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The Vocation to Opus Dei

This essay on the vocation to Opus Dei may be of interest to those who are discerning a vocation to Opus Dei, to their families, or to anyone else who would like a more in-depth description of the vocation to Opus Dei. The author is a member of Opus Dei who is a professor at Seton Hall Law School. The essay was first published in 1994.

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INTRODUCTION

Opus Dei is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church. It was founded in Spain in 1928 by Josemaría Escrivá, who was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2002. Opus Dei has spread throughout the world and now has approximately 77,000 members from 88 countries [*Editor's note: 86,000 as of 2005*].

A vocation to Opus Dei entails committing oneself to following one particular way of loving God above all things and loving others for his sake. Members of Opus Dei try to convert their everyday work, their family life, their social relationships, and indeed the whole of their lives into a way of serving God, the Church and others while spreading the joyful message that God calls everyone to holiness. People join Opus Dei because they are convinced that God wants them to respond in this

specific way to the call to sanctity that he addresses to everyone.

This essay sketches the principal features of the vocation to Opus Dei. It is directed primarily to readers who have a personal interest in the subject, either because they think they might have a vocation to Opus Dei or because God has called a member of their family to Opus Dei. The early pages deal with Christian vocation in general because a vocation to Opus Dei can be understood only in the broader context of Christian vocation.

CHAPTER 1

CHRISTIAN VOCATION

The Baptismal Vocation to Holiness and Apostolate

God calls every Christian to be holy, that is, to love him above all things and to love and serve others for his

sake. St. Paul assured the first Christians at Ephesus (a group made up of blacksmiths, shopkeepers, maids, cooks, and laborers) that God had chosen them in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish in his sight in love.” (Eph. 1:4). The Second Vatican Council reminded us of this truth when it stated that “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [LG], n. 40).

As part of this universal vocation to sanctity, every Christian is called to serve others and to bring them closer to Christ. Not only those who work in obviously “spiritual” tasks, but also people engaged in every honorable form of secular work and activity are called to spread Christ’s message by their example and their

conversation. God calls every Christian to be “a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself.” (*LG*, n. 33).

The Vocation to Holiness and Apostolate in the World

Hairdressers, assembly line workers, accountants, and homemakers are called to strive to love and serve God and others and to contribute to spreading Christ’s message among their friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbors. They do this primarily by the witness of their lives and words in the midst of their work, family life, recreation and community involvement. God calls them all to “illuminate and order all temporal things” (*LG*, n. 33) with the spirit of Christ, so that Christ’s message becomes a reality not only in church but also in their places of work, in their homes and neighborhoods, and in the social and

professional associations to which they belong. “In all fields of business and human endeavor, [lay men and women] are called by God . . . to contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties.” (*LG*, n. 33). Like the man healed by Jesus in St. Luke’s gospel, ordinary lay Catholics are sent by Christ to “make known God’s dealings” (Lk. 8:39), his justice, love, and mercy to the people with whom they live and work.

All lay people are thus called to fulfill a “special and indispensable role in the mission of the Church” (Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* [*AA*], n. 1), by living a Christian life “in the midst of the world and of secular affairs.” (*AA*, n. 2). For them the universal call to holiness is a call to love God and to try to bring others to love him as they live their daily lives in the midst

of the world. The vocation to Opus Dei involves precisely dedicating one's best energies to living in this way, as a lay member of the Church. Without understanding that God calls lay people to holiness and apostolate by living their faith in the office, factory, farm, school, and home, one cannot comprehend why anyone would dedicate his or her life precisely to doing that, as the members of Opus Dei do.

A Personal Call

God does not limit himself to issuing a general invitation to holiness and apostolate addressed to all. He has a specific plan for each human being. He calls each one of us to play a concrete role that he has foreseen from all eternity. Jesus Christ assures us in the Gospel that God's plan for each of us encompasses every detail of our lives. The very hairs of our head, he tells us, are all numbered.

(Cf. Mt. 10:30). For each man and woman the universal vocation to holiness and apostolate finds expression in a unique, absolutely personal vocation to holiness in the totality of the specific circumstances that make up that person's life.

We hear God's personal call in the myriad circumstances of our daily lives: in our natural gifts and inclinations, in apparently chance encounters, in thoughts that strike us at odd moments. We discover God's plan for us bit by bit, through the circumstances and events of our lives. Each person's life is usually marked by some major turning points: choice of a career, marriage, birth of children. A Christian, of course, discovers God's plan in those events, but a Christian also discovers God's plan in scripture, in the reception of the sacraments, in personal prayer, and in the thousands of minor circumstances

that make up the fabric of an ordinary life. In many cases, there may not even be a moment in which the individual is aware that God is specifically calling him or her to do something special, but even in these cases God has a unique plan that encompasses all the daily events and circumstances of the person's life.

Shaping One's Life to Respond to God's Call

The fact that God's call is demanding does not, however, mean that it is negative or burdensome. As John Paul II wrote: "Those who are impelled by love and 'walk in the spirit' (Gal. 5: 16), and who desire to serve others, find in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out. ... Grace enables us to possess the full freedom of the children of God (*cf.* Rom. 8:21) and thus to live our moral

life in a way worthy of our sublime vocation as ‘sons in the Son.’” (*Veritatis Splendor* [VS], n. 18). A generous response to God’s call is the key to happiness not only in heaven but also here on earth. Not in vain did Christ promise those who followed him not only life everlasting but also a hundredfold here on earth. (*Cf.* Lk. 18:29-30).

