

The Prelature of Opus Dei's Service to the Dioceses*

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In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, the Servant of God John Paul II recalled that it is the task of the bishop “tirelessly to promote a genuine pastoral plan and educational task of holiness, in order to carry out the program set forth in the fifth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* about the universal call to holiness.”¹ It is within this wide panorama, which includes not just each bishop but the whole of the Church of today and for all time, that I wish to offer my reflections on the service of Opus Dei to the dioceses.

The mission of the entire Church and of all her faithful is holiness and the recapitulation of all creation in Christ (*Jn* 12:32 and *1 Cor* 15:25-28). Already in the early centuries some Fathers saw the Church as the *mundus reconciliatus*, the mystery of the fulfillment of salvation in men and women and in the whole of creation. Within this common mission, the bishops have the responsibility of serving the whole People of God along the way towards the fullness of charity. The establishment of Opus Dei as a personal prelature—whose 25th anniversary we are commemorating on this Study Day—had for its purpose “that it [Opus Dei] may always be an apt and effective instrument of the salvific mission which the Church carries out for the life of the world.”² How could we not see, in these words of the preamble to the Apostolic Constitution *Ut Sit*, Opus Dei’s convergence with and service to the mission of entire Church? How could we not see, therefore, its convergence with and service to the mission of every diocese in which it carries out its own particular pastoral mission? In St. Josemaría Escrivá’s own life we find confirmation of this truth about Opus Dei’s service to God and the whole Church: two events that occurred in 1933 and 1941 respectively. On both occasions the Founder of the Work experienced the temptation of thinking that perhaps it had all been his own invention and that he was deceiving all those women and men. It was only a moment, from which he emerged by the path of abandonment into God’s hands and service to the Church. Immediately afterwards his heart was filled with great peace, confirming the reality that we still have with us today, and enlightening us as to the mission of Opus Dei and its

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1. John Paul II, post-synodal Ap. Ex. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 41.

2. John Paul II, Ap. Const. *Ut Sit*, Preamble.

fundamental ecclesiality. Years later, he told a group of young people: “If Opus Dei were not for the Lord and to serve the Church, it would be better for it to be dissolved. I would not want it any longer!”³

I have just recalled a “missionary” moment, showing the convergence of Opus Dei’s mission with that of the dioceses, and a moment from the life of the Founder of Opus Dei in which the Church appears as the center that gives light and provides the reason for everything else. In these we can clearly see that the Work’s whole life has always had this fundamental ecclesial dimension. And it is from this perspective—this ecclesial convergence—that I propose to consider the service of Opus Dei to the dioceses.

When we look at the purpose of the Prelature, we see that each one of the faithful aims at sanctification through the practice of the Christian virtues in his or her own state and condition in life, following a specific and clearly secular personal spirituality. Furthermore, the specific mission of the Prelature is addressed to every person, of all conditions and states in life, enabling each one to be united to Christ, to sanctify their work and to play their own proper part in the Church’s mission, carrying out all their activities according to the will of God.⁴ In this mission we see a similarity with the mission entrusted to the bishops that I mentioned at the start of this paper: the task of promoting a genuine pastoral plan and educational task of holiness.

I would like to recall at this stage the words which the Servant of God John Paul II addressed to a group of faithful of Opus Dei in 2001: “First of all, I wish to emphasize that the membership of the lay faithful in their own particular Churches and in the Prelature into which they are incorporated, enables the special mission of the Prelature to converge with the evangelizing efforts of each particular Church, as envisaged by the Second Vatican Council in desiring the figure of personal prelatures.”⁵ Apart from the convergence I have been talking about, these words of the Holy Father invite us to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the membership of the laity in their local particular Church and in the Prelature of Opus Dei. Given that the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei are also faithful of the dioceses where they live, the fruit of the pastoral mission carried out by Opus Dei for the life of the world is present in individuals who are, at one and the same time, faithful both of their own dioceses and of the Prelature. Hence, the fruit of Opus Dei’s mission always remains within the local Churches in which the Prelature of Opus Dei carries out its particular task.

3. Cf. St. Josemaría, Personal Notes, n. 1730, quoted by A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 1 (Princeton, 2001), pp. 385-387; Vol. 2 (New York, 2003), pp. 382-383; and Vol. 3 (New York, 2005), p. 382; J. Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá* (Como, 2001), p. 319.

