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Living the Joy of the Gospel in daily work

2017 sees the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the apostolate of Opus Dei in Ireland. Dr Orla Halpenny, who lives in Dublin, writes of her vocation to the Work and the mission of the prelature in the Church and in the world.

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During a brief tea-break on an out-of-hours shift one weekend recently, a

colleague painted an exhilarating picture of her life as a part-time GP and farmer of a small holding. She and her husband had purchased the farm after long professional lives spent in office blocks and busy cities abroad. At one point, she turned to me and said: "You have to decide what you want to do and go for it. What is it that *you* want to do with your life?" I was taken aback by the unexpected question and muttered something about hobbies and things before the conversation moved on.

Driving home afterwards, I was kicking myself for not having had the wit to tell her what exactly I am doing with my life. Like her, I am a GP who thoroughly enjoys her work. Like her, I have family and friends, professional associations and (a few) hobbies that require constant nurturing and not a little dedication. More importantly, I am also in Opus Dei and it is through Opus Dei that I

have learned that all these different compartments of my life, indeed of anyone's life, can become places where I meet Christ.

Opus Dei is Latin for "the work of God" and people often refer to it as "the Work". Founded by St. Josemaría Escrivá in 1928 and a personal prelature of the Catholic Church since 1982, it has some 96,000 members worldwide, of whom 57% are women. I met one of them when I was a medical student and a few years later found my vocation in Opus Dei. Why did I do this? Fundamentally because I believed that God wanted me to, but he wanted it because he knew that there I would be able to follow my heart's desire to play a part in transforming the world. I had read St. Josemaría's challenging words: "These world crises are crises of saints"^[1]. I knew that he was right.

The heart of Opus Dei's message is that all honest work can be a meeting point with God. Furthermore, if that work is done with God, it draws others towards him. The faithful of the Prelature strive to, "sanctify themselves with their work," and are convinced that they, "must sanctify their work and sanctify others through their work"[2].

What does that mean in practice? Do I talk about God to everybody I meet in the surgery? Do I tell them to pray as I write their prescriptions? Most of my colleagues and patients are not practising Catholics and I am expected to provide a professional service, not a mission. So how does my work draw people to Christ?

The essence of trying to unite work to God consists in striving to work as well as one can, practising the entire range of Christian virtues. Most people appreciate someone who tries

their best to work with these standards. Some may be curious and will ask you why you're always (or mostly!) in good humour, which opens up an opportunity to talk about what drives you. In my case, it is inevitable that a GP who does not prescribe the contraceptive pill, or the so-called "morning after" pill AND opposes repeal of the Eighth Amendment, is asked to give an account of herself, which can be the starting point of a deeper conversation about the Catholic Church and human dignity.

Controversial issues seldom arise, however. More often, someone looks for help or advice. For an increasing number of men and women, you might be the only person who awakens them to the reality that they have a soul. Like so many other Catholics, people in Opus Dei want to be in their work what Pope Francis

has called "living sources of water from which others can drink".[3]

All the faithful of the prelature, married or single, young and old, sick or well, are offered the opportunity to acquire a level of doctrinal formation commensurate with their responsibilities and time. The purpose of this is to help them try and freely integrate Catholic principles into their personal lives and explain them to others. It is a formation tailored to bring their faith to bear precisely on the neuralgic issues of our contemporary secularised society. Of course, the activities of Opus Dei are offered not only to the faithful of the Prelature, but to anyone who wishes to understand and practise the Catholic faith, no matter how close or far away they might feel towards the Church.

Above all, Opus Dei offers people practical helps for maintaining a contemplative spirit throughout the whirlwind of a normal day, no matter what their occupation. Daily Mass whenever possible, dedicated time for prayer and personal spiritual direction, a lively devotion to Our Lady and frequent confession all combine to keep one's head and heart focused on the goals that are truly important. It works as well for a busy CEO in the financial quarter as for a mother of young children in a suburban home, because any kind of work can be a *rendez-vous* with Christ, who knew what it was to work, to shoulder responsibilities, to be weary but also to be glad.

All over the world, thousands of people find in Opus Dei support and encouragement to do their work as well as they can for love of God and to bring to their families, friends and colleagues the warmth of God's love

for them. Many of these people find that the values of their Catholic faith can illuminate their environment in countless different ways as they go about their work in homes, financial institutions, schools, hospitals, shops, farms and court houses. They find inspiration to set up social projects in response to the needs of their communities and contribute to the culture of societies in which they live. A glance at the Opus Dei website yields an abundance of personal and group initiatives which, in one way or another, aim to make life better for people through the "creative apologetics" that is always a feature of the life of the Church.[4]

The Opus Dei Prelature has featured in the news most recently due to the death of Bishop Javier Echevarría, on December 12th after twenty-two years as prelate. When asked what he expected of the faithful of the prelate now, his successor, Msgr.

Fernando Ocariz, referred to his obvious reliance on their prayers, "then their work, work that is also transformed into prayer; that they support me in whatever way they can with initiative, with a youthful spirit, with joy, with hope, which, as St. Paul says, is one of the defining marks of a Christian".[5]

The majority of people in Opus Dei are married and parents of families. A smaller number of men and women commit themselves to apostolic celibacy and make themselves available to acquire a deeper knowledge of Catholic theology so as to form others, while at the same time maintaining their profession and career. A smaller number again are ordained as secular priests to serve the faithful of the Prelature. Priests incardinated in different dioceses can also belong to Opus Dei by joining the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, while

remaining completely under the jurisdiction of their local bishop.

For me personally, Opus Dei has imbued me with a deep sense of apostolic mission, so that in spite of my personal weakness, I might work with many other people, "to leave this earth somehow better than we found it". [6]

For further information:

www.opusdei.ie

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[1] St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 301

[2] St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations*, no. 70.

[3] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 86.

[4] Ibidem, no. 132.

[5] Words of Msgr. Ocariz in an interview conducted after his election on January 24th, 2017.

[6] Pope Francis *The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 1.

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