like a personal army of the Pope in each diocese.

In our dealings with the Holy See, the only change has been that like other Prelatures, Opus Dei now comes under a different Congregation, the Sacred Congregation for Bishops.

You could put the rest down to journalistic colouring in an attempt to 'explain' this measure without having to go into pastoral and juridical matters with which the public at large is not familiar and perhaps cares little about.

Naturally, this does not detract from the fact that each member of Opus Dei, and the Work as a whole, will strive to be fully faithful to the Roman Pontiff everywhere and in all circumstances. It is obvious that such faithfulness to the Pope also implies faithfulness and a deep union with each diocesan bishop.

Cooperating with the Diocese

6. With this new juridical status, doesn't Opus Dei run the risk of isolating itself, of becoming a group of Christians, even excellent Christians if you wish, but separated from the other members of the Church. In a word, couldn't it easily become a 'church for the elite', closed in on itself?

I have partly answered this question already, but I don't mind going into it further.

A few moments ago I said that the new juridical status does not separate us in the slightest from bishops. Now I add that neither does it convert us into a group which is separate from other priests and laity in the Church. This new juridical form endorses a living reality: the priests of Opus Dei are fully secular, by reason of their training, their spirit, their mentality, the manner in which they carry out their priestly ministry, and so on. They strive to practise and encourage fraternal unity with the other priests of the respective diocesan *presbyterium*, to which they also belong.

As regards the laity, they are ordinary faithful, and are subject to the bishop, neither more nor less but rather in exactly the same way as all the other faithful of the diocese in all matters which come under the general law of the Church. Their dependence on the Prelate of Opus Dei, in regard to the spiritual, formative and apostolic commitments they take on with their incorporation into the Prelature, strengthens their union with the diocesan bishop, since the Work helps them to strive to be exemplary members of the faithful and Catholic citizens.

It is evident, therefore, that there is no risk of the Work becoming closed in on itself, as you suggest. In fact, I would add that practically all the fruits of the apostolate of Opus Dei remain in the dioceses in which we work. Indeed it is a great blessing from God for any diocese to have a good number of Christians who enjoy prestige in their work, who try to live a life of intense prayer and who give true Christian witness, notwithstanding all their personal shortcomings. Remember also that these men and women strive to transmit their ideals to their relatives, colleagues and friends, bringing them to the Sacraments and the life of grace, and helping them participate more fully in the activities of their respective parish communities.

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The diocese benefits from the Christian families that these men and women form, and from the vocations to the priesthood and religious life that come from these Christian homes. As well as that, society stands to gain from the welfare work and educational undertakings promoted by members of Opus Dei all over the world, in cooperation with very many other people, including non-Catholics and non-Christians.

Neither will the Prelature constitute a ‘church for the elite’ from a sociological point of view, since people of all professions, occupations and social backgrounds can be, and in fact are, members of Opus Dei.

Foundational charism

7. What then were the reasons that prompted Opus Dei to ask for a change in its juridical status?

This juridical change was requested to solve a longstanding and serious institutional problem, namely: to ensure that the juridical structure of Opus Dei would be in keeping with what one might call the ‘foundational charism’, that is, in keeping with what Monsignor Escriva saw that Opus Dei should be from the very beginning. From as early as 1928 (the year Opus Dei was founded) he sensed that the answer would have to come along lines similar to those now approved, without, of course, seeing all the finer juridical details of the eventual solution.

The previous juridical status kept us in a framework which was not in keeping with our way. This meant that our Founder had to make repeated clarifications to ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and to the general public, in order to defend our vocation and to spell out the characteristics of our specific secularity.

The new status is not in answer to a desire to be different. Quite the contrary: up to now we have had to repeat time and again (and it certainly wasn’t a whim!) that, within the juridical framework in which we found ourselves, *we were different*; we have had to explain continually *what we were not*, so as not to be identified with religious.