God calls every Christian to live a totally committed life that is transformed by faith. The vocation of ordinary Catholics, who are not called to be priests or members of religious orders, is “fundamentally defined by their *newness in Christian life.*” (*Christifideles Laici* [CL], n. 15). In God’s plan, the “ordinary life in the world” of lay Catholics is “not simply an external and environmental framework, but a reality *destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning.*” (CL, n. 15). In God’s plan, “the deep

involvement and the full participation of lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community,” is meant to have “the radical newness and unique character of an involvement and participation which has as its purpose spreading the Gospel that brings salvation.” (*CL*, n. 15).

Awareness of their personal “exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era and every part of the earth” (*LG*, n. 33) should pervade the lives of all Catholics. God calls lay men and women to “see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ.” (*CL*, n. 17). John Paul II teaches that “the vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, first of all as an undeniable

and demanding obligation.” (CL, n. 17).

A faithful response to the personal call God addresses to each one of us entails allowing his plan for us to shape our entire life, and requires rejecting anything that is incompatible with God’s plan. We understand this easily in the case of marriage. A man or woman who wants to make a success of marriage has to be prepared to subordinate other possible noble plans and ambitions to the demands of the marriage. Whether or not we think of marriage in vocational terms, it strikes us as natural and laudable that it is life-encompassing and life-shaping. A man whose wife’s health requires a warm, dry climate must be prepared to live cheerfully in Arizona, even if deep-sea fishing is his favorite pastime. A couple with several children in college finds it natural to cut back on entertainment

and vacations and to drive an old car in order to be able to pay tuition. It is clearly a sign of immaturity or lack of generosity when a married person is unwilling to make the sacrifices required to meet the legitimate needs of spouse and children.

The same holds true for all vocations. A faithful response to a divine vocation to carry out a particular plan of God requires the person who receives that vocation to shape his or her whole life around that plan. The total, life-transforming character of God's call is evident in the Gospels. In the parable of the guests invited to the royal banquet, the king, who represents God, grows angry with those who decline his invitation, even though they had seemingly valid professional and family reasons for not attending the banquet. (*Cf.* Lk. 14:16-24).

Christ asks those whom he calls to eliminate from their lives everything that is not compatible with his call. He reacts vigorously to two people who wished to delay answering his call: “And he said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their dead but do thou go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.’ And another said, ‘I will follow thee, Lord, but let me first bid farewell to those at home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.’” (Lk. 9:59-62). The seeming harshness of Christ’s refusal to assent to these two requests may respond to the particular needs of these individuals, which the Gospel text does not reveal. Perhaps Christ, who knew the hearts of men, opposed their requests because he knew that for them the slightest delay in accepting his call would be decisive. In any

case, God's call focuses the entire life of the person he calls and must not be subordinated to anything else.

CHAPTER 2

THE SPIRIT OF OPUS DEI

In establishing Opus Dei as a personal prelature, the Holy Father described it as “an institution endowed with a unity of spirit.” (Apostolic Constitution, *Ut Sit*, Introduction). This chapter will describe the principal features of the spirit of Opus Dei.

Children of God

The spirit of Opus Dei is based on a vivid awareness of being children of God, who is our loving Father. (*Cf.* Jn. 1:12; 1 Jn. 3:1). This joyful reality fosters cheerful, simple confidence in the dealings of Opus Dei members both with God and with other people, who are also children of God. It leads

to a desire to live in the presence of God, and to maintain a loving dialogue with him throughout the day. Awareness of being a child of God gives peace, confidence, and happiness, along with a desire to improve one's life in order to serve our Father God better and more faithfully.

As God's sons and daughters, Opus Dei members come to know and value more deeply the gift of freedom he has given them. The spirit of Opus Dei inculcates in its members a great esteem for "this inexhaustible treasure that belongs to Christianity: 'The glorious freedom of the children of God!'" (Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, n. 27, quoting Rom. 8:21). In a homily in 1956, the founder of Opus Dei said: "I like to speak of the adventure of freedom, because that is how your lives and mine unfold. I insist that it is freely, as children and not as slaves, that we

follow the paths which Our Lord has marked out for each one of us. We relish our freedom of action as a gift from God. I opt for God because I want to, freely, without compulsion of any kind.” (*Friends of God*, n. 35).

Holiness in Ordinary Life

A characteristic feature of the spirit of Opus Dei is its emphasis on the call to holiness in daily life. “In the aims and spirit of Opus Dei stress is laid on the sanctifying value of ordinary work, that is to say, on the obligation to sanctify work, to sanctify oneself in one’s work, and to turn it into an instrument of apostolate.” (Declaration of the Congregation for Bishops, August 23, 1982; II, c.).

Christ’s life as a craftsman in a small village inspires the lives of members of Opus Dei. For thirty years, Christ lived a life which did not call attention to itself. He loved God

above all things and dedicated all of his energies to doing the will of his Father at each moment. Yet he did nothing that singled him out from his contemporaries. He dressed like other people. He spoke like them. He shared their interests and concerns. To the casual observer, he seemed to be simply one more village artisan. Nothing in his behavior during the first thirty years of his life prepared his relatives, neighbors, and friends for his preaching and miracles. In fact, when he did so, they asked themselves in amazement “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How then does he say that ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn. 6:42).

The life of Christ in Nazareth, which could be called his “private life,” is the model that members of Opus Dei try to imitate. They try to give witness by their lives that ordinary life in the world can lead us to God.

