

## THE WORK (I)

### Its' nature and its goals

What is the nature of Opus Dei? What are its aims? Why can one say that it has a supernatural spirit? What are the activities of Opus Dei? What makes the Work so likeable? We will try to offer some answers in these pages. St Josemaría had proclaimed the universal call to holiness and apostolate (cf. Mt 5:48; 28:19). In the words of Pope Francis on the occasion of a theological congress in Rome on St Josemaría and his theological thoughts, he synthesized the content of our exposition and at the same time encouraged us to make it a reality: “May the wonderful example of the priestly life of the holy Founder, a precursor of Vatican II in stressing the universal call to holiness, inspire in all the faithful of the great family of Opus Dei a renewed conviction that believers, by virtue of baptism which incorporates them into Christ, are called to be holy and to help further with their daily work the salvation of all mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate our attitude to the mystery of the Church and, therefore, to the reality of Opus Dei within it, Joseph Ratzinger once made use of an Eastern fable to deal with our perception of religion.<sup>2</sup>

The then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recalled the Buddhist parable of the elephant and the blind men: A king of northern India once gathered all the blind people of the city together. Then, he had an elephant led in front of them. He let some touch the head and said: “This is an elephant”. Others were able to touch the ears or the tusks, the trunk, its back, its foot, its flanks, the hairs on its tail. Then the king asked each one: “What is an elephant like?” And, depending on which part they had touched, they replied: “It’s like a woven basket...”, “it’s like a vase...”, “it’s like the wooden handle of a plough...”, “it’s like a warehouse...”, “it’s like a pillar...”, “it’s like a brush...”.

Opus Dei belongs to the mystery of the Church, and is understood in and from the Church. And like her, this allows for many angles, without any one covering entirely what it is. A mystery, something which invites contemplation and which can be understood only in part as – with the limitations of an example – suggested by the above fable. A reality which can always be understood more deeply, while avoiding turning it into a kind of “problem” which one has to resolve.

#### ***1. Nature of Opus Dei***

Faced by the reality of Opus Dei, one could easily find oneself like these blind men, in the sense that we see only some facets of a complex human reality which is also divine: an image of Christ and his Church. So, one has met taxi drivers for whom Opus Dei was something which only had meetings for such drivers for moments of prayer. For a businessman, they are colleagues who try to follow business ethics in the transactions of every day. It even seems that for one 7 year old girl, Opus Dei was something which led to her father arriving later than usual on a Tuesday evening, and very happy because he had met some friends. This parent perhaps thought that, for him, Opus Dei is what had enabled his son to do better at school. For neighbours, members of Opus Dei are those who greet them and give them a smile when they cross one another in the street (or at least it is

<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, Greetings on the occasion of the International Symposium on *Saint Josemaría Escrivá and Theological Thought*, organized by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, 14-16 November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> JOSEPH RATZINGER, *The Truth of Christianity*, a Lecture given on 27 November 1999, at the University of Sorbonne.

what one hopes happens). A boy who goes to a club for young people speaks of a place where they do incredible things like leaping across a river using rubber tyres, or visiting elderly people who seem to be a thousand years old. A parish priest whom I know might even wonder: What is Opus Dei? Who are its faithful? What could one say about their way of praying, of relating to fellow parishioners, of contribution to the apostolate of the area, of how they get on with their parish priest? In summary, thanks be to God, many people – Christians or not – have first-hand knowledge of people of Opus Dei; and they can attest that, in spite of their limitations, these try to give witness to trust, compassion, friendship, a professional approach, being approachable and giving hope, which is none other than a manifestation of the spirit of the Gospel in the middle of the street.

### ***In the Church***

What the girl expects, what the cab driver lives, what enthuses the boy attending a club, are partial realities of a greater reality which brings them together and exceeds them. This reality with a thousand and one facets, is Opus Dei in the Church. As part of the Catholic Church, Opus Dei is a mystery which does not allow for it to be reduced to a mathematical definition. In the same way, the Church is Temple of the Holy Spirit, People of God, Communion of Saints, Peter's barque, field, flock, pathway, garden, house of God, construction, work of God... Each and every one of these expressions says something more and something less than a merely conceptual definition. The Church is the People of God which is made the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Opus Dei is a small part of this reality, having the same substance, the same means, the same end: the salvation of the human race. At the heart of the Church, Opus Dei is substantially nothing other than this: *a small part* of the Church, as St Josemaría used to say. Like the Church, in and from the Church, it grows therefore with prayer and the sacraments.