Besides, up to 1975, our Founder – with all the weight of his moral authority – ensured by careful vigilance that the incompatibility between the spirit of Opus Dei and the juridical norm that had been applied to us, did not produce any deviation in that

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spirit. With his death, that danger could have increased and there was a greater risk that the Work might, as time went by, lose its true foundational charism and end up diluted.

I should also like to mention that confusion was caused from time to time because some people said that the laity in Opus Dei were 'consecrated persons'. This led to groundless doubts about their real freedom in social and professional matters, thus giving rise to amazing misunderstandings and discrimination. As you can well imagine, this constrained situation in which we found ourselves obscured the true nature of Opus Dei and limited in no small way the apostolic effectiveness and incisiveness of its lay members.

The spirit of the founder

8. Why are you so determined not to be confused with religious?

Your question touches on the essence of the spirit of Opus Dei. For the sake of brevity, I'll answer it simply, and refer those who would like a fuller explanation to a collection of press interviews given by our Founder in the sixties, published in book form as *Conversations with Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer*. There you'll find a complete description of what Opus Dei is.

Here I would just like to say the following: since 1928 God has wished to use Opus Dei to remind Christians that they can and should be saints in the middle of the world. This has been done again, in a most impressive way, through the solemn Magisterium of the most recent ecumenical Council. They can become saints, without giving up their ordinary work or their family or professional relationships, but rather by converting all these human affairs into opportunities and means to practise virtues, converting them into the 'prime matter' of their holiness and apostolate. The reason why we are determined not to be thought of as religious is therefore very simple: it is because we are not religious, nor is it good for the Church that we be considered more or less like religious.

But allow me to take this opportunity to express once again all the love and veneration that I feel for the religious. This is something we learned from Monsignor Escrivá. I am quite sure that all the members of Opus Dei live this same spirit, since we all have engraved in our hearts a guideline which we often heard from our Founder: in Opus Dei we truly love and venerate all religious, and

if someone were not to do so, he would not be living his vocation faithfully.

We feel similar affection for all those men and women who consecrate themselves to God in the middle of the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels.

9. And why wasn't a better-known juridical solution sought?

This is a subject which our Founder, and the whole of Opus Dei as represented in our Congresses, studied in depth, and which has been the object of very much prayer. I can therefore assure you that there was no other suitable solution. Bear in mind that the juridical study was not carried out in the realm of pure speculation, nor on a purely theoretical basis. Its basis is quite practical: firstly, the need to safeguard the foundational charism which is an expression of God's will; and secondly, the present nature of Opus Dei, considering all its spiritual, juridical and social aspects.

The clearly secular character of our apostolate and spirit excluded any solution proper to religious or institutions which profess the particular ecclesiastical state which used to be called the 'state of perfection', now called the 'consecrated life'. Moreover, in order to guarantee its apostolic development, Opus Dei needed to continue to be an international organisation, with ecclesiastical jurisdiction and centralised government, and to be able to continue to incardinate its own priests. The Work could not, therefore, have the structure of an apostolic movement or a simple association of the faithful.

Thus by a process of elimination, if I may put it that way, we also arrive at the conclusion that the formula chosen was the only possible one. And, following years of study, that is also the conclusion reached by the Holy See in decreeing the erection of Opus Dei as a personal Prelature.

The juridical path

10. If the Founder of Opus Dei wanted this solution, why did so much time pass before it was granted? Would you have any objection to telling us briefly about the process involved in the study?

It is a long story, as it begins in 1928 with the foundation of the Work. Our Founder was obliged, by reason of the urgent need to

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solve the difficulty regarding the incardination of priests into Opus Dei, and to obtain an international structure of government which would guarantee the unity of the Work, to have recourse, provisionally, to inadequate juridical formulae, because they were the only ones permitted by the then existing laws. In accepting these solutions (in 1943 and 1947), he pointed out to the competent ecclesiastical authorities at the time that he hoped other juridical solutions would appear which could adequately solve the institutional problem of Opus Dei and be in keeping with its true nature.

