

The Secular Institutes and the Opus Dei

by JAMES CONDON

PERHAPS the most important development of the ascetical life within the Catholic Church during the past decade has been the emergence of the Secular Institutes. For some decades previously the feeling had been prevalent that the times called for a new form of the life of perfection and of the apostolate that would correspond to contemporary conditions and give direct answers to contemporary challenges. In the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* published by the Holy See on 2 February 1947, the Church gave its formal approval to these aspirations and laid down the general lines which corporative efforts in this direction should follow.

The secular institutes are the latest stage in a development of the Church's ascetic-apostolic history that leads from the medieval monastic orders through the mendicant orders to the various types of modern congregations. This development is at the same time one of a growing directness in the approach of the dedicated Christian life to the world and the world's redemption. The secular institutes provide a framework and direction primarily for those lay people who wish to follow the life of Christian perfection and carry on their apostolate by engaging in work or professional activity under the normal conditions of the society they live in.

Some secular institutes restrict their action to special spheres—teaching, building, the care of the sick, etc.—or to special countries. This is not essential, however, and indeed the Opus Dei, the first of the secular institutes to be approved by the Church and the most extended at the moment throughout the world, has no such limitation. It includes persons of all professions and walks of life, for the most part simply continuing in the work or profession in which they were when they found their vocation in the Opus Dei. The universal nature of the vocation offered and the absence of geographical limitations makes it possible to gain from an observation of the Opus Dei a good over-all view of what the concept of a secular institute can embrace. However, by no means all the characteristics of the Opus Dei are or need to be common to other secular institutes.

The Opus Dei was founded in Madrid in 1928. Until the end of the Spanish Civil War it was limited to a nucleus of persons gathered about the founder, Don José María Escrivá de Balaguer, an Aragonese priest.

On 19 March 1941, it was recognized as a Pious Union by the Bishop of Madrid. A few years later Fr Escrivá moved to Rome. Its Constitutions were definitively approved by the Holy See in 1950. After 1945 it began its expansion outside Spain and is to-day established in nine western European and almost all the South American countries, in Mexico and the United States. (Ireland is one of the nine European countries.) Its first foundations in each new country have usually been in the capital city or at important university centres.

The "aims" of the Opus Dei are the personal sanctification of its members and the carrying on of the apostolate. It gives its members an ascetical and doctrinal formation, and provides them with direction in their spiritual life and in their apostolate. This apostolate is usually carried on by each individual as the circumstances of his work and ordinary life suggest and allow. However, there are also corporate works of apostolate such as student hostels, educational establishments, publications, various kinds of business enterprises (including farms), etc.

The Work, as the institute is usually called in the vernacular, is divided into two separate sections for men and women. They have a common hierarchy only at the top. The President-General and some of the other top members of the Institute's internal hierarchy are priests. The local directors are lay men or women as the case may be, even when, as is usual, priests of the Opus Dei fall within the area of their jurisdiction.

Priests form a very small proportion of the members of the Opus Dei. Ordinarily, they are members who after spending some time as lay members of the institute are directed by the President-General to proceed to the priesthood. They carry out spiritual functions within the institute and contribute in their clerical and professional capacity to the work of apostolate. Strictly speaking there is nothing to prevent their continuing their professional work as before, but hitherto the pressure of directly spiritual work has generally prevented this. Secular priests can also become members of the Opus Dei. Together with the priests coming from among the ordinary members of the institute they form juridically a special body, the Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross. The full juridical title of the institute commonly known as the Opus Dei is the "Sacerdotal Society of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei".

The Opus Dei offers lay people several different forms of membership. The core of the institute are the so-called "Numeraries", usually persons with a university education or some equivalent form of higher professional training. (This condition does not apply to the same extent for women members.) The institute regards the intellectual and higher professional sphere as a special object of its apostolate. The Numeraries take private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; their dedication is complete. They are not obliged to live together, though groups of them usually do for practical reasons connected with

their spiritual life and their apostolate and to foster the "family life" so characteristic of the institute. Numeraries of the Men's Section do complete courses in philosophy and theology, usually in centres provided by the institute.

Supernumeraries are usually persons from any walk of life whose vocation is for the married life. They can be married or intending to marry. Apart from their share in the professional apostolate, the apostolate of the family is in a special way in their hands. Their vow of poverty is a personal one (the family is not involved!), their obedience has to do only with their spiritual life and they observe chastity in accordance with their state.

A third group are the Oblates. This is intended for those who have not a higher education nor higher professional training or those who for one reason or another cannot share in the "family life" of the Numeraries. They take the three vows in the same full sense as the numeraries but usually live with their families. In particular, the Oblates represent the institute's social mission to the working classes.

There are also the Cooperators who are not bound by any special tie to the institute except that they make material contributions and pray for it and at the same time share in its graces. This group can include non-Catholics.

The priests of the institute are divided into similar groups.

Permeating all these different groups is the particular spirituality peculiar to the Opus Dei and adapted to its special mission. There is a glad acceptance of the world of men as the material out of which sanctity is to be wrung through a life of prayer and sacrifice. Daily work acquires a high supernatural significance, becomes, in fact, the central form of prayer in the spiritual life. This spiritual life rests at the same time on a thorough acquaintance with doctrine and an intimacy with the life of Christ as revealed in the Gospels. From the constant remembrance that they are God's children, the members of the Work draw much of their confidence and optimism.

Relations within the institute are maintained on informal, personal bases. The development of warm human ties and of individual responsibility are regarded as important factors for the cohesion of the institute and the efficacy of its apostolate. The spiritual life and practices of the members are of a kind suitable for a secular atmosphere and the normal circumstances of lay people.

Members are encouraged to take part in public life and hold positions of civic responsibility. It is emphasized that their way to sanctity there lies in the conscientious fulfilment of their duties to the community or to the state that employs them. Political opinions and activity are affairs of the individual members, they enjoy in this respect the same freedom as any other Catholics.