### ***A work of God***

The Church is the prolongation in time and space of the presence of Jesus Christ until the Parousia. *What is most important in the Church is not how we humans react but how God acts. This is what the Church is: Christ present in our midst, God coming toward men in order to save them, calling us with his revelation, sanctifying us with his grace, maintaining us with his constant help, in the great and small battles of our daily life.*<sup>3</sup>

The whole of the Bible is a narration of the Lord approaching man, of the great works of God and his marvels. *Opus Dei*, in Latin, means "God's work", "a labour of God".<sup>4</sup> In Latin versions of the *Acts of the Apostles* in the Vulgate and the neo-Vulgate, the word "opus" translates the Greek term "*ergon*", "work". Thus for example, according to the words of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas are selected in Antioch "for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2): this work is the spreading of the Gospel.

That the institution founded by St Josemaría is called "Opus Dei" is a reflection of his conviction of the divine origin of this work and, at the same time, of its development: it was, above all, a gift of God, yet another intervention of His in history. That is why he was so convinced as to be able to say: *This is not a question of a work of my own, but of the Work of God.*<sup>5</sup> He would recall that the secret of Opus Dei is prayer. The seed is the word of God, the one who sows is Christ: *semen est verbum Dei* (Lk 8:11), *sator autem Christus*.<sup>6</sup> From here follows the condition of being an instrument. St Paul tells the Philippians: *God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure* (Phil 2:13).

<sup>3</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing By*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> In the Church, these words also refer to the liturgy. Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1069: "The word 'liturgy' originally meant a 'public work' or a 'service in the name of/on behalf of the people'. In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in 'the work of God'. (cf. Jn 17:4). Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church."

<sup>5</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Intimate Notes*, 21, quoted in A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol I, Scepter, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Gospel Acclamation, 5th Week of Lent, Tuesday.

## 2. *The aim of Opus Dei*

The aim of Opus Dei is to spread everywhere the universal call to holiness and the apostolate in the middle of the world, in ordinary life, especially in professional work.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, an exclusively spiritual aim, which can be summed up by saying that when carrying out our usual occupations we can allow the Holy Spirit to act in our souls, so as to identify ourselves every time more with the Holy Spirit, becoming progressively better children of God the Father in Heaven. When we say “professional work”, we understand the principal activity which in some way confers personal identity: it can be work which is paid for, but also some occupation practised as a duty of one’s state, for example, looking after the home.

The *Collect* of the Mass of St Josemaría summarizes these perspectives well. One addresses God in these terms: “O God, who raised up your priest Saint Josemaría in the Church to proclaim the universal call to holiness and the apostolate, grant that by his intercession and example we may, through our daily work, be formed in the likeness of Jesus your Son and serve the work of redemption with burning love.”<sup>8</sup>

This prayer highlights that Opus Dei was born *in the Church* and participates in its essential mission: that of reconciling the world with God: *in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself* (2 Cor 5:19). St Augustine would say: *Ecclesia, hoc est mundus reconciliatus* – the Church is the world reconciled with God.

On several occasions St Josemaría spoke of Opus Dei as being *a great catechesis*. *We are and we will always be a great catechesis*.<sup>9</sup> What does this phrase mean? Although the founder did not attempt to say anything else other than what the phrase immediately communicates, there is nothing against going deeper. Etymologically, *catechesis* implies the idea of resonating, of causing an echo. In the early Church, catechesis had three aspects: *kerigma*, or the proclamation of the truths of salvation; some practical teachings on what the life of a Christian had to be; and finally, a “ritual” which had to be practised, that is to say, living a sacramental and liturgical life. Following this tradition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a four part structure: “the Christian mystery is the object of faith (first part); it is celebrated and communicated in liturgical actions (second part); it is present to enlighten and sustain the children of God in their actions (third part); it is the basis for our prayer, the privileged expression of which is the *Our Father*, and it represents the object of our supplication, our praise and our intercession (fourth part).”<sup>10</sup> In summary, it deals with the faith in which we believe (the content of the faith); the faith which we practice (moral); the faith which we profess (liturgy); the faith which we recite (prayer). We can say that Opus Dei, as *a great catechesis*, helps ordinary faithful to unite these four dimensions in their ordinary life. That is why the means of formation are means of transformation: they are *performative*, to use an expression which Pope Benedict XVI applied to the Christian message.<sup>11</sup>

In Opus Dei, that concrete character of Christianity is made manifest, presented above all as an event: the life of Christ in us. On occasions, St Josemaría spoke of the Work as an encounter with God in the midst of ordinary activities. The faithful of Opus Dei make an effort *so that all may get to know and love our Lord and discover that their normal life in the world, their everyday work, can be*

<sup>7</sup> The CODEX IURIS PARTICULARIS OPERIS DEI, 2 states: “§ 1. According to the norms of its particular law, the Prelature aims at the sanctification of its faithful through the exercise of the Christian virtues, in the state, profession, and condition of life proper to each person, according to its specific spirituality, which is completely secular.