4. Cf. *Codex Iuris Particularis Operis Dei*, n. 2.

5. John Paul II, Address of March 17, 2001 to the participants in the Workshop on *Novo Millennio Ineunte* organized by the Prelature of Opus Dei, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Italian edition, March 18, 2001, p.6.

Looking at it in the opposite direction may also help us see this convergence: some of the faithful in a diocese are also faithful of Opus Dei, and this characteristic does not weaken their membership of their own diocese, but in the specific case of Opus Dei actually strengthens it. According to the doctrine proclaimed by St. Josemaría Escrivá, the universal call to holiness means, among other things, that sanctification and the apostolic mission are carried out through the conditions of life and the state of every Christian: in Christian existence as it is. There is no need for isolation, or for dispensing with any of those conditions, or seeking sanctity in parallel with any of them.⁶ One such condition is the laity's membership in a diocese or specific local Church. Thus, practice of virtue and mission take place precisely in their local Church. Their quest for sanctity in daily life and their apostolate are always within the local Church to which they belong, and the fruits always remain in the local Church where they live and carry out their activity.

The same can be said of all those who receive the Christian formation which the Work offers in fulfilling its specific mission. They belong to the diocese where they live, and the fruit of this formation remains as a hope of Christian life for all their brothers and sisters. We should also take into account the apostolate that the faithful of the Prelature carry out with non-Christians who live in the diocese. By this apostolate they enable the Kingdom of God, whose seed is the Church, to grow, and they find themselves at the forefront of the evangelization of society, culture, the family, the school, and the different professions and conditions of life in which Christ wishes to be loved and known.

The service that Opus Dei renders to the faithful of the dioceses in which it has a presence—whether or not they are actually members of the Prelature—is thus a very direct one. We will consider it under two aspects: insofar as it takes place through the life of each one of the individual faithful in the various aspects of their own existence, and institutionally, through the formation given to the faithful of the dioceses.

The Church offers the world a great testimony of the salvation to which God calls us precisely through the lived existence of its members. In this sense, the prophetic dimension of the Christian message becomes lived truth, by which all can see that holiness itself, God, has come to dwell among us. Indeed, looking at Christian life as a whole, as it is lived in the different environments of society, the business world, work, the family, or culture, we can appreciate the strength and extent of the laity's mission, to which Opus Dei, as a pastoral phenomenon, contributes in a particular way.

St. Josemaría used to say, "Opus Dei's most important apostolate is the testimony of the life and conversation of each individual member in his daily con-

6. Cf. Fernando Ocariz, "The Vocation to Holiness in Christ and in the Church," *Holiness and the World* (Princeton/Dublin/Chicago, 1997), pp. 32 ff.

tacts with his friends and fellow workers. Who can measure the supernatural effectiveness of this quiet and humble apostolate? It is impossible to evaluate the help we receive from a loyal and sincere friend or the influence of a good mother over her family.”⁷ These words apply to all Christians, from the Apostolic era to our own times. The witness of Christian life has a beneficial influence on the life of our brothers and sisters and on all people. It is difficult to express in numbers the mission of the Church, as it is lived out in the life of Christians. Within it is found the sanctifying divine action, along with the freedom of every one of the faithful who, by loving the Church, plays his or her part in the ecclesial mission. This activity is leaven in the dough (*Mt* 13:33), similar to the missionary activity of the early Christians, which can be seen especially in family life, work, and each Christian’s circle of friendships and acquaintances.

Little by little, this mission leads to a different way of seeing and appreciating life, other people, the world—a vision that is transmitted and becomes lived existence, a true culture that transforms society according to the measure of Christ. There is much more potential and a greater abundance of means and possibilities at this level than at the institutional level (although “institutional” possibilities do exist). But for lay people to be truly the light of the world in which they live, they need a painstaking doctrinal, ascetical, apostolic, human and spiritual formation. In this way they will be in a position to bring together a combination of creativity, grace, freedom, their own capacities, the possibility of dialogue, etc., so that the Kingdom of God becomes a reality in their lives, and all creation is ruled by Christ and offered to the Father through the Holy Spirit. In the words of the well-known Pauline phrase, the aim is *instaurare omnia in Christo* [“to unite all things in Christ”] (*Eph* 1:10). In this regard, Saint Josemaría asserted that “Our task as Christians is to proclaim this kingship of Christ, announcing it through what we say and do.