Anyone acquainted with a member of Opus Dei will recognize that he or she takes the faith seriously and tries to put it into practice. A friend or colleague of a member will know of his or her vocation. Members of Opus Dei have no objection to anyone's knowing that they belong to Opus Dei. But since they are called to imitate Christ's life in Nazareth, and to live a normal ordinary life in the midst of the world, they prefer not to announce publicly their personal commitment to God. The vocation of members of Opus Dei is quiet and unobtrusive, like Christ's hidden life. It shows up in a father's taking greater interest in the education of his children, in a nurse's stopping to listen to an elderly patient, in a college student's willingness to help a classmate understand a difficult math problem, and in a person's effort to help a neighbor solve a family problem in a Christian manner. These, of course, are things

that all good Christians try to do. And that is just the point: members of Opus Dei try to sanctify themselves and others by doing as well as they can, out of love for God and others, the things that God asks all Christians living in the midst of the world to do.

Sanctification of Work

“The Lord created man ‘to work’ (Gen. 2:15). The law of work belongs, then, to the general human condition. Nonetheless, the particular character and aim of Opus Dei leads its faithful not only to work but to love deeply their ordinary work. They see in work an outstanding human value and an essential means for the dignity of the human person and social progress. Above all they consider it a marvelous opportunity and means for personal union with Christ, imitating his hidden life that was full of work and of generous service to

others. Through their ordinary work, the members of Opus Dei cooperate in God's loving work of creation and redemption of the world." (*Statutes of the Prelature of Opus Dei*, n. 86, par. 1).

The effort to sanctify work requires working as well as possible, because we cannot offer to God shoddy, defective work. So, for instance, doctors motivated by this spirit attempt to develop their technical skills, to keep up-to-date with the most recent developments in their field and to give each of their patients the attention and the time they require; while house painters who belong to Opus Dei try to learn the best techniques, to do their work neatly and carefully, and to give an honest day's work for their pay.

The faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei try to work well not merely in order to get ahead or from a sense of

professionalism, but primarily because they see their work as part of God's plan for them, something God wants them to do as well as possible out of love for him and for those whom their work affects. They work well in order to fulfill God's will and to express their love for others.

For a Christian, and concretely for a member of Opus Dei, working well means, among other things, not working selfishly. A Christian sees the just rewards of work, including the income it produces, as something to be administered prudently according to God's purposes.

Members of Opus Dei live sober and austere personal lives. Like responsible stewards they use their earnings not to satisfy their own whims but to support their families, to help apostolic works and to carry their share of society's burdens.

The formation given to Opus Dei members helps them to form their consciences in accord with Catholic social teaching. Opus Dei urges its members and those who participate in its activities to be acutely aware of the demands of justice and to be magnanimous and generous in attempting to improve the situation of the less fortunate members of society. One result of this is the existence throughout the world of numerous social centers founded and run by Opus Dei members. Even more important, however, are the efforts of individual members to implement the Church's social teaching in their work and other activities.

Work offers concrete daily opportunities to practice many virtues, including concern for others, order, punctuality, justice and humility. Above all, work manifests charity through service. St.

Josemaría wrote: “I undertake to serve, to convert my whole life into a means of serving others, out of love for my Lord Jesus.” (Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 27). This spirit leads members of Opus Dei to try to do their work in such a way that it constitutes a real service to others. The lives of two members whose processes of beatification have already begun—Isidoro Zorzano, a civil engineer who worked for a railroad, and Montserrat Grases, a student who died of cancer at the age of 17—manifest charity through service. The holiness of their lives consisted not in extraordinary deeds but in practicing the virtues in everyday circumstances. Isidoro’s colleagues, for example, remember him for his cheerfulness and for his willingness to go beyond the limits of his duties to help them get done whatever was needed at a given moment. Montserrat underwent months of

painful illness, seeking sanctity through the offering of her suffering, her prayer, her joy and using that time to bring her friends and classmates closer to God.

Work and Prayer

Work itself, and the social contacts it involves, can become an occasion for raising one's heart to God and conversing with him. People whose lives are inspired by the spirit of Opus Dei try, therefore, to take advantage of the natural breaks in their work, to offer it to God, to ask his help or simply to tell him that they love him. To the extent that people succeed in incorporating the spirit of Opus Dei into the fabric of their lives, they find that work and the other aspects of daily life bring them closer to God and help them to carry on a loving conversation with God during the day. They become, in the words of Opus Dei's founder,

“contemplatives in the midst of the world,” that is, people who live in loving conversation with God precisely through work that is externally no different from the work of millions of other people.

It would be impossible to turn daily work and other daily activities into an occasion of conversation with God without dedicating some time exclusively to him. A Catholic needs the sacraments and a certain amount of time set aside each day expressly for prayer in order to live in the presence of God and in loving dialogue with him. Opus Dei, therefore, stresses the importance of daily Mass, of reading the Gospel, and of personal prayer. These periods of time dedicated exclusively to personal contact with God—never isolated moments nor religious interludes in an otherwise mundane existence—enable a person to convert work, recreation and all of

life into ways of loving God, into a friendship which seeks to share everything.

The prayer life of members of Opus Dei is centered on Jesus Christ and concretely on the Mass. In the words of St. Josemaría Escrivá, the Mass forms the “center and root of the interior life” of the members of Opus Dei. In the Mass, work and other daily activities take on their full meaning as part of the sacrifice which Jesus Christ offers to God the Father. The sacrament of Penance also plays a central role in the spiritual life of Opus Dei members as an opportunity to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Gal. 3:27).