§ 2. The Prelature also seeks to work with all its strength so that persons of all conditions and states of civil society, and in the first place those called “intellectuals”, may adhere wholeheartedly to the teachings of Christ the Lord; and that by sanctifying their own professional work, they may put these teachings into practice in the midst of the world so that all things are ordered to the Will of the Creator, and to form men and women to do apostolate in civil society”.

<sup>8</sup> CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Decree CD 689/02/L, 2 December 2003.

<sup>9</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Intimate Notes*, 548, 6 January 1932, quoted in A. DE FUENMAYOR, V. GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS, J.L. ILLANES, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*. Scepter Publishers, New Jersey, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, by which, in virtue of his Apostolic Authority, he promulgates and establishes, following the Second Vatican Council, the CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 11 December 1992, and exposition of the faith of the Church and of Catholic doctrine.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, 2 & 4.

*an encounter with God.*<sup>12</sup> This, in a certain way, repeats the experience of the disciples of Emmaus when they met the Risen One, as St Josemaría says, using a beautiful expression: *The road to Emmaus: our God has filled this name with sweetness. Now the entire world has become an Emmaus, for the Lord has opened up all the divine paths of the earth.*<sup>13</sup>

### 3. *Spirit. Activities.*

#### *The supernatural spirit of the Work of God*

Opus Dei is the work of God because it was born by divine inspiration and because God continues acting in her today, as he acts in his Church. As the fourth Eucharistic prayer of the Roman Missal states, the Holy Spirit was sent so that “bringing to perfection his work in the world, he might sanctify creation to the full: *“opus suum in mundo perficiens”*”.

Opus Dei was inspired by God to St Josemaría Escrivá on 2 October 1928 in Madrid (Spain). The founder was then a young priest, 26 years old. It isn’t then a human enterprise, such as the opening of a business, the creation of a sports association, or that of an organization to resolve the challenges faced by a society in a particular period, such as the spreading of the faith or the care of handicapped people: all these are good, excellent, in themselves. Very early on St Josemaría expressed his conviction that he was an instrument. For example, on 19 March 1934, a few years after the foundation he wrote: *The Work of God has not been dreamed of by a man [...]. Many years ago God revealed it to a clumsy and deaf instrument, who saw it for the first time on the feast of the Guardian Angels, the 2nd of October 1928.*<sup>14</sup>

On 2 October 1928 St Josemaría “saw” – that is the word he used – Opus Dei: this intellectual vision was imposed on him without him having to seek to found something: in some way he would be a founder in spite of himself<sup>15</sup>. The origin of Opus Dei is, in this sense, charismatic: it is an irruption of God in history. The Church has recognised this supernatural character, that is to say not something merely human. It is in this sense that St John Paul II wrote in the Apostolic Constitution *Ut sit* that Opus Dei was founded “by divine inspiration” in Madrid.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Opus Dei has an institutional character, in so far as it is a personal prelate, a circumscription which belongs to the hierarchical structure of the Church. This institutional physiognomy can be explained in the following way: The Holy See entrusts some faithful to a Prelate who counts on some priests to attend them, both faithful laity and priests co-operating together to carry out Opus Dei’s mission, under the authority of the Prelate. The Prelate, clergy and faithful members form the Prelature of Opus Dei.<sup>17</sup>

There were other moments in St Josemaría’s life when from the institutional point of view, the illumination of 2 October 1928 would be completed. On 14 February 1930 he would understand the place of women in Opus Dei. On 14 February 1943 he would see the solution to be able to count on priests who would develop their ministry in the apostolates of Opus Dei.<sup>18</sup> All the same, since 1928 the priestly ministry had already been present in Opus Dei, in the very person of the founder. It is significant that both lights of 14 February took place while he celebrated the Holy Eucharist.

With the vision of faith, after the light of 2 October, St Josemaría saw the Work projected in time and space. What did he see? People, above all, one by one, many souls, and in this perspective which embraced the centuries to come, he used a verb which characterized the human attitude when faced by a Christian mystery: “to contemplate”. Thus he would write, for example: *I already contemplate, over the centuries even the last of my children, since we are children of God, I repeat,*

<sup>12</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá*, 70, 5

<sup>13</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 314.

<sup>14</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, 6 & 7; quoted in PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *Opus Dei: estructura y misión. Su realidad eclesiológica*, Ediciones cristiandad, Madrid 2011, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, Vol I, p. 113-120.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Const. *Ut sit*, 28 November 1982: AAS 75 (1983) 423.

<sup>17</sup> This aspect is developed in Article 10 of this series.

<sup>18</sup> The unity of Opus Dei and the separation between the apostolates of the men and women is dealt with in Article 8 of this series.

