THE SECRET OF OPUS DEI

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How can each individual do God's work?

Short on money and English but long on optimism, three young Spaniards arrived in Chicago in the winter of 1949 with a mission: to do the work of God. Opus Dei – The Work of God – was their purpose and their cause.

If not precisely a household name, Opus Dei is today known to many people in the United States and Canada. It has been praised by Popes and other Church leaders and is viewed with appreciation by thousands who have benefited from what is offers. Yet it has also been called ultra-conservative, secretive, or otherwise blameworthy. What is the truth about this unusual movement? What is it really up to?

To Hispanic and black teenagers on Chicago's South Side, Opus Dei is the organization behind the Midtown Center, which offers weekend and summer courses ranging from model rocketry to photography, along with sports and leadership training.

To young people at student residences near major universities in several U.S. cities it is the provider of a wholesome home away from home; to students at schools in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere it is the proponent of a tough, no-frills curriculum which emphasizes hard work, academic excellence, and the development of human and Christian virtues.

To its members in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico, as well as to many others who have taken part in its retreats and other spiritual activities, it is an

intense program of formation and motivation which they believe helps them lead better lives as Christians in the world.

To a journalistic critic it is 'an ineffective minority group.'

To a bishop in a large East Coast diocese it is 'a blessed presence' which 'works to sanctify the laity where they are.'

Is Opus Dei some kind of esoteric religious order? Hardly – considering that its members are ordinary people going about their usual work and family and social lives. For some this ordinariness itself causes difficulties. Hearing talk of 'dedication' and 'vocation',they expect to see something that looks like a religious order. Failing to see it, they imagine Opus Dei is hiding something. Yet ordinariness lies at the heart of Opus Dei's message: that ordinary people living ordinary lives can and should aim at sanctity.

It began with a man, an idea, and bells.

The man was Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, born in Barbastro, Spain, Jan 9, 1902, the second of three children, and ordained a priest on March 28, 1925. As early as 1917 he had the notion that God wanted something special of him. But what?

The answer came, accompanied by the pealing of bells from a nearby church, in Madrid on Oct 2, 1982, while he was doing a retreat. It was Opus Dei, an association which, as Msgr Escriva later explained, was to 'tell men and women of every country and of every condition, race, language, milieu, and state of life . . . that they can love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life and their normal social relations.'

A conventional success story would record that the Work, as its members familiarly call it, caught on at once and spread like wildfire. In fact, nothing like that happened.

Msgr Escriva was fond of recalling that at the start he had 'my twenty-six years, God's grace, a good sense of humour, and nothing else'. Gradually he gathered a few followers, students with whom he shared his vision. In 1930 the Work took a significant step forward with the founding of the Women's Branch. But growth came slowly, and the Spanish civil war was a serious check to expansion.

By 1940 nevertheless the association had between 300 and 400 members. During the Second World War it spread to Italy and Portugal, then to Ireland and England. In 1943 it received its first approval by the Holy See, and in 1946 Msgr Escriva and several companions moved to Rome. International headquarters are now located in several large buildings at 73 Viale Bruno Buozzi in a Roman residential neighbourhood.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the Work was introduced into Mexico, West Germany, France, and most of Latin America. Since then it has continued to grow in Latin America and Western Europe, while spreading to Kenya, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Zaire, the Philippines, Australia, Japan and Hong Kong. Currently it has more than 70,000 members representing well over 80 nationalities.

Msgr Escriva died in Rome on June 26, 1975. Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice, in an article published just before he was elected Pope John Paul I, called him a 'revolutionary priest . . . vaulting over traditional barriers.' Pope John Paul II, who as Cardinal-Archbishop of Cracow lectured several times in Rome at conferences organized by members of Opus Dei, has hailed the movement, for its 'commitment to holiness and to the Gospel witness.' At the

time the formal process began last spring, petitions urging Msgr Escriva's beatification had been received from, among many others, 69 cardinals and some 1,300 bishops. One of his earliest and closest associates, the Very Rev Alvaro del Portillo, was elected his successor and serves as president general of Opus Dei.

When people who have a hard time understanding that ordinary individuals can aim to live dedicated lives accuse members of Opus Dei of being secretive, the response is that it would be really strange for them to act differently. 'Members of Opus Dei don't advertise their membership, but neither do they conceal it,' says one. 'Call it humility or just good taste, it's basically a matter of naturalness -- of not pretending to be something you aren't.'

In any case, Opus Dei's spirit, purposes, and program are, literally and figuratively, an open book.

The book is a collection of spiritual maxims by Msgr Escriva called *The Way* and regarded by many as a spiritual classic. Some three million copies in 34 languages have been published to date.

