

## THE POPE AND OPUS DEI

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*The teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on the theology of work and the role of lay people in the building up of culture is much appreciated by Pope John Paul II.*

**P**EOPLE WHO KNOW that I spent years working on Park Avenue and Wall Street with Citibank and Merrill Lynch often assume that 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. After the usual jocular reply that I was seeking a better return on my investment (after all, even George Soros or Peter Lynch can't provide 'a hundred-fold in this life and life everlasting'), I hasten to assure them that I had already completely dedicated myself to God many years before as a layman and that it was possible, indeed imperative, for everyone to seek holiness in the midst of everyday life whatever their professional or familial situation.

### **Laity in the world**

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.

All of this might serve as an introduction to the phenomenon of the growth of Opus Dei throughout the world and how it may be an aspect of the world-wide strategy of the pontificate of John Paul II as we begin the third millennium. 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 and has played an essential role in encouraging its development through the granting of its definitive juridical status, the establishment of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and finally the beatification of its founder, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá.

### **Children of God**

Blessed Josemaría's teachings are rooted in the concept of divine filiation, the reality that all men and women are children of God. Hence their rights and responsibilities before God, the Church, and society. They possess an inalienable right to life (from conception to natural death as John Paul II has so often put it) and

through God's grace the privilege of living a life here on earth directed towards an eternal destiny through membership in the Church. This of course fits in perfectly with the Pope's emphasis on the 'dignity of the human person' as the yardstick by which the health of any society can be measured.

#### **Centrality of work**

Work, which the Pope has defined in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* as anything useful to man, is the hinge upon which hangs the spirituality of Opus Dei. 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. To be a member of the Catholic spiritual elite, one was called to the priesthood or religious life. This view had the effect of relegating the laity to second-class citizenship in the church; 'to hunt, shoot, and entertain' in the words of a famous letter on the role of the laity written by a Roman prelate to Cardinal Newman in the nineteenth century. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá conceived of human work of any sort as ennobling, both as a means of service to family and society and as a way to give glory to God that is available to all. Thus his message, as he expressed it, 'opened up the divine pathways of the earth.'

#### **Unity of life**

This point has not been lost on John Paul. As he put it in addressing members of Opus Dei in 1979 soon after his election, 'Opus Dei anticipated the theology of the laity of the Second Vatican Council.' Blessed Josemaría 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.

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.

#### **Human freedom**

Blessed Josemaría also placed a strong emphasis on the worth of human freedom as a God-given gift, abhorring both totalitarian regimes in government and any and all efforts to coerce the conscience of individual people. John Paul II has also 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 a furthering of 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. It creates and strengthens the notion of duty. If men are not kept straight by duty, they must be by fear. The more they are kept by fear, the less they are free. The greater the strength of duty, the greater the liberty.

#### **Personal Prelature**

Blessed Josemaría's greatest work is the reality of the Opus Dei Prelature itself, which reaches millions of people in all five continents through its program of personal formation. It in-

stills 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 developmental programs, rural farm schools, clinics, etc. — all done professionally but with a spirit of selfless service.

Blessed Josemaría's emphasis on work, piety, freedom, and initiative—all in total union with the teaching of the Church — is in the words of the historian Paul Johnson (speaking of John Paul II's opinion) a formula that works:

Escrivá had the right combination: a robust adherence to the traditional dogmas and moral standards of Catholicism together with the missionary zeal to apply them to the modern world.

#### Re-evangelizing

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. William Bennett has written convincingly and depressingly of 'Quantifying America's Decline'. He says that only civic virtue and the development of character through education can stem the tide of rapid societal disintegration. However, it can be shown convincingly, as did the historian Christopher Dawson, that

it is the religious impulse which supplies the cohesive force which unifies a society and a culture.... 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 that plays an important role in influencing behavior can flourish or even survive.

#### Entering a new stage

Pope John Paul II played a crucial, if not pre-eminent, role in the downfall of Communism in Eastern Europe. He now views his final struggle as to rescue the formerly Christian West from a hedonistic materialism that threatens civilization as surely as godless Marxism. The ideology of the Bolshevik Revolution having collapsed, the ideological excesses of the French Revolution must be the next to go. It is quite fitting that Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great anti-liberal of our time, met with the Holy Father on the 15th anniversary of the Pope's election for over an hour. What a conversation it must have been. Solzhenitsyn was coming directly from France where he had commemorated the 200th anniversary of the massacres of the Vendée Catholics by the French revolutionaries. Some years back we witnessed the Nobel Peace Prize winner Mother Teresa going head to head with the Clintons and the Gores over abortion and adoption at the congressional prayer breakfast in Washington, the sacred and the secular at loggerheads when they should be at each other's service.

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 1880's where he saw that God would allow the forces of evil free rein for a

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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.

**Conclusion**

The great French sociologist De Tocqueville speaking of the U.S. said that: the men of our days are little disposed to

believe but as soon as they have any religion, they immediately find in themselves a latent instinct which urges them unconsciously towards Catholicism. Many of the doctrines and practices of the Roman Church astonish them; but they feel a secret admiration for its discipline and its great unity attracts them.

If the Catholic moment is indeed present in the West, Pope John Paul evidently sees in Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and his Work an effective means to seize it.

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