The Second Vatican Council providentially opened up the juridical path that was required. In the light of these new possibilities, Monsignor Escriva, with the encouragement of Pope Paul VI, called a General Congress of Opus Dei in 1969, with a view to carrying out the necessary studies which would lead to a definitive juridical solution.

These studies continued unhurriedly, and without interruption, over the years and were not interrupted either by the death of Monsignor Escriva in 1975, or of Pope Paul VI in 1978. In his brief pontificate, Pope John Paul I expressly indicated that the study of the definitive juridical situation should be continued. In November 1978 Pope John Paul II told me that he considered it vital to find a solution to the institutional problem of Opus Dei without delay.

Shortly afterwards, when all the official documentation had been presented, the Holy Father entrusted the study of the question to the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, which is the competent Congregation in such matters. With the assistance of a special technical committee, on which we were also represented, the Congregation completed the task entrusted to it, following a detailed and careful evaluation of all the relevant historical, juridical, doctrinal, apostolic and pastoral aspects. This work took three years.

This comprehensive study was finally submitted for the personal examination of the Holy Father who, before taking the ultimate decisions, heard the views of an *ad hoc* committee of Cardinals, presided over by the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops.

The Holy Father then indicated that his decision be communicated to the bishops in the countries where Opus Dei, with the

venia of the respective local bishops, has established Centres, so that if they wished they could send their observations to the Holy See. It is now a publicly known fact that the vast majority of bishops expressed their satisfaction with the proposed arrangement, and that those who sent in observations or asked for clarification of some points, were duly listened to and attended to.

I feel that with what I have already said, I have also answered your question as to why so much time passed, as you put it, before reaching this solution. It is not surprising that the Holy See should have wished to proceed in a very sure and prudent fashion, since Opus Dei is a pastoral phenomenon with genuinely new characteristics, and since it was also a question of applying, for the first time, a juridical formula which is new in the general law of the Church.

The New Statutes

11. The Pope has also approved the new Statutes of Opus Dei. Can you tell us what is new in these Statutes?

These Statutes are practically the same as those which Pope Pius XII approved, experimentally in 1947 and definitively in 1950. With the encouragement of Paul VI, our Founder convoked a General Congress in 1969 with the aim of introducing into the Statutes, the modifications which were strictly necessary, so that all would be ready when the moment came to ask the Holy See to transform the Work into a personal Prelature.

Among these modifications was an important change which our Founder had longed for for many years, namely that incorporation into the Work would now be by means of a contractual bond. This specific agreement, between the Prelature and the incorporated faithful, allows the nature of their mutual obligations to be seen even more clearly; as is well known, though I do not mind repeating it, these obligations are strictly spiritual, formative and apostolic in character.

While establishing this contractual bond in the Statutes, elements proper to the Institutes of consecrated life (concerning the profession of the evangelical counsels) are suppressed. These elements do not belong to the path which our Founder saw in 1928. But, although he never wanted them, he had to incorporate them into the particular law of Opus Dei because they were required by the juridical framework of Secular Institutes.

12. Will the Statutes of Opus Dei be made public?

Yes. I will be very happy to present them to all the appropriate authorities, beginning with the bishops in whose dioceses we are working already. And, with the opportune permission of the Holy See, I see no objection to making them publicly available. In a press interview more than ten years ago, our Founder said that this would be done.

13. Now that you have this suitable juridical status, will it help public opinion know more about what Opus Dei really is?

Yes, I believe it will. From now on it will be even easier for people the world over to understand what we are and what we are doing.

However, I would point out that we have always acted in broad daylight and with the approval of the authorities, both ecclesiastical and civil. We have always kept people informed about our activities. Our Centres have been open to everyone. In addition, we have set up information offices in quite a few cities in order to provide journalists and everyone interested with the data they want about Opus Dei.

Some say we don't publicise our work, with graphs and statistics. While respecting the contrary opinion, I don't think such things are necessary in an apostolic undertaking, in work with souls. If we were to do so, no doubt there would be some who would accuse us of boasting.

