
FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD

An interview with Mgr A. del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei

The Prelate of Opus Dei, Monsignor del Portillo, took part in the Synod on the Laity last October. He was interviewed recently by Cesare Cavalleri, editor of the Italian monthly *Studi Cattolici*; the interview was published in its December issue and in the daily newspaper *Avvenire*.

What aspect of the definition of a lay person would you say was particularly highlighted by the recent Synod of Bishops?

The Synod drew on the teaching of Vatican II, emphasising two essential elements of the laity which are found in *Lumen gentium*, where it says that lay people are 'faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ', and that 'a secular quality is proper and special to lay people' (no. 31). The Christian identity common to all the faithful is first stressed, and then come the specifics: the lay person is a member of the Christian faithful who in a special way lives the secularity that is common to the whole Church, but which of itself does not characterise either priests or religious, since they are defined by other theological coordinates. Secularity is not merely a 'sociological datum', it is not simply a matter of living in the material world. After all, one cannot really live anywhere else but in the world. As the 'Consultation Document' which served as a basis for the work of the Synod pointed out, secularity is a 'theological datum', that is, one which indicates the manner in which a Christian relates to God and directs everything to God. It would have no theological meaning if it were not connected to the primary element, that is, to a person's Christian identity. Paraphrasing a saying of Monsignor Escrivá, we can say that the Christian lay person is someone called to 'see God in the world', in each and every situation of ordinary, occupational, family and social life. That is why the Founder of Opus Dei used to say that, for the lay person, the respective missions of the Church and of the world are not 'opposed' to one another; rather, one is 'superimposed' on the other.

What is needed to ensure that the presence of Christian lay people in temporal affairs really is a leaven, rather than absorbed by the 'secularised' society around them?

Secularity, of course, does not mean secularisation. It would be disastrous if the effort to christianise the world were to result in the secularisation of Christians. To sanctify the world from within – the task which Vatican II identifies as belonging to the laity – is not an automatic process, in the sense that it is not enough for an activity simply to be carried out by a Christian for it to be immediately sanctified. First of all, the Christian has to live in the state of grace, to nourish himself or herself on the sacraments – the Eucharist and Penance in particular –, to lead a life of prayer and sacrifice, and to be committed to developing all the virtues, natural and supernatural. Hence the absolute need for an appropriate doctrinal formation, together with an in-depth knowledge of the teaching of the Church. Furthermore, one's action in the world must obey creation's own intrinsic laws: work must also be done well in order for it to be sanctified. This action in the world is guided by that sense of offering it to God, which is in fact a participation by the laity in the royal priesthood of Christ, as expressed in *Lumen gentium*.

Thus the meaning of a Christian's activities in the world can only be understood in the context of the universal call to holiness, which brings with it what our Founder used to call 'unity of life'; in other words, communion with Christ must have a real bearing on carrying out every Christian task.

The Synod has indeed re-launched the 'universal call to holiness' proclaimed by Vatican Council II. But what can be done to ensure that that very expression, 'universal call to holiness', is not reduced to an empty slogan? How can it be lived in practice?

Vocation is one thing; but response to vocation is something else. God calls all to be holy, and he calls the lay man or woman to be holy in the world. The results depend on the generosity of one's response to grace. First of all there needs to be commitment, a decision to respond, and then one must actually use the means to achieve holiness – sacraments, prayer and mortification –, and use them with a genuine lay spirituality. Holiness is heroism, and the fact that there is a universal call, that holiness is accessible to

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everyone, does not mean that there are short cuts or soft options. Holiness is, always and everywhere, an identification with the crucified and risen Christ, and one cannot aspire to the Resurrection without first passing through the Cross.

What is the experience of Opus Dei in the field of cooperation with, and service to, the local Churches?

Opus Dei exists solely to serve the Church, and there can never be opposition between the universal Church and particular Churches. That would be absurd, both theologically and in practice. How is this service carried out? I won't dwell on the organisational aspects which are laid out clearly in the apostolic constitution *Ut sit*, which established Opus Dei as a personal Prelature, and in the other relevant documents. Coming to the main point, I will say that Opus Dei carries out its service to the Church by an extensive sowing of holiness, not only among its own members, but also in all those who come into contact with the apostolates of the Prelature, or who are reached by the soul-to-soul apostolate 'of friendship and trust', which all members carry out in their own environment. Anyone who comes in contact with Opus Dei is invited to take seriously his or her baptismal commitments. This leads to faithful obedience to the teaching of the Pope and the Bishops. If a Christian really decides to seek holiness, his or her creativity will give rise to all sorts of initiatives, to be carried out singlehandedly or with others, in a great mobilisation on behalf of the Kingdom of Christ. Opus Dei provides a spark which makes possible the spreading of the fire which Christ came to bring into the world. It is a specific contribution towards enriching the Communion of Saints. The Church progresses by dint of holiness, and the service which Opus Dei strives to give to the Church is that of encouraging lay people to be holy in accordance with their own way, 'at the frontiers of history', as John Paul II said in his concluding homily to the Synod.

What kind of relationship does Opus Dei have with the various Movements in the Church?

A relationship of reciprocal esteem and respect. I thank God with all my heart when I see the fruits of Christian living which the various

Movements give rise to all over the world, and pray that they may grow stronger and stronger, for the good of the whole Church.

On the other hand, it is well known that Opus Dei is not a Movement, but rather a personal Prelature, with a specific juridical framework, different from that of the Movements. A Prelature is a hierarchical structure of the Church, that is, one of the modes of self-organisation which the Church provides for herself to achieve the goals given her by Christ.

Vatican Council II showed that the nature of dioceses and of other hierarchical structures are more or less the same: Christian communities consisting of their own Pastor, their own clergy, and a Christian people, united by the bonds of the *communio fidelium* and the *communio hierarchica*.

In Opus Dei then, there is a Prelate, who is the Ordinary, a clergy incardinated in the Prelature, and lay faithful (the vast majority), forming an organic unity, with shared responsibility, in accordance with the particular *communio fidelium* specified by the aims of the Prelature. These aims are: the quest for holiness within a person's own state in life and environment, by means of the sanctification of work, and the promotion of the universal call to holiness in all sectors of society.

Between the Prelate, the clergy and the lay faithful there exist the links of *communio hierarchica*, which extend only to matters which come within the scope and aims of the Prelature.

These elements have been present in Opus Dei from the very beginning. I am an eyewitness to that. So, as a personal Prelature which has received a juridical configuration in keeping with the foundational charism of Monsignor Escrivá, Opus Dei is fundamentally distinct from ecclesial Movements.