'Don't let your life be sterile,' the book begins. It could serve as a motto. Opus Dei urges people to be useful, to be of service, to carry on an active apostolate in and to the world. A journalist once said Opus Dei inculcates a 'Naive success ethic' but this misses the point. The Work does not aim at conventional success but at sanctity. Says *The Way:* 'If things go well let's rejoice, blessing God, who makes them prosper. And if they go wrong? Let's rejoice, blessing God, who allows us to share the sweetness of his Cross.'

This was the spirit that led three members of the Work to Chicago in 1949, bringing with them little except a picture of the Blessed Virgin. 'I can give you nothing else, my sons,' the founder of Opus Dei had explained.

The new arrival took root and grew. A student residence soon was established near the University of Chicago. In 1964 the Midtown Center was founded on the near west side to serve the Hispanic and black populations there. Other centers and programs have followed.

But not only in Chicago. From there members of Opus Dei fanned out to other parts of the country: to Boston in 1954 with the establishment of another student residence, Trimount House; to Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Washington in 1956; and in subsequent years to New York, San Francisco, South Bend, Burlington, Newark, and Providence. In 1958 several members from the U.S. combined with others from France and Spain to begin efforts in Canada, where centers now exist in Montreal, Quebec, and Toronto.

Its institutional presence is creditable but not overwhelming. Technically, there is only one 'Opus Dei school' – The Heights School (grade and high) for boys, located in Washington – although other schools, for boys and girls, have been launched in several cities by members of the Work on their own. There are study centers like Chicago's Midtown providing evening and weekend programs in academic enrichment and leadership development. There are the student residences. There is the Lexington Institute in Chicago, where members of the Women's Branch offer a two-year program to train high school graduates for careers in the food service professions. And there are retreat and conference centers – Arnold Hall near Boston and Shellbourne in Valparaiso, Ind.

But institutions are not the measure of Opus Dei. Nor does it seek to substitute for anything else – to be a replacement for any other organization or programs. Its focus is on individual people – on forming and motivating them to

strive for sanctity and carry on an apostolate where they live and work.

There is no telling how many have been touched by Opus Dei through a retreat, an evening of recollection, a study center program, or the individual efforts of members. But formal membership in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico now totals about, 4,000, divided almost evenly between the men's and women's branches. The two branches are in practice almost entirely separate. At the same time, there are a fair number of families in which husband, wife, and one or more children belong to the Work. The majority are under 35 and college-educated, although that is not a requirement for membership and Opus Dei members include significant numbers of workers of all kinds.

Why do people join? Leaving aside the most important but most elusive reason – grace – the answer is usually that a person was impressed by someone already a member, to the point that membership began to seem like an attractive possibility for him or her, too.

That is how it happened with Joseph O'Donnell, a Vice President of the American Mining Congress in Washington. Recalling his contacts with a friend who belonged to Opus Dei, he says, 'It wasn't so much his knowledge about the Church and religion that impressed me, but his kindness and sincerity.' Led by his friend's example to investigate Opus Dei, O'Donnell is now himself a member.

'To me Opus Dei just makes tremendously good sense,' he says. 'I guess I had gotten to be a kind of Sunday Catholic. It's a very easy thing to do. Through Opus Dei I've come to understand what the Christian vocation in the world really means – trying to live as a Christian there, do the Lord's work, and help other people.'

Three of the O'Donnell sons have also joined. 'As far as the family is concerned,' their father says, 'the effect has been tremendously positive. My wife and I often say to each other, 'What could these boys be doing that would make them any happier?' I've known cases where parents have been concerned about having their children join the Work because they thought they were losing them. But in our experience it makes them much closer to the family, though of course it's true that they also have a new family – Opus Dei, I mean – to which they also are attached.'

Opus Dei sees itself as a family which at the same time has a clear organizational structure – the president general assisted by a General Council in Rome, and in each country a collegial body headed by a counselor. The Women's Branch has a comparable organization.

In both the men's and women's branches a relatively small number of members make a commitment to celibacy and are on call to go wherever the demands of the apostolate require. Most, however, are married and have families. Some of the single members are ordained after joining Opus Dei; they make up about 2% of the membership. Diocesan priests who are already ordained may also join Opus Dei; they remain in their dioceses under the authority of their bishops. Rounding out the picture are 'cooperators,' including non-Catholics, who support the association's aims and take part in some of its programs.

To a great extent Opus Dei can be summed up in four words: vocation, work, apostolate, and formation.

Despite the different forms of membership and the difference in function and lifestyle which they entail, members believe they share essentially the same vocation. This concept of a calling is central to Opus Dei, and its idea of vocation focuses especially on work.