Life in Opus Dei

14. Opus Dei has over 72,000 members, some of mature age, some with university degrees, some with important roles in society. However, it is said that life in Opus Dei is too austere. What is it then that attracts so many people and, if these conditions are true, how is it that they remain in Opus Dei all their lives?

It is God who attracts people, who sows in their hearts the desire to sanctify themselves in the middle of the world, through their daily work.

I agree with those who say that the vocation to Opus Dei is demanding: a complete dedication to God, and to one's neighbour for his sake, necessarily implies saying 'no' to all kinds of personal satisfactions which would be legitimate for other people.

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It is with naturalness and joy, which are characteristic features of the asceticism of Opus Dei, that all these thousands of men and women persevere. They are motivated by something which our Founder considered to be very supernatural: they are in Opus Dei because that is where they want to be. God's grace and their freedom are the only things that keep them linked to Opus Dei. It would be absurd to try to constrain someone to remain in the Prelature against his or her will. Nor could we put pressure on anyone to remain, because each person is perfectly autonomous and each has a job by which they earn their living, without being helped by anyone.

15. However, don't you think that, even in the areas of self-denial and asceticism, there can at times be excesses?

When the Church's authority has approved a spirituality and some specific ways of living it, as in our case, then we Catholics at least can set our minds at ease, since we rely on the prudence of the Church.

If there are some Christians who have adopted an easy approach, then it is quite possible that they might accuse those who are determined to follow him who gave himself up to death in order to save us, of fanaticism. There is nothing new in this, and it is not only to members of Opus Dei that it happens. St Paul pointed out that, for the Gentiles, the Cross of Christ is mere folly.

However, there is one point I would like to stress: generous, youthful, souls (who can also be found among older people) understand immediately the significance of self-denial, and they come in increasing numbers to Opus Dei and to the institutions of the Church, whether new or old, which try to practise their spirit faithfully. I think there is a close relationship between the genuineness with which any vocation is lived, with all the demands it brings, and the vitality of the institution.

16. How do relations between Opus Dei as an institution and each of its members work in practice? Are there rules which regulate in detail the life of each member?

The members of Opus Dei commit themselves to try to reach holiness and spread it from the place where each one finds himself in the world, through their ordinary work and their day-to-day

activities. In order to fulfill this commitment, they have the right to be helped by the Prelature, through on-going and demanding spiritual assistance. This formation is received either personally or in small groups, through classes, talks, retreats, and so on.

For their part, the members of Opus Dei try to put new life into fulfilling their daily duties; they do so by means of spiritual practices which help them live a life of contemplation in the middle of the world, as required by our vocation. The originality of Opus Dei lies in the spirit with which all this is done, in a solid unity of life, which brings together the faith we profess and the ordinary work which each member carries out under his or her own personal responsibility.

To conclude, I would like to make it clear that each person lives where his family circumstances, work, and so on dictate. And each person freely organises his own life and his work, in which the directors of Opus Dei do not intervene or interfere. Opus Dei does not lay down inflexible ways of behaving, or particular timetables. It would not make sense to try to straightjacket the lives of people who are engaged in such a variety of activities, from housewives to journalists, from agricultural workers to secondary school teachers, from businessmen to traffic wardens.

Responsible freedom

17. Does Opus Dei help its members materially speaking; does it support them financially, for example? Does Opus Dei in return ask its members to follow definite guidelines in their ordinary work?

No. Everyone knows that we don't and we have said so thousands of times. Each person chooses the work he or she wants, and carries it out with complete freedom. In temporal matters each behaves according to the dictates of his or her own conscience, enjoying the same autonomy that any other Catholic citizen enjoys.