Children of Mary

Besides cultivating a strong sense of being children of God and a lively personal contact with Jesus Christ in scripture and in the sacraments, members of Opus Dei practice

devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Josemaría encouraged his spiritual sons and daughters to “go to her with a son’s love and joy.” (*Christ is Passing By*, n. 142). In a book written a few years after the foundation of Opus Dei, he said: “The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary.” (Josemaría Escrivá, *The Holy Rosary*, p. 8).

Devotion to Mary and awareness of the fact that all men and women are children of God leads to a spirit of service, a desire to help others. In a homily on the Blessed Virgin, the founder of Opus Dei said: “If we have this filial contact with Mary, we won’t be able to think just about ourselves and our problems. Selfish personal problems will find no place in our mind. Mary brings us to Jesus, and Jesus is the ‘firstborn among

many brothers.’ (Rom. 8:29). And so, if we know Jesus, we realize that we can live only by giving ourselves to the service of others. ... Concern for one’s own spiritual improvement is not really a personal thing, for sanctification is completely bound up with apostolate.” (*Christ is Passing By*, n. 145).

Devotion to St. Josemaría Escrivá

Pope John Paul II has described St. Josemaría Escrivá as occupying “an eminent place among the men and women faithful to Christ who throughout the centuries have illuminated different epochs of history with their lives and with their message.” (*L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed., n. 43 [1313], Oct. 27, 1993). In the audience he granted to members and friends of Opus Dei the day after the beatification of its founder, John Paul II expressed his hope that they would be “illuminated

by the example and teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá,” whom the Pope described as a “model of sanctity” and as an “eminent testimony of Christian heroism in the exercise of everyday human activities.” (*L’Osservatore Romano*, May 17/18, 1992, p. 6).

As the Pope urged them to do, members of Opus Dei find in the writings of St. Josemaría the spirit which they attempt to put into practice. Even more important, his life constitutes a concrete example of how that spirit can be lived on a day to day basis. In addition, like millions of other people, members of Opus Dei have learned by experience that St. Josemaría is a powerful intercessor before God, and they turn to him for help in their spiritual life and apostolate and in other daily needs. For all of these reasons, the members of Opus Dei try to become familiar with the life and writings of

their founder. And they encourage other people to seek his intercession.

Spirit of Sacrifice

Even on the purely natural plane, self-discipline and self-sacrifice are necessary. Athletes subject themselves to rigorous training. People diet in order to improve their health or simply their appearance. Men and women in all walks of life put in long hours to get ahead in their professions or to achieve some other personal goal. Similarly, St. Paul insisted to the early Christians at Corinth that following Christ closely requires personal sacrifice. “Every athlete must keep all his appetites under control; and he does it to win a crown that fades, whereas ours is imperishable. ... I buffet my own body, and make it my slave; or I, who have preached to others, might be rejected as worthless.” (1 Cor. 9:25, 27). Mortification helps

Christians to grow in virtue, control their appetites, fulfill the duties of their state in life, and live charity toward others.

But Christians embrace sacrifice above all to imitate Christ and to share in his life. Jesus invites everyone who wants to follow him to renounce himself and take up his cross each day. (*Cf.* Lk. 9:23). He warns that “he that does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Mt. 10:39). The goal of members of Opus Dei is to share Christ’s life to the point of being able to say with St. Paul, “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20). But for this to become a reality, a Christian must also be able to say, “With Christ I hang upon the cross.” (Gal. 2:19).

In addition to uniting us personally with Christ, sacrifice helps to bring others closer to him. When the

apostles asked Jesus why they had been unable to cast out a devil, he told them, “There is no way of casting out such spirits as this except by prayer and fasting.” (Mt. 17:20). St. Paul told the early faithful at Colossae, “I am glad of my sufferings on your behalf, as, in this mortal frame of mine, I help to pay off the debt which the afflictions of Christ leaves still to be paid, for the sake of his body, the Church.” (Col. 1:24).

In the spirit of Opus Dei, sacrifice finds expression primarily in the effort required to fulfill as perfectly as possible each one’s professional, family, and social duties. Work and the other aspects of daily life offer numerous opportunities for living an authentic spirit of self-denial and sacrifice manifested in constancy, order, punctuality and cheerful acceptance of the setbacks and difficulties of life.

Members of Opus Dei also attempt to respond generously to Christ's invitation to take up the Cross by traditional Christian practices of self-denial, including, in some cases, use of the disciplines and the cilice. These practices of Christian asceticism are no more harmful to health than are athletic training or the diets followed by many to improve their health or appearance. They are a way of sharing voluntarily, in a small way, in the suffering of Jesus Christ as many saints and holy people down through the centuries have done, including St. Dominic, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Thomas More, St. Francis de Sales, Cardinal Newman, and in our own time, Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, and Pope Paul VI.

The asceticism practiced by Opus Dei members is fully compatible with a cheerful, contented life, and contributes to it. St. Josemaría said:

“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.” (*The Way*, n. 658). “I want you always to be happy,” he added, “for cheerfulness is an essential part of your way.” (*The Way*, n. 665). Anyone who visits a center of Opus Dei finds a “bright and cheerful Christian home,” where people are “peaceful and brimming over with joy.” (Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, n. 520).

Apostolic Spirit

Work, social life, recreation, and the other activities of ordinary daily life, besides being worthwhile in themselves, offer members of Opus Dei the opportunity and means for bringing others to know and love Christ better. The apostolate of members of Opus Dei rests primarily

on the friendships that arise naturally in the course of work and on the example of work well done, with cheerfulness and a spirit of service. In this setting, members try to carry out their mission of spreading the message that God calls all men and women to the fullness of holiness.

