
OPUS DEI: CHARISM AND LAW

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What follows is a personal reflexion in the light of Pope John Paul II's recent decision to establish Opus Dei as a personal prelature in applying the relevant indications of Vatican Council II and subsequent postconciliar legislation.

Primacy of the Charism

At the outset it must be said quite clearly that what is essential about Opus Dei is its spirit, its foundational charism, that is to say, what God made its Founder see on 2 October 1928 and what Monsignor Escriva explained over and over again since then, in a host of different ways. One has only to read his works to grasp the central core of the message they contain. 'From its very beginning, Opus Dei's only aim has been what I have just described', he told *Time* magazine's correspondent in 1967. 'To contribute to there being in the middle of the world men and women of every race and social condition who try to love and serve God and their fellow men in and through their everyday work. Since the foundation of the Work in 1928, my teaching has been that holiness is not reserved for the privileged few. All the ways of the earth, every state in life, every profession, every honest task can be divine' (*Conversations with Mgr Escriva de Balaguer*, Dublin 1980, no. 26).

Ordinary people, then, whom you might find anywhere. Men and women who are deeply aware of their Christian vocation and desire only to be Christian faithful, reliable people of the People of God who seek a full self-giving to the God of that People.

Opus Dei members are 'people who live in the world and hold down normal jobs. They do not join Opus Dei to give up their job. On the contrary, what they look for in the Work is the spiritual help they need to sanctify their ordinary work. Thus their work becomes a means to sanctify themselves and help others do likewise. They do not change their status. They continue being single, married, widowed or priests. What they try to do is serve God and their fellowmen in their state in life. Opus Dei is not interested in vows or promises. It asks its members to make an effort to practise human and Christian virtues as children of God, despite the limit-

ations and errors that are inevitable in human life' (*Conversations*, no. 24).

Around Mgr Escrivá and inspired in that foundational charism an ever-growing pastoral phenomenon developed.

At first it had hardly any juridical shape. The moment of institution was barely seen. This was so because the pastoral reality was so far removed from the possibilities allowed for in the law of the Church at that time. But the very development of Opus Dei and its presence in the life of the Church demanded a minimum of institutionalisation and juridical personality. Mgr Escrivá had a sharp juridical mind and his concern in this regard was to ensure that the legal form Opus Dei took did not smother its charism but rather allowed it full expression. Accordingly, the Founder of Opus Dei, who never took a step without remaining in close communion with the hierarchy, never showed any haste in obtaining a canonical status. He always wanted the pastoral and apostolic reality to lead the way.

The various approvals which Opus Dei received from 1941 onwards from ecclesiastical authorities gave this Christian and ecclesial phenomenon the 'least inadequate legal dress' (the phrase is the Founder's) to be found among the juridico-canonical structures of the time. But it was not until Vatican Council II that a suitable juridical structure was devised. This came about through its including in its constitutions and decrees theological and spiritual realities proclaimed by Opus Dei in the 40's and 50's and indeed from the time of its foundation. But more about that later.

Looking back and seeing things with a certain historical perspective, those approvals, and especially the definitive approval of Opus Dei by Pope Pius XII in 1950, signify more than anything else, the definitive approval of *the spirit of Opus Dei*, or what amounts to the same thing, the recognition by the Church, at the highest level, of Opus Dei's foundational charism, as an evangelical way of being and living, preached and spread everywhere by the Founder.

Nonetheless, the juridical problem remained unsolved. This 'long pilgrimage' of Opus Dei, the juridical problem which some people have not understood, has been nothing more than a witness to its faithfulness to the original charism, that is to say, to Opus Dei's mission in the Church. The new juridical status, as a

personal prelature, makes it possible for the charism and the juridical solution to be harmoniously combined. In other words, the members of Opus Dei, in law and without ambiguity, are what they have always been in their human and theological existence: ordinary lay people, those who are lay; ordinary secular priests those who are priests. Its juridical status as a personal prelature does not change Opus Dei, which remains what it was and is, and it forestalls anyone trying to change it through the pressure caused by an inadequate juridical framework.