As for giving support, help and so forth, I assure you most firmly that such has never been given and it never will be given. If anyone were to try to make use of the Prelature in order to get ahead in life, the organism of Opus Dei would sense this foreign body and expel it straight away without thinking twice about it. In these times of recession and unemployment, I know of many

members of Opus Dei who are looking for a job and of some who have had to emigrate because they had lost their previous job. No one has sought the slightest help from the Prelature to find a job, because we all know that it is something in which Opus Dei will not and cannot get involved.

18. So Opus Dei is not interested in its members' ordinary work, in the role they play in society, in politics, and so on?

When we insist that each member of Opus Dei is free, and that the purpose of the Prelature is exclusively spiritual, we in no way wish to say that we do not care about the ethical or moral content of the work which each person does.

For someone to join the Prelature, he or she needs to be doing an honest job. Then the doctrinal and ascetical formation they receive in Opus Dei helps them to carry out their work with ever greater loyalty to society, with love and deeds of service towards others, setting aside all selfishness and injustice. If this attitude were lacking, it would be naive or hypocritical to speak of sanctifying one's work or of sanctifying oneself in one's work.

But at the same time, in giving this formation, Opus Dei carefully avoids laying down or suggesting specific solutions or approaches within the broad field of choice open to Catholics.

Secular apostolate

19. I realise that one cannot speak of Opus Dei as playing a part in the political or financial life of a country. But some say that, despite its modern methods of apostolate, the pastoral work of Opus Dei moves along conservative lines. Would you agree with that classification?

I accept and appreciate a healthy and necessary pluralism within the Church, but I don't like the division into progressive and conservative. In my opinion, it is so ambiguous that, rather than being a useful classification, it is a weapon which some people use to attack those who do not think as they do, or to create divisions within the Church.

In Opus Dei we strive to keep the faith of the Apostles and of their successors, the bishops in communion with the Pope. We obey all the indications of the legitimate authority in the area of

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ecclesiastical discipline, because we are convinced that only in this way can genuine renewal come about in the Church.

At the same time, I think we can objectively recognise the deeply innovative and forward-looking breadth of vision which the charism of our Founder has opened up in so many aspects of life of the Church.

Opus Dei, with God's help, is carrying out a task of general mobilisation (if you'll allow me use that expression) of Catholic laity, women and men, aimed at helping them to become clearly aware of their rights and to take up with responsibility their duties as Catholics who must live up to their name. This apostolic task is carried out with a fully lay spirituality. It is based on the sanctification of ordinary work. From a true Christian position, and without yielding to secularising pressures, it has broken clerical moulds, both old and new. This spirituality encourages the members of Opus Dei to take part in all noble human undertakings, giving a genuine Christian witness there, and contributing, each on his own personal responsibility, to the cultural, social and scientific progress of mankind. The members of Opus Dei, as our Founder used to say, strive to place Christ at the summit of all human activities.

I don't know what classification you would like to give this way that Opus Dei has of doing things.

20. Would it be right to say that Opus Dei has been put at a disadvantage by the new winds and openness which the Second Vatican Council brought into the Church?

Quite the contrary. Aspects which are central to our spirit, such as the universal call to holiness, the theology of the laity and of temporal realities, the sanctifying value of ordinary work, have been solemnly incorporated into the documents of the Council. Many theologians have publicly recognised this, as have members of the hierarchy, who were outstanding protagonists in Vatican II and who have not hesitated to describe our Founder as a fore-runner of the Council. Note, also, that our final juridical status has been made possible thanks to the fact that the Council created personal Prelatures. I don't think I need say more.

21. To what do you attribute the fact that some people say that Opus Dei has many enemies?

I would say that, above all, Opus Dei has friends. In addition, as our Founder used to say, in Opus Dei we do not feel we are enemies of anyone. If this were not so, how could you explain the rapid growth of Opus Dei, and the cooperation we receive from so many people, non-Catholics included, in very many countries? I am pleased to call to mind now in a particular way the support, through prayer, affection and also material means, which we normally receive from the families of the members of Opus Dei, who are happy and grateful for the vocation of their children, or brothers or sisters.