Members of Opus Dei find in the awareness of God's fatherly love a source of peace and happiness.

Naturally they want to share that peace and joy with others. And so they seek to bring their friends, colleagues, family members, and neighbors closer to God. In addition to trying to give good example, they pray for their friends and offer sacrifices for them. They also try through their conversation to help their friends get to know Christ better, to love him more, and to respond to his call to holiness.

Frequently an encouraging word, an

assurance that they will pray for the solution of a particular problem, or a bit of advice will reflect this deeply Christian friendship. Other times, it will be a serious heart-to-heart talk about some aspect of Christ's teaching, the demands of Christian life, or a friend's possible vocation to Opus Dei.

On occasion, members of Opus Dei join together with other citizens to promote schools, medical clinics, clubs, agricultural training centers, and other similar activities that help meet the needs of society and provide an opportunity to spread Christ's teaching to larger groups of people. Some members of Opus Dei find their professional work in these settings. The majority, however, have jobs in factories, law firms, offices and hospitals, etc., where they try to work as well as they can for love of God and as a service to their fellow men and women.

CHAPTER 3 VOCATION TO OPUS DEI

We have seen that God calls each and every Christian to strive for holiness -- to try, that is, to make the love of God and others the dominant force in his or her life. This universal call to holiness includes an invitation to spread Christ's message and to help others come closer to him. We have also seen that God wants most men and women to respond to this universal vocation to sanctity and apostolate in the setting of their work-a-day lives. He asks them to express their love for him and for others in and through their daily work, family life, and their other everyday activities.

A vocation to Opus Dei is a specific vocation within this call to holiness and apostolate in the world. It involves serving the Church by helping to teach all lay men and

women that God wants them to sanctify themselves in the ordinary circumstances of their lives. In calling people to Opus Dei, God invites them to dedicate their lives to spreading the doctrine of the vocation to holiness in the world and to strive seriously for holiness themselves. He asks them to do this by sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in their work, and converting their work into a means of sanctifying others, making use of the guidance provided by Opus Dei in their spiritual lives and apostolate. The vocation to Opus Dei represents, therefore, a particular way of living the vocation to sanctity and apostolate in the world that is common to all lay people.

A Personal Invitation

The men and women whom God calls to Opus Dei perceive their vocation as an explicit personal

invitation to serve the Church and to sanctify themselves by living the spirit of Opus Dei and helping to carry out its apostolate. This vocation involves the conviction that God wants them to live out the baptismal vocation of a Christian living in the world by following this particular path of service to the Church, and to other men and women.

When a person discovers his or her vocation to Opus Dei, he or she becomes aware of God's invitation to love him above all things and to love others for his sake, as a pressing, personal invitation. An example, even at the risk of being trite, may clarify this. Imagine a woman who receives in the mail an invitation to a party to which all the guests are asked to bring a dish. A few days later, she receives a personal visit from the host pressing her to come to the party and asking her to bring the seafood salad she makes especially

well. Although the invitation does not differ from the one received in the mail, with the visit comes a request to participate in a specific way and a personal awareness that the host really cares whether she attends the party or not. Similarly, in recognizing a vocation to Opus Dei, a person becomes aware that Jesus addresses to him or her personally his invitation to “be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48). The substance of the invitation does not change, but its content becomes clearer and more specific and it takes on a new, much more personal character.

Personal Commitment

Accepting a vocation to Opus Dei involves a personal commitment. In response to Christ’s invitation, members of Opus Dei freely commit themselves to strive with all their energy to sanctify themselves and to

sanctify others by living the spirit of Opus Dei and spreading its message of the universal call to holiness. Like Samuel, who responded to God's call, "Here I am, because You called me" (1 Sam. 3:9), members of Opus Dei try to respond generously to God's call. This personal commitment to carry out God's will in their personal lives shapes and gives significance to their effort to live in accordance with the spirit of Opus Dei. More than merely doing something good, which they find attractive, commitment means pledging themselves to respond continually to God's invitation.

That invitation takes on specific content in the guidance that members receive from Opus Dei directors with regard to their spiritual life and their apostolic activities. Members of Opus Dei retain complete freedom and autonomy in professional, social and

political matters, but in the spiritual and apostolic dimensions of their lives they freely undertake to receive the formation and spiritual advice of Opus Dei, because they are convinced that God is calling them to serve him in this specific way. The advice they received is firmly rooted in sacred scripture and in Catholic tradition. It is the advice that the Church gives to people pursuing holiness, adapted to the particular personal circumstances of each individual, by people who know them well and are deeply concerned about their well-being. The content of this advice is laid out in the previous chapter on the spirit of Opus Dei.

An Interior Change

As a call to individuals to sanctify themselves and others by sanctifying their own work, recreation, social relations, etc., a vocation to Opus Dei

requires primarily an interior change, manifested principally in attitudes. Relatively little may change in the exterior life of someone who joins Opus Dei. A vocation to Opus Dei does not involve abandoning one's ordinary life for a new and different way of life, but rather living one's ordinary life with a new and different outlook. A married lawyer with two children who joins Opus Dei will continue to work in the same office, to live in the same house, to wear the same clothes, and play in the same basketball league as before. Some things will, of course, change. He will get up a little earlier on weekday mornings in order to go to Mass, and he will make a greater effort to use his time well at the office so he can get home on time to play with the kids and help get them ready for bed. He will try to find time to attend classes in the evening or on weekends in order to learn more about his faith and about the spirit of

Opus Dei, and he will take a deeper interest in his friends and his colleagues at work. At home, he will try to be more attentive and affectionate toward his wife and more involved in raising the children. He will come to see his work, his family life, his prayer and his recreation as elements in God's plan for him and as the means God has arranged for his sanctification and that of others.