Charism and mission

Nevertheless in Pope John Paul's decision there is in my view another aspect which cannot be passed over. It goes beyond the merely juridical. In the documents of Vatican II and post-conciliar legislation personal prelatures appear as ecclesial institutions which the Church may use to carry out certain pastoral projects outlined by the Council itself. By creating a personal prelature the Church, as such, entrusts it with the task of carrying out particular pastoral initiatives as part of the process of renewal desired by the Council. This has happened for the first time in the case of Opus Dei's establishment as a personal prelature. It will be worthwhile, therefore, stopping to consider for a moment the theological and pastoral importance of Vatican II.

Theologians are in agreement in affirming that one of the chief characteristics of the Magisterium in the recent Council is its solemn declaration regarding the universal call to holiness. It is the central message of chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*): 'It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered in earthly society' (no. 40). When describing these different walks of life the Council speaks of those who live in the ordinary conditions of secular life, and specifically of those engaged in the world of work: 'Those who engage in human work, often of a heavy kind, should perfect themselves through it, help their fellow-citizens and promote the betterment of the whole of human society and the whole of creation; indeed, with active charity, rejoicing in hope and bearing one another's burdens, they should imitate Christ who plied his hands with carpenter's tools and is always working with the Father

for the salvation of all; and they should rise to a higher sanctity, truly apostolic, by their everyday work itself' (no. 41). Those who thus engage in work, men or women, married, unmarried or widowed, are lay people, ordinary Christian faithful, who 'by reason of their special vocation . . . seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they must manifest Christ to others' (no. 31).

These are the very same ideas we find, for example, expressed by the Founder of Opus Dei in 1968: 'Since God wants the majority of Christians to remain in secular activities and to sanctify the world *from within*, the purpose of Opus Dei is to help them discover their divine mission, showing them that their human vocation — their professional, family and social vocation — is not opposed to their supernatural vocation. On the contrary, it is an integral part of it.

'The one and only mission of Opus Dei is the spreading of this message, which comes from the Gospel, among all those who live and work in the world, whatever be their background, profession or trade. And to those who grasp this ideal of holiness, the Work offers the spiritual assistance and the doctrinal, ascetical and apostolic training which they need to put it into practice (*Conversations* . . . no. 60).

The first personal prelature erected by the Supreme Authority of the Church is entrusted with a world-wide promotion of one way and mode of living this fundamental dimension of Vatican Council II. The pastoral and apostolic purpose of personal prelatitudes demands that their establishment depend not only on the Christian authenticity which animates them but also on the proven reality of their pastoral effectiveness. When giving Opus Dei its task logically enough the Church has borne in mind the abundant experience of this institution in realising this objective of the

Council. Opus Dei's work of 50 years in the world must have been a very decisive factor.

Summing up

What I wish to emphasise in my concluding remarks does not cut us off from what I have just said about charism and mission.

The change of Opus Dei into a personal prelature signifies not only a new and solemn recognition of its spirit, nor only the purpose of carrying out particular pastoral objectives but something much more. It means that the Church, through its Supreme Authority, has given Opus Dei the task of realising in the Church itself and in the world a task which is formally *the same mission implied by its original charism*. In the words of its newly appointed Prelate: Opus Dei has come 'to remind all men of the universal call to holiness and to lay down a way of achieving this goal, namely specifically through the sanctification of everyday work which by that very fact becomes a means and an occasion for apostolate.'

This is the mission which the members of Opus Dei undertake and in fulfilling it they count on the spiritual help of the clergy of the Prelature, who were originally laymen incorporated in the Prelature.

So, making Opus Dei a personal prelature can be taken as an example of how in the Church the two factors of charism and law are in no way a joining of contraries but of realities which in themselves demand mutual integration, at times hard to achieve and always the fruit of a patient and active hope.

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