Evidently, if we devoted ourselves solely to the care of the elderly or the sick (which are very important activities and ones in which a good number of members of Opus Dei are involved professionally, and all apostolically) we would suffer fewer misunderstandings. But the members of Opus Dei try to give witness to Jesus Christ in all the crossroads of human activity, sharing struggles, efforts, sorrows and joys with their fellow citizens. They are there where their work has placed them, and they strive to fill the circles in which they move with a Christian spirit.

It should not come as a surprise then that, in a society that is strongly marked by an attitude of passive conformity to the dictates of a secularist culture, there are persons or groups who try to deprive us of the air we breath, and who would like to shut us up in sacristies. The activities of Christians have never been free from such misunderstandings, especially when these Christians have tried, by following the Gosepl, to waken people from that conformist slumber.

Permit me to tell you something that has happened a number of times in various countries. Some publication publishes malicious and unjust errors about Opus Dei. When we try to point out the truth, their reply is, with more or less diplomacy in their choice of words: 'We are not interested. Since Opus Dei serves the Church, we won't change our attitude and we will continue to give information in the way we have done to date'.

Power of prayer

22. People speak at times of the 'power of Opus Dei' or Opus Dei's 'powerful organisation', or that some members of Opus Dei occupy important positions in society. What have you to say about this?

I would firstly like to clarify that members of Opus Dei occupy the same positions in society they would have occupied on their own merits if they did not belong to Opus Dei, because, as I said earlier, Opus Dei does not interfere in the ordinary work of its members.

By its very nature, and also because of the way our Founder established it, Opus Dei as an institution cannot own or in any way control newspapers, banks or other businesses whose purpose is commercial, political, or the like. The only corporate activities of the Prelature consist in giving spiritual assistance to its members and, on specific occasions which are announced publicly, assuming responsibility for the Christian formation which is imparted in some educational or professional development centres and in other activities of a welfare nature.

The power of Opus Dei is rooted in prayer. The influence of Opus Dei in the world is of an exclusively spiritual nature. It is based on the efforts of each of its members to try to be a Christian who lives up to his calling and to spread around him, by word and above all by example, the light and teaching of Christ.

In the life of Opus Dei, all other things do not count, nor do they interest us. Our Founder once said: 'If at any time Opus Dei were to intervene in temporal matters, I would be the first to leave, and I'd leave immediately'. Well, we haven't changed.

The Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross

23. Can priests who are already incardinated in other dioceses be associated with Opus Dei?

The clergy of the Opus Dei Prelature is made up solely and exclusively of the priests of Opus Dei who are drawn from the laity of the Prelature. Having completed their ecclesiastical studies, they are called to the priesthood by the Prelate and receive Holy Orders.

But, inseparably united to Opus Dei, there is also the Sacerdotal

Society of the Holy Cross, of which the Prelate of Opus Dei is the President General. Priests incardinated in any diocese may join this Association, by means of a purely associative bond. This bond does not place them under the power of jurisdiction of the Prelate, nor does it suspend, or in any way weaken, the bond which these priests have with their respective dioceses and their own Ordinary.

As you know, the Second Vatican Council, in its Decree on priests, praises and encourages associations whose aim is to foster holiness among the priests in the exercise of their ministry. This is the object and purpose of the Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross. It gives its members appropriate spiritual attention and support, which not only preserves intact the canonical obedience these priests owe their own bishop, but actually reinforces it. There is therefore no problem of a double obedience, no conflict of any kind. This is simply because, with the new situation created by the establishment of Opus Dei as a Prelature, these priests do not have two superiors (their own bishop and an internal superior, of Opus Dei). Rather they have one, and only one: their own bishop.

This solution is crystal clear. It is what our Founder wanted. But it could not be achieved while Opus Dei was legally a Secular Institute. With the experience of many years, I have no hesitation in saying that the pastoral work of these priests in their dioceses is greatly improved and developed by the spiritual support they receive from the Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross, which leads them, among other things, to maintain an exemplary availability with regard to the needs of their Ordinaries and of the diocese.