Similarly, a young woman studying for an MBA who joins Opus Dei will ordinarily continue to take the same classes, hold the same part-time job, and belong to the same clubs as she did before she joined Opus Dei. But she will try to see her classes as an important part of what God asks from her. She will take more interest in her classmates and try to help them, and she may also begin to help at a soup kitchen or visit people in nursing homes from time to time.

Just as a fellow student who has become deeply interested in canoeing may try to arrange the summer so that she can take a long canoe trip, a student who joins Opus Dei may try to arrange things so that she can attend a summer course where she can learn more about the teachings of the Church and the spirit of Opus Dei. The external changes in her life will be relatively small, but her new interior attitude will give a new meaning to everything she does.

Variety of Members

God directs the same calling to all members of Opus Dei. He asks them all to strive to sanctify work, family, and the other facets of ordinary life, to sanctify themselves in and through those activities, and to sanctify others through them. The people he invites to do this, however, differ greatly in age, occupation,

state in life, education, etc. Those circumstances, especially marriage and other family obligations, explain the existence of “supernumerary,” “numerary” and “associate” members of Opus Dei. These names reflect different degrees of availability to plan or carry out the means of formation offered by Opus Dei, in or from its centers, but they do not imply different vocations or different degrees of personal commitment. All members of Opus Dei are called to strive with all their strength to live the same spirit, and all are equally called by God to holiness.

Supernumerary members, most of them married, carry out an extensive work of evangelization among their friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers through their word and their example. Like all other members, they attempt to spread Opus Dei’s message that ordinary life

should lead to holiness. They do this in the most diverse settings but with a minimum of formal organization. Because of their family and professional commitments, supernumerary members ordinarily have little time available for directing Opus Dei activities or giving formation in the spirit of Opus Dei to others in a formal, organized fashion. But they strive by word and example to bring their colleagues, friends and family members closer to Christ, and they try to contribute generously to support financially the activities of Opus Dei as well as their parish.

Numerary members of Opus Dei remain celibate to give themselves body and soul to God for the sake of the apostolate. In this way, they are fully available to carry out tasks of formation and direction within Opus Dei. Most hold professional jobs outside the centers of Opus Dei. If

their services are needed to work in a professional capacity as full-time directors of Opus Dei, all are willing to give up the practice of their professions as engineers, business people, lawyers, etc. In order to be more available and to facilitate their formation, ordinarily the numerary members live together as a family in centers of Opus Dei, although individuals may live elsewhere if their professional work requires this.

The numerary members contribute to the various apostolates of Opus Dei all their salaries and other earnings not needed for their personal support. Gifts or inheritances they receive do not, however, automatically go to Opus Dei. Income of this sort usually brings moral and other commitments that must be responsibly met. To take care of those obligations, numerary members have complete freedom to retain title to such goods. In order to

practice Christian detachment from material goods, they arrange for third party administration of such assets.

Some women numeraries, called numerary assistants, choose to dedicate themselves professionally to housekeeping services in the centers of Opus Dei. Their work helps create a warm and inviting family atmosphere. St. Josemaría often stressed the importance of the work of the numerary assistants, because it contributes immensely to the fruitfulness of the apostolic activities carried out in Opus Dei centers.

Associate members also live apostolic celibacy, but family responsibilities or other personal circumstances often make them less available than the numeraries for the apostolic activities of Opus Dei. Ordinarily, associate members live with their own families. They handle their

income, with a spirit of Christian detachment and responsibility, in a manner similar to that of the numerary members.

A small number of numerary and associate men who freely wish to do so are invited by the Prelate to be ordained as priests of the Prelature of Opus Dei. The priests care for the spiritual needs of the lay members of Opus Dei and assist their apostolic activities by preaching, giving spiritual guidance, and administering the sacraments. The approximately 1,850 priests of the Prelature of Opus Dei make up less than two percent of the total number of members.

A Contract

The personal commitment of members is expressed in a verbal contract between them and Opus Dei. In this contract, the members commit themselves to strive to live

the demands of Christian life and carry out apostolate by living in accordance with the spirit of Opus Dei, putting into practice the advice they receive from the directors of Opus Dei. Opus Dei, for its part, commits itself to provide its members the spiritual support and guidance they need to respond faithfully to God's call.

Like any personal commitment of great importance, a vocation to Opus Dei is not to be undertaken lightly. As the founder of Opus Dei said: “The decisions that determine the course of an entire life ... should be taken calmly, without rushing into it. Such decisions should be particularly responsible and prudent. And part of prudence consists precisely in seeking advice ... of other people, and especially of one’s parents.” (*Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, n. 104).

The statutes of Opus Dei contain explicit provisions to insure that those who become members will decide maturely, with ample knowledge and reflection. To make a contractual commitment to Opus Dei, a person must be at least eighteen years old, and must have received, for a year-and-a-half, a detailed education in the mission and spirituality of Opus Dei, while trying to live and carry out apostolate in accord with the spirit of Opus Dei. Only after this period of initial formation, in which the person gets to know Opus Dei from the inside and the directors of Opus Dei get to know him or her, is any one permitted to make an initial contractual commitment.