‘*carrying out his professional work*’, with the wisdom of an artist, the happiness of a poet, the confidence of a master, and with a modesty that is more persuasive than eloquence, seeking the welfare – by seeking out Christian perfection in his profession and state in life – of all humanity.<sup>19</sup>

With the death in Rome of Josemaría Escrivá on 26 June 1975, the foundational period came to an end. Years earlier he had infused faith and hope in the souls of those who were to follow this pathway which had been opened in 1928: *In my conversations with you I have repeatedly pointed out that the enterprise we are engaged in is not a human enterprise, but a great supernatural enterprise, which from the beginning fulfilled exactly all the conditions to be truly called without boasting the Work of God. We form part of this Work by God’s choice – Ego elegi vos (I chose you) (Jn 15:16) – in order to be imitators of our Lord Jesus Christ in the world, sicut filii carissimi, as dearly beloved children (Eph 5:1).*<sup>20</sup> A little later he continued:

1) The Work of God has come to fulfil the Will of God. Therefore be deeply convinced that heaven is determined to see it carried out.

2) When God our Lord plans a work for the good of men, he first considers the persons he wants to use as his instruments... and grants them the necessary graces.

3) The supernatural conviction of the divine nature of our enterprise will give you such intense enthusiasm and love for the Work that you will feel blessed in sacrificing yourselves to carry it out.<sup>21</sup>

### ***The activity of Opus Dei***

The activity of Opus Dei may be summarized essentially in the *formation of its faithful* and other people. We can say that it carries out a vast and permanent formation.<sup>22</sup> *The principal work of the Directors, St Josemaría once said, is to see to it that all the members receive the genuine spirit of the Gospels (a spirit of charity, of harmony, of understanding, all of which are absolutely foreign to extremism) by means of a solid and appropriate theological and apostolic formation. Beyond this, each member acts with complete personal freedom. He forms his conscience autonomously. And he tries to seek Christian perfection and to Christianise his environment, by sanctifying his own work, whether it be intellectual or manual, in all the circumstances of his life and in his own home.*<sup>23</sup>

What is then to be said about initiatives like Midtown Study Center in Chicago, the Hospital of the University of Navarre in Pamplona (Spain), the Monkolé Hospital in the Congo, Warrane the hall of residence for students in Sydney, Dualtech the centre for technical formation in the Philippines? They are *corporate works of apostolate* of Opus Dei. The prelatry takes on the responsibility for the Catholic doctrinal orientation of these Centres, and the chaplaincy in particular. But it is not the Work which creates or directs the activities of these initiatives, which rely on their own responsibilities and operating entities.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, St Josemaría not only proclaimed the universal call to holiness, but he set in motion, with the grace of God and the generous response of many people, a work destined to offer a pathway towards this goal. It requires taking seriously the radical calling to holiness

### ***Loving the Work***

The very name of the Work prevents a badly understood zeal. “Opus Dei”: It is God who acts. To love the Church, and Opus Dei in it, is to take part in this love which comes from God and spreads itself in souls: it is to love God and one’s neighbour in Him. This charity is also extended to

<sup>19</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 9 January 1932*, 4, quoted in JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *La santificación del trabajo*; Palabra, Madrid 2001, 10<sup>a</sup> ed., p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, 1, Cf. PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ-FERNANDO OCÁRIZ-JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *Opus Dei in the Church*, and JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *La santificación del trabajo*, Palabra, Madrid 2001, 10<sup>a</sup> ed., p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Instruction*, 19 March 1934, 46-49; Cf. ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, Vol I, p. 576.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Article 1 in this series.

<sup>23</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> For more details on the relationship between these initiatives and Opus Dei, cf. Article 48.

those who oppose this message, for the Gospel invites one in a sublime way to love enemies, and Christ himself adds: *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven* (Mt 5:45).

*We cannot look only at the Work: we look first and always at the holy Church. We give thanks to the Lord, who has arranged that we never have either a restless gaze or a small heart.*<sup>25</sup> Love for the Work therefore lies in believing in the action of God in his Church. The faithful of Opus Dei love the Work also because it is the way that God has wanted for them: they love a family with spiritual bonds. This love is a participation in the love of Jesus Christ for his Church, and is open to all the realities that exist in her. The joy of the Holy Spirit, the certainty of one's own journey, overflow into esteem, respect and affection for those who do not follow the same pathway of Opus Dei, but who also are workers of the harvest of the Lord (cf Mt 9:37-38). That is why it excludes self-praise, collective pride, all ridiculous and odious things, which are contrary to a Christian spirit.

Love for the Work is manifested in love for the people who try to live out the spirit of the Work in their own lives. It is none other than the love of Jesus Christ in others. It is to discover this mysterious presence of God in everything, putting into practice the "*mandatum novum*" (Jn 13:34), the new commandment of love.

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<sup>25</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 14 September 1951*, 27.