24. With this juridical change, one could say that a stage in the life of Opus Dei has ended. Would you like to make an appraisal of the activity and growth of Opus Dei during these past years, and how you see its work developing in the near future?

Although, as I said before, the change is only one of juridical ‘clothes’, and nothing essential in Opus Dei has been altered, I would like to emphasise that we have taken a very important step, something which for many years our Founder prayed for with great faith and asked others to pray for, even when all the juridical paths were still closed. From now on the members of Opus Dei will be able to work more peacefully and freely in the service of the Church and of society.

POSITION PAPER III

You ask me for an appraisal and for a forecast. We are not very keen in Opus Dei on producing statistics about our apostolic work. I fully respect the contrary opinion, but my view is that statistics are very much of secondary importance in apostolic works.

Firstly, because when the apostolic work is fruitful, statistics can produce a certain sense of human power or influence, what one might call ‘collective pride’. This would separate us from God and irritate those around us. And secondly, in supernatural undertakings, what is important is the spirit, fidelity to God’s will. Our Lord, who is All-powerful, acts effectively through his instruments — poor instruments admittedly, but faithful ones — although to human eyes they may seem useless or of very little worth. History is full of well-known examples, beginning with the twelve Apostles who undoubtedly were not, humanly speaking, the most suitable instruments for evangelising the whole world.

Nevertheless, for the benefit of your readers, I can tell you that at present Opus Dei has more than 70,000 members, of whom over a thousand are priests, and that since our Founder’s death, we have felt his intercession and his apostolic encouragement even more strongly.

With regard to the future, let me repeat that what is really important is to remain faithful to the foundational spirit of Opus Dei, having apostolic zeal, the desire to be closer to God and his Blessed Mother, and generous personal dedication with a spirit of sacrifice in the service of others. And to be daring (why not?) in planning and carrying out works of apostolate, undeterred by difficulties, which are never lacking, and not paying much attention to gossip and idle criticism. God will look after everything else — such as sending us people who are ready to serve the Church and souls —, as he has done up to now.

From the figures I have given you, you can see that we are still at the beginning — Opus Dei is young — although we are no longer few in number. Opus Dei is more developed in some countries than in others where we are just beginning, but broadly speaking, I can say that the Work has put down deep roots in some fifty countries, where it has men and women working for Jesus Christ, serving society and trying to sanctify their ordinary activity, according to the spirit of Opus Dei.

Alvaro del Portillo

As you see, there is plenty of work to be done. We would like to feel that we can count on your prayers, and on those of your readers, to do that work as God wants it to be done.

25. Are efforts being made to have your Founder, Monsignor Escriva, canonised?

Those of us who knew Monsignor Escriva and witnessed his love for God and the Church think it quite natural to ask for his beatification. I might even say that we feel duty bound to do so, both as a way of expressing our appreciation, in a practical way, for all we owe our Founder, and because by making his life known we are rendering a great service to souls. We have abundant evidence that many people all over the world have come closer to God through the example of Monsignor Escriva's virtues.

The process of beatification began on 19 February 1981. While following the stages laid down by Canon Law, we are also trying to avoid unnecessary delays. One of the reasons for this is that the Church wishes that, as far as possible, witnesses be interviewed covering the whole life-span of the Servant of God.

Private devotion to our Founder has spread to the five continents and very many accounts of favours, both spiritual and material, attributed to his intercession, have been received. In the Postulator's Office, we also have evidence of many cures which have no natural explanation. One cure in particular has already been examined in accordance with the processes of Church law, and all the documentation has been handed over to the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

Interview with Joaquin Navarro Valls, published in ABC (Madrid) on 29 November 1982.

**The 1917 Code of Canon Law has in fact now been superseded by the New Code of Canon Law, promulgated by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on 25 January 1983, feast of the conversion of St Paul the Apostle (Editors' note).*