A person's first contractual commitment to Opus Dei lasts for a period of one year or less. For at least five years, members of Opus Dei make renewable contractual

commitments of no more than a year's duration. During this period the contract must be freely renewed each year, otherwise it lapses. Before anyone can make a life-long commitment to God in Opus Dei, at least six-and-a-half years must elapse from the time when he or she first formally asked for admission. No one, therefore, can make a permanent commitment to God in Opus Dei before he or she is twenty-three years of age.

CHAPTER 4

OPUS DEI WITHIN THE CHURCH

As a part of the Catholic Church, Opus Dei seeks only, in the words of its founder, "to serve the Church as the Church wants to be served." Opus Dei encourages its members not only to serve but, above all, to love the Church, and concretely to love the Pope, the bishops, priests and religious. St. Josemaría Escrivá

taught that “if you don’t have the highest reverence for the priesthood and religious state, you certainly don’t love God’s Church.” (*The Way*, n. 526).

A Personal Prelature

Technically, Opus Dei is what is known as a personal prelate. The Second Vatican Council introduced the concept of personal prelates as a new structure for carrying out particular apostolic tasks. According to Canon Law, a personal prelate is a hierarchical structure governed by statutes laid down by the Holy See. It is presided over by a Prelate who, as its proper Ordinary, calls men to receive priestly ordination to carry out the apostolic tasks of the prelate. Through a contract with the prelate lay people dedicate themselves to carrying out the same apostolic tasks. (*Cf. Code of Canon Law*, can. 295, n. 1; can. 296). Opus

Dei was established as a personal prelate in 1982 with the special pastoral task of spreading the message of the universal call to sanctity in ordinary life.

Opus Dei and the Diocese

Opus Dei complements the spiritual attention the faithful receive through the diocesan and parochial structure. As a world-wide institution, it serves the universal Church by offering a service to those local Churches that welcome it. Belonging to Opus Dei does not change members' relationships with the diocese and parish in which they live. Lay members of Opus Dei have exactly the same obligations and rights as other Catholics in relation to their dioceses. The local bishop's directives for all the faithful also oblige the faithful of Opus Dei. The Prelate of Opus Dei, the priests of Opus Dei who assist him in his pastoral tasks, and

the lay directors of Opus Dei build on the foundation laid by the local bishop. They provide a specific and powerful complement to his efforts to sanctify God's people in his diocese.

The priests and directors of Opus Dei try to help members fulfill their spiritual and apostolic obligations in an exemplary way. This necessarily entails faithful fulfillment of the directives that the local bishop gives. Opus Dei encourages its members to obey, to love and to venerate the local bishops because, as Holy Scripture teaches, they have been chosen by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the Church. (*Cf.* Acts 20:28).

Members of Opus Dei cooperate fraternally with the pastor and the other members of their parishes. All try to promote a sense of unity within the parish community through their example, their prayer

and their words, and some take an active role in the parish council, the school board, or other parish activities. The degree of active participation of Opus Dei members in parish activities varies widely depending on personal circumstances and personal inclination. In every case, however, members of Opus Dei try to contribute to the life of the local church primarily by making Christ present through their prayer and sacrifice, and by their word and example in the places where they live and work. In this way they help to bring closer to Christ the people with whom they come into contact in their daily lives. This apostolate of Opus Dei members directly benefits the parishes and the dioceses in which they live.

Opus Dei and the Holy See

As a personal prelature of world-wide scope, Opus Dei depends on the Holy See and concretely on the Congregation for Bishops. From its foundation, Opus Dei has enjoyed the approval, blessing and enthusiastic support of the popes as well as of hundreds of bishops throughout the world.

Pope John Paul II established Opus Dei as a personal prelature on November 28, 1982. In preparation for this, the Holy See undertook an extremely thorough and detailed study. The appropriate Roman congregations reviewed in depth the statutes of Opus Dei, which set forth in detail its spirit, the way of life of its members, and its internal structure. The Holy Father also heard the opinions of the bishops of every country in the world in which Opus Dei was carrying on apostolic activities – at that time, more than fifty.

The beatification of the founder of Opus Dei, on May 17, 1992, dramatically confirmed the Church's approval of Opus Dei. Among the approximately 250,000 people present in St. Peter's Square were 33 cardinals and over 200 bishops from all over the world. Many of them had been among the more than 1,000 members of the hierarchy who wrote to Pope Paul VI in the years immediately following Msgr. Escrivá's death, asking the Holy Father to open his cause of beatification and canonization. During the ceremony of beatification, Pope John Paul II said: "With supernatural intuition, Blessed Josemaría untiringly preached the universal call to holiness and the apostolate. Christ calls everyone to become holy in the realities of everyday life. Hence, work too is a means of personal holiness and apostolate when it is lived in union with Jesus Christ, for the Son of God

in the Incarnation has united himself in a certain way with the full reality of man and the whole of creation (cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, n.50). In a society in which an unbridled craving for material things turns them into idols and a cause of separation from God, the new Blessed reminds us that the same realities, creatures of God and of human industry, if used correctly for the glory of the Creator and the service of one's brothers and sisters can be a way for men and women to meet Christ. 'All things of the earth,' he taught, 'including the earthly and temporal activity of men and women, must be directed to God' (Letter, 19 March 1954). . . . The relevance and transcendence of this spiritual message, deeply rooted in the Gospel, are evident, as is also shown in the fruitfulness with which God has blessed the life and work of Josemaría Escrivá." (*L'Osservatore Romano*, May 18/19, 1992, p. 4.)