Our Lord wants men and women of his own in all walks of life. Some he calls away from society, asking them to give up involvement in the world, so that they remind the rest of us by their example that God exists. To others he entrusts the priestly ministry. But he wants the vast majority to stay right where they are, in all earthly occupations in which they work: the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains.”⁸

From the institutional perspective the Prelature of Opus Dei also renders valuable service to the dioceses through the courses and formative meetings it organizes, for the purpose of shedding further light on the quest for holiness and apostolate through each one’s work and personal circumstances.

It is not enough for lay people simply to be in the world and for their existence to be interwoven with the things of the world.⁹ In order to fulfill their spe-

7. St. Josemaría, *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá* (New York, 2002), no. 31.

8. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing by* (New York, 2002), no. 105.

9. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.

cific mission they need to enlighten the environments in which they live with the grace of God, and for this they need a deep and specific formation, such as that which Opus Dei offers.

Apart from this more institutional aspect, the presence of the Prelature of Opus Dei in a diocese offers opportunities for mutual collaboration, specifically among the clergy. In many dioceses, including Rome, priests incardinated in the Prelature carry out—with the consent of their proper Ordinary—diocesan tasks (as parish priests, curates, defenders of the bond, and judges in diocesan tribunals, etc.). In performing these pastoral supply activities, the priests incardinated in Opus Dei sanctify their pastoral work and do apostolate, that is, they do Opus Dei through these ministerial services. Nonetheless, their more particular and more direct pastoral service to the dioceses is accomplished through the fulfillment of the mission of the Prelature. It is for this purpose, and not to fill diocesan vacuums, that the Prelature was established by the supreme authority. If supply work were to hinder the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to the Prelature, it would defeat the purpose for which it was established. Responsibility for the manner in which such service is rendered, in communion with the diocesan bishops, pertains to the Prelate, who has received the mission of governing this instrument “so that it may be apt and effective.”¹⁰

As a bishop, together with my brothers in the episcopate, I cannot fail to appreciate these two dimensions of the service of Opus Dei to the dioceses, both of them converging with the wide mission that the Church fulfills in the world. They help directly, and in a most useful way, in raising the spiritual level of every local Church, and they invite us not to consider only the institutional aspects (which may be more quantifiable), nor to concentrate simply on the service that the Work might offer in resolving specific problems within the diocese. A better idea of Opus Dei’s service to the dioceses is obtained when looked at within the wide panorama we referred to at the start of this paper: the educational and pastoral program of holiness which all the bishops receive as a task from the Lord for the whole Church and, more particularly, for the local Church entrusted to them.

Because of this close collaboration between Opus Dei as a hierarchical institution and every diocese, it is necessary to define competencies and stimulate dialogue. On the one hand, in order to ensure the unity of the diocese under the guidance of the diocesan bishop, the Code of Canon Law in can. 297 requires the consent of the diocesan bishop before a personal prelature exercises its own mission within the diocese; it also provides that the statutes of the Prelature should define the relationship with the Ordinaries of the places where the Prelature operates. On the other hand, it is precisely in order to respect the identity of the mis-

10. John Paul II, Ap. Const. *Ut Sit*, Preamble.

sion of the Prelature and to ensure unity of direction for its work that a Prelature—an institution under the jurisdiction of a single Prelate—is created. Specifically, clerics incardinated in the Prelature are at its service, under the jurisdiction of the Prelate.

Within this broader view of the Church's mission—the *salus animarum*, which will never be lacking—it seems natural for priests of the Prelature of Opus Dei to participate in the council of priests in each diocese.

In view of these reflections, we can conclude that the activity of Opus Dei in the dioceses in which it operates is something “interior” to them, and helps provide each diocese with the internal diversity that characterizes communion.¹¹

It is a service appearing quite naturally within the diocese, without the need for any subsequent “insertion.” The dioceses themselves acknowledge that the fruit of such service is principally in the lived existence of their faithful. It is in those lives that the prophetic dimension of the call to holiness in the middle of the world becomes a reality, and from them that each diocese receives abundant fruits of holiness and apostolic life.

Within the vision of the Church as communion, in which different institutions of the universal Church cooperate in the common mission, it is possible to understand the convergence and importance of this ecclesial service of the Prelature of Opus Dei. Remembering that the clearest truths can shed light on those that are more obscure, we can state that the Petrine service existing within every particular Church is something that can help us understand, albeit in analogous fashion, how the “interior” presence of Opus Dei's service within the particular Church serves the entire communion of the Churches.

11. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion (Vatican City, 1992), no. 16.