'Make no mistake about it,' Msgr Escriva once said in a homily, published last year in a collection called Friends of God. 'Man's duty to work is not a consequence of original sin, nor is it just a discovery of modern times. It is an indispensable means which God has entrusted to us here on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power.'

Another time he told a New York *Times* interviewer: 'In God's service there are no second-class jobs, all of them are important . . . Sanctity, for the vast majority of men, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it.'

Work and the round of everyday activities provide the context of apostolate for the ordinary lay person. As Opus Dei sees it, apostolate is simply the natural response of an individual trying to live as a Christian and help others around him do the same. Msgr Escriva put it this way: 'Whoever said that to speak about Christ and to spread his doctrine, you need to do anything unusual or remarkable? Just live your ordinary life; work at your job, trying to fulfill the duties of your state in life . . . Be loyal; be understanding with others and demanding on yourself. Be mortified and cheerful. This will be your apostolate.'

It is not a sense of superiority which causes members to act in this way but something quite different. Says one, a writer and family man: 'It would be absolutely false to imagine I joined Opus Dei, solved all my problems, and then set out to help everybody else solve theirs. I want to become a saint, but I'm not one yet. The difference Opus Dei makes is that I now have a new source of encouragement in trying to cope with my weaknesses – including picking myself up and starting over when I blow it – and for giving others a hand.'

Opus Dei's program of formation for this enterprise is demanding but not remarkable, composed as it is of traditional elements of Catholic piety and doctrine according to the letter and spirit of Vatican Council II. 'I suppose it sounds like a lot,' remarked one member. 'Daily Mass and Communion, frequent confessions, Scripture and spiritual reading, mental prayer, the Rosary, and so on. There is a strong emphasis on devotion to the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph and on loyalty to the Pope and bishops. Courses and lectures on doctrine are an integral part of the program, too.

'But it's like most things in life – you find time for what you really want to do. If there are shortcuts to establishing and maintaining a relationship with the Lord, I don't know what they are. Furthermore, Opus Dei puts a lot of stress on order and making good use of time. When you get the hang of it, you find that you have time for what the Work asks of you and for a lot else besides, because you don't waste time the way you used to. The basic purpose of it all is nothing more – or less – than to help you live your whole day in the presence of God.'

In an age which puts a premium on comfort and an affluent version of the good life, this emphasis on piety and self-discipline can sound not only old-fashioned but downright unhealthy. A psychiatrist who practices in a large Eastern city and knows a good deal about Opus Dei sees it differently.

'People who develop problems are ones who have avoided piety,' he maintains. 'The person with piety sees things in a realistic perspective and in that sense is less vulnerable to stress. This holds true for families, too. I find that, just on the natural level, a family with genuine piety is likely to have a lot fewer problems, while the absence of piety leads to an unstable environment, if nothing else.'

How does Opus Dei's program work in practice? Consider the case of Richard

Ellis, an electrical engineer in charge of engineering facilities at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Columbia, Md. He and his wife were active Catholics long before encountering Opus Dei. They were, for example, among the first certified lay teachers of religion in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in the Washington area and taught successfully for years.

'But the thing we missed was personal formation, and we felt that need very strongly,' Ellis recalls. 'You can't teach religion simply as an academic subject. You can teach mathematics without living it, but you can't teach love of our Lord without loving him.'

Then a friend brought him in contact with Opus Dei. 'I immediately recognized it as something I'd been looking for,' Ellis says. So did Mrs Ellis . They became members in 1963. Driving home from a CCD class some time later, Dick Ellis said to his wife: 'I've been teaching that same catechism lesson for five years, and this is the first time I really understood it because now I'm trying to live it myself.'

For the past decade Ellis has presided over an informal boys' club in his home bringing together youngsters for religious instruction, sports, and character formation. He also conducts two 'study circles' for men – monthly sessions of instruction and discussion on topics related to the practice of the faith. Mrs Ellis, confined to a wheelchair by a neurological disease, has three groups of her own – for young mothers, for older married women, and for working women. Underlining the importance of Opus Dei in his wife's spiritual life, Ellis says: 'People often remark on how cheerful she is, and how remarkable it is that a person with a 'handicap' can be a means of service to others.'

The Ellises' initiatives are matched by many other Opus Dei members. In several U.S. cities, for example, individual members have launched a 'Family Development Program' aimed at helping parents increase their skills in educating and forming their children. Focusing on a case-history method and encouraging interaction among participants, this evening course spread over 10 weeks deals with such topics as child development, communication and motivation, handling money, school work, formation of character and religious formation. Under the auspices of the International Foundation of the Family in Zurich, Switzerland, similar programs have proved popular in Western Europe, several Latin American countries, the Philippines, and Australia.

