
THE RISE OF OPUS DEI

George William Rutler

The growth of Opus Dei around the world since 1928, and its inculturation in the United States these past few years, must certainly be one of the most important modern religious developments, especially since Vatican II. If Opus Dei shares a common breath of spirit with the Council, it has also shared an enormous amount of misunderstanding and even misrepresentation. This very circumstance knits it and the Council into the consistent pattern of tradition, since such has been the lot of great councils and movements. Chalcedon, Trent, and Vatican I took longer to digest than Vatican II probably will, and we know that the various progressions of subapostolic eremites, medieval frairs, and missionaries of the romantic enthusiasm did their spade work before anyone had come up with a neat definition of what that work was.

The intent of Vatican II is generally described as 'pastoral' but that hardly credits its dogmatic integrity, and haplessly has given an excuse for the tendency to make it an impression rather than a promulgation. Along the same lines, the uniqueness of Opus Dei — neither a religious order nor a secular institute, but now the Roman Catholic Church's only Personal Prelature — has encouraged unsubtle observers to force it into a preconceived mold with the result that at times it is presented as an insincere order or an overly ambitious institute.

Only the same Church which defined the God-Man without painting him as the fleshly sprite of some Gilbert and Sullivan fancy can explain Opus Dei. The important thing is that the Church has just done this in erecting a Personal Prelature. In considering what this Personal Prelature means, I am writing as a diocesan parish priest, not a member of Opus Dei, but one who has observed and benefited from its increasing presence in New York.

Pigeon-holing

To call Opus Dei secretive, which has often been done, even by professional journalists, must bring back to Dominic, Ignatius, John Eudes, and Elizabeth Seton sparks of their lightning days on earth. It is not unlike holding Jesus suspect for having spent so

many anonymous years in Nazareth. The analogy can be extended, for as Christ was dismissed by logical people who saw no illogic in branding him both too human and too ethereal, too iconoclastic and too rigorist, too inventive and too commonplace, so Opus Dei will be described even by the most intent guardians of public information as both reactionary and radical, relativist and ultra-montane, rich and austere, clericalist and lay-dominated, Iberian and international, secretive and self-advertising, cultic and worldly, Tridentine and the spoiled heirs of Vatican II. But to dismiss Opus Dei is to contradict the voice of the modern popes and architects of Vatican II. In the sense that Cardinal Newman was the invisible *peritus* of the Council, Msgr Josemaria Escriva, who founded Opus Dei on 2 October 1928, was its anonymous *peritus*, revered by John XXIII and Paul VI, compared to St Francis de Sales by John Paul I, and introduced to the process of beatification by John Paul II. What Newman taught about the work of priests and laity in the ecclesial economy, Escriva implemented as a working model 30 years before the Council, and it may be realized soon enough that Opus Dei is the Council's *Lumen Gentium* in action.

Opus Dei now has 72,000 members and 1,000 priests of 87 nationalities in some fifty countries (and far from being secretive or hidden, its public headquarters in the U.S. may be found at 117 Overlook Circle, New Rochelle, N.Y.). Its purpose, in the words of Pope John Paul I as Patriarch of Venice, is to provide not a spirituality for lay people but a lay spirituality. That is, the laity are not incomplete clergymen but the stuff of the Church, with a responsibility, not an option, to become saints. Priests exist to help them do it, thus receiving a double obligation to do the same themselves.

Essential characteristics

It was only for canonical requirements that Pope Pius XII designated Opus Dei a secular institute in 1947. The founder had a larger idea of what he had begun. It was not 'a circumstantial organization', as he explained in 1967:

Opus Dei is not interested in vows . . . or any form of consecration but the one which all have already received through Baptism. Our association in no way wants its members to change their state in life, or to stop being simple faithful exactly the same as anyone else, in order to acquire a *status perfectionis*. On the contrary, what it wants and endeavours

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is that each should do an apostolate and should sanctify himself within his own state, in the place and condition which he has in the Church and in society.

The founder also stressed that,

a Christian should do all honest human work, be it intellectual or manual, with the greatest perfection possible, with human perfection (professional competence) and with Christian perfection (for love of God's will and as a service to mankind). Human work done in this way, no matter how humble or insignificant it may seem, helps to shape the world in a Christian manner.

On 28 November 1982, eighteen months after opening the process of beatification for Escriva, the Holy See recognized the uniqueness of Opus Dei by erecting a Personal Prelature. It applies to persons rather than territories; in this case there is a prelate, the member clergy, and laypeople married and single. Lay members in every way under the jurisdiction of the local bishop and are committed to the jurisdiction of the Prelate of Opus Dei only in matters of spiritual formation and apostolic activity. It is not a 'diocese within a diocese.'