The day after the beatification, in an audience granted to numerous members and friends of Opus Dei gathered again in St. Peter's Square for a Mass of thanksgiving, John Paul II added: "Sustained by the holy zeal which you have learned from the newly beatified founder, may you be fully committed to the cause of evangelization through your faithful witness to the Church's faith and doctrine in the vast world of human affairs and through your generous participation in the Church's mission. As a leaven in society, bring your talents to bear in public and private life at every level, proclaiming in word and deed the truth about man's transcendent destiny. Following the teaching of your founder, respond generously to the universal call to the fullness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity, thus laying the foundation for a more human way of life and a more just and equitable earthly society." (*Id.*, p. 6).

A year later Pope John Paul II said: “In the 65 years that have passed since Opus Dei's foundation, the Prelature—an indissoluble unity of priests and lay persons—has contributed to make the salvific message of Christ ring out in all spheres of life. As pastor of the universal Church, echoes of this apostolate reach me. I encourage all the members of the Prelature of Opus Dei to persevere in faithful continuity with the spirit of service to the Church that always inspired the life of the founder.” (*L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., n. 43 [1313], October 27, 1993).

CHAPTER 5

OPUS DEI AS A FAMILY

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus stressed the importance of love. Indeed, he predicted that the sign by which his followers would be known

would be their mutual love. (*Cf.* Jn. 13:35). The mutual love of Christians for each other has a family aspect because, as our Lord explicitly told us, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. (*Cf.* Jn. 13:35). Since a lively awareness of their condition as God's sons and daughters supports and vivifies the spiritual life of the members of Opus Dei, they naturally feel closely united to all their brothers and sisters in the faith and particularly to those who share their same specific vocation.

A Family Spirit

The spiritual and supernatural bonds that unite the members of Opus Dei find expression above all in prayer and sacrifice. In addition, members also cultivate among themselves the natural affection and mutual concern of a good Christian family.

At the beginning of Opus Dei, the founder used to gather the first

members in his mother's home, and they soon made their own the cordial, cheerful atmosphere of loving concern for others that characterized that home. As Opus Dei grew, it became impractical to meet in the Escrivá home, but St. Josemaría and the first members created, in the centers that Opus Dei established, the same family atmosphere of good humor, warmth, and mutual support.

The family atmosphere that links together members of Opus Dei and characterizes life in its centers is often striking to observers. Shortly after the death of St. Josemaría, the bishop of Valencia, Spain, who had served as his confessor in the early 1940's, published a personal tribute to him. Bishop José María García Lahiguera, who was not a member of Opus Dei, wrote about his visits to one of the first centers: "From the first time I set foot in his house I was

delighted with the family atmosphere I was able to share.... Above all, I enjoyed the trust and the intimacy that everyone showed me. I was present at some of the meetings with the young men who lived there and I noticed a characteristic note common to all of them—it was cheerfulness, such a lovable and attractive virtue which derived from their generous dedication, from the disposition they had to serve without shying away from sacrifice.” (*Testimonies To a Man of God*, Vol. 1, Scepter Press, 1992, part 1, p. 21).

Family Life in Centers of Opus Dei and Relations of Numerary Members with Their Own Families

While all members of Opus Dei share this family spirit, its practical effects are most marked among numerary members. After a period of initial formation, in which they continue to

live at home or wherever else they were living when they joined Opus Dei, most numerary members live together in Opus Dei centers. In their case, a vocation to Opus Dei brings with it a new set of relationships with other members, not unlike those they had with the other members of their family in their parents' home. In establishing their new relationships they act in much the same way their parents did when they left their parents to form their own families.

Numerary members respond to God's call to create an environment of family affection among the members of the Work. They do this, for example, by having family dinner together each evening and then spending some time in an informal conversation. They celebrate birthdays, anniversaries of important dates in the development of Opus Dei, and secular and

religious holidays in the same way as the members of a closely-knit Christian family.

The numeraries lead very full lives. Like all other members, they carry on their studies or their work, just as they did before they joined Opus Dei. They set aside time to study philosophy and theology, both to nourish their own spiritual life and to be able to pass on to others the teaching of Christ and his Church. They freely commit themselves to live an intense spiritual life, including daily Mass and time for personal prayer, the rosary and spiritual reading. And they keep up their relations with relatives, friends and colleagues.

Naturally, the numerary members of Opus Dei visit and spend time with their parents and other family members. Like young people who have married they are sometimes

unable to make it to their parents' home for Thanksgiving or an anniversary or birthday party. This does not mean they have broken the bonds of affection with their families, but simply that they have taken on new responsibilities, as children invariably do when they grow up.

St. Josemaría often referred to the Fourth Commandment as the “most sweet precept of the Decalogue” and insisted that members of Opus Dei should respect, honor and love their parents even more intensely after joining Opus Dei. Over time, a member's parents find that they have not only retained the love and affection of their son or daughter but also have acquired the affection of their child's many new brothers and sisters in Opus Dei. Often, parents discover their own vocation to Opus Dei through the vocation of one of their children.

Editor's Note: This essay was originally published in 1994. Msgr. Escrivá was canonized in 2002, so references to 'Blessed Josemaría' have been changed to 'St. Josemaría.' A section at the end of the essay called 'More Information' has also been removed. Readers may consult other sections of this website if they are interested in more information after finishing reading the essay.

John F. Coverdale

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