But for Dick Ellis, as for many other members of Opus Dei, much of his apostolate is carried out on the job – and, in his view, it helps him do his job better.

'Before I joined Opus Dei I was very interested – to a fault – in my work. But my interest wasn't focused on anything except the technical problems to be solved,' he says.

'More recently I've been involved in supervising a large group of technical and craft personnel. I have to deal with individuals on a person to person basis concerning their personal problems, technical programs, and management policy. The Work has given me a perspective on these things which I couldn't have gotten anywhere else. Suppose I have a man who has a problem working with other people. I see him as a human being and a brother, I try to listen and understand, and I provide the support necessary to correct the difficulties. This almost always helps the individual, and it creates a stronger organization, too.

'I think some people are suprised that I take the time and trouble to work with persons they might tend to brush off. They don't say 'That's Opus Dei.'

But the fact is that Opus Dei has changed my perspective – it has affected how I deal with people in a very good and positive way. I try to build friendships, and my life is much more satisfying because I have many friends.'

Despite Opus Dei's emphasis on individual initiative, some critics have accused it of fostering conformity and passivity. The psychiatrist mentioned earlier disagrees. 'That kind of criticism simply doesn't understand the spirit of Opus Dei with regard to freedom and responsibility,' he says. 'But it's easy to see where it's coming from. Unfortunately, the common notion of freedom today is that you must be absolutely self-sufficient, the author of whatever happens in your life. People who take that approach end up with problems because they don't realize the need human beings have for one another. It's very natural to involve other people in your problems and decisions. It isn't passivity which determines that, but the natural orientation of human beings toward involving themselves with others.'

Back in the 1950s, when several members of the Work held posts in the Spanish government, some said Opus Dei aimed to manipulate public policy by placing people in key positions. Although such talk has died down, the Work *is* out to change the world – not, however, as a power broker but as a Christian 'leaven' in society.

In this sense, it is interested in how its members do their jobs. But its interest is focused exclusively on their success and failure in living Christian lives in the work environment and helping others, not on matters of policy or professional judgment. It has no line on politics and economics and no concern for whether its members are Republicans or Democrats, supply-siders or Keynesians.

Says Father Malcolm Kennedy, a priest on the staff of the U.S. headquarters: 'All professions can be sanctified, including those pertaining to the political and social orders. What Opus Dei teaches a person in public life – or in private life – is to sanctify himself through the pursuit of interior life and the practice of virtues. Opus Dei itself has no agenda, no social program. Its only purpose is to form the leaven. All this is expressed by the seal of Opus Dei – a circle representing the world, with the cross as its center.'

Concepts like lay initiative and sanctity in the world were avant-garde novelties when the Work began but, especially since Vatican II, they have come to be widely appreciated. The 'universal call to holiness' is a major theme of the Council's Constitution on the Church; the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People stresses the laity's role; the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World underscores the importance of the secular order and the Christian mission there. When Msgr Escriva founded Opus Dei in 1928 he was ahead of his times. Times may just now be catching up with him.

That is the opinion of Dr. Germain Grisez, a prominent philosopher and theologian at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., who is not a member of Opus Dei. He says:

'Something like Opus Dei is going to be very important in the renewal of the Church along the lines marked out by Vatican II. For the Council calls for a Christian life which is at once more in touch with the world and more oriented toward heaven. Opus Dei is suited to the program of the Council, in that it takes people where they are, in their secular occupations, and forms them toward living in and with Jesus in glory here in the world.'

Says a bishop in a diocese where Opus Dei has been active for some years: 'The presence of Opus Dei is a blessed presence, not competitive but rather

helpful to parishes and institutions by enhancing the spiritual life of those who hereby can make a greater contribution in building up the Body of Christ wherever they are – in work, in play, or at home.' This emphasis, a pastor familiar with the Work adds, 'goes hand in glove with the American style and the needs of the Church in the 21st century.'

Many see Opus Dei's spirit as a contemporary synthesis of the old and new. Explains Grisez: 'A very important aspect of the reality of Opus Dei which shows its significance for the merging Church in its renewed form is that it is really new in many ways, an up-to-date movement which fits the situation and needs of today.

'At the same time, all of the Opus Dei people I know are marked by deep fidelity to Catholic tradition. They are not old-guard conservatives. But they are conservative with respect to what is important – the truth of Catholic faith, the model of holiness in Jesus, and the sacramental life of the Church.'

All that may be true, but it leaves a mystery. Opus Dei makes many demands on its members and offers them no tengible rewards. What is it that draws busy practical-minded men and women with both feet in the secular world to the Work and keeps them there? That is Opus Dei's secret – a secret cleared up in the last point of *The Way:*

'Love. Fall in love, and you will not leave him.'