The purpose of the new status was to provide a flexible means of furthering the Church's evangelism. That Opus Dei was chosen for this status indicates the Holy Father's recognition of the accomplishments already evidenced by Opus Dei, its absolute fidelity to the authentic magisterium, and its unqualified obedience to the Sovereign Pontiff. By making clear that members are not 'consecrated persons' but ordinary lay Catholics and secular priests, the Prelature is a sign of Escriva's deep solicitude for the Religious life and the quite compatible distinction he made between Religious and Opus Dei members, who are ordinary faithful engaged in secular work, and who for the most part live in their own homes as married people.

The failure to provide specific spirituality for the laity may explain in part the deterioration of lay and Religious apostolates in recent years. Various attempts to combine the two, especially as tried by many women Religious, have had disastrous results. Rather than provoke criticism or envy, the success of Opus Dei — properly reflected upon — could help inspire a renewal of the founding charisms in the classical Rules.

In today's modern world

A world that persists at the close of the twentieth century to make the term 'modern' an inclusive description of its values could become traumatized to discover that it has already begun to breathe the atmosphere of the post-modern age. For that reason alone, it is useful to examine what it is that makes Opus Dei more timely as time goes on. For one thing, it combines complete freedom in the choice of profession (and political, electronic, and social expression) with obedience to the Holy Father and his bishops in matters of faith and morals. There are no 'degrees' within the membership since the vocation to holiness is the same for all. *The Work* is further aided by the prayers, alms, and work of nonmembers called Cooperators, many of whom are not Catholic. This arrangement, unusual when first provided before Vatican II, helped elicit an amused response from Pope John when Escriva told him that Opus Dei had learned ecumenicity without pontifical help.

From among the total membership, a small number live a celibate life, and about two per cent are chosen to receive Holy Orders. The Prelature has its own schools for the study of philosophy and theology. This structure operates without preferential regard for persons whether lawyers, housewives, politicians, policemen, teachers, miners, or factory workers. Its appeal to the intelligentsia and people of influence should not distract one from its far more numerous constituency of ordinary citizens.

Furthermore, through Opus Dei the Catholic Church is sustaining many who in latter years have been left uninspired by a banal liturgical life, inconsistent catechesis, anemic preaching, and amorphous spiritual direction. Moreover, Opus Dei is reaching university students, encouraging members in the establishment of schools and colleges (including the first integrated school in East Africa), providing vocational training opportunities for the poor, operating medical dispensaries and remedial education in depressed areas, and preparing for priestly vocations men of first rank intellectually and morally who can eloquently articulate the Church's eternal commitments in any situation.

To the present confusions, the fresh voice of Escriva on the sanctification of ordinary work is so approved in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* that one might well see an affinity between the Spaniard and the Pole. However that may be, the Spaniard's vision has already made itself felt around the world.

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The causes for the beatification of two who heard and followed Escriva, have already been introduced: one a 41-year-old Argentinian engineer who died in 1943 and the other an 18-year-old Catalan girl who died in 1959.

Following the early Christians

The spirituality that has produced this is easily traced. Without being facetious, we can say that the spirituality of Opus Dei is the spirituality of the primitive Church, the subapostolic Church, the renaissance Church – refusing to call any one age the age of faith since the only age of faith is that which begins at baptism and is commended to Providence with final absolution. The metaphysics of tradition teaches the difference between things primitive and things antique; that which is primitive is the substance of that which is classic, while the fashion of any one date is dated by the next. So the founder of Opus Dei dug deeply to the primitive roots for the source of his radicalism, resisting the popular urge which pretends to be radical by going out on a limb: ‘The easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by the simple, and sublime fact of their baptism.’

With this in mind, Opus Dei may well make a claim not dared even by recent leaders of various schools who in their several ways married the Spirit of the Age and who now are burying their spouse: for while Opus Dei’s radicalism has fared well in the twentieth century, it is even more the spirituality of the twenty-first. And that is not the dream world of H.G. Wells or Flash Gordon; every infant born today will attain the next century before he attains drinking age. For all the talking that has been done about a post-conciliar Church and a post-Christian culture, a more informed retrospective may decide that we are in the pangs of a pre-Christian generation, and what appears to be the post-Conciliar Church is the flexing of the Conciliar Church about to take its first steady step. As it does, Opus Dei will make its imprint.