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Lay faithful, the leaven of society

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Tell us in brief what the preoccupations of the Opus Dei Prelature are all about, its scope of apostolate and other relevant information

Opus Dei is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church. It was founded by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá in Madrid on 2 October 1928. Currently over 80,000 people from every continent belong to the Prelature. Its headquarters, together with its prelatric Church, are in Rome. The Second Vatican Council taught that all the baptised are called to follow Jesus Christ, by living according to the Gospel and making it known to others (cf *Lumen Gentium* nos. 32 – 33). The aim of Opus Dei is to contribute to that evangelising mission of the Church, by promoting among Christians of all social classes a life consistent with their faith, in the middle of the ordinary circumstances of their lives, especially through the sanctification of their work. In order to achieve this aim, the prelature offers spiritual formation and pastoral care to its members, as well as to many others.

So, this is in synthesis what Opus Dei is all about.

In summary, are you of the opinion that the lay faithful in the Church, especially in Nigeria, are fully aware of the teachings of Vatican II on their role in the Church? If no, what are the possible factors or reasons for this lack?

In my view there is need to grow in the understanding and the implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council with respect to the role and development of the laity. Many people often miss the most essential characteristics of these teachings. Lay people should be more aware that we all share in one and the same mission, that "we all are the Church and that each one should fulfil his mission according to his personal circumstances". Lay people should feel fully committed to following Christ right in the midst of

their normal everyday occupations and work, and carrying out his mission because they have been called by him. "Lay people have their own way of contributing to the holiness and apostolate of the Church. They do so by their free and responsible action within the temporal sphere to which they bring the leaven of Christianity" (Bl. Josemaría Escrivá in an interview with *L'Osservatore della Domenica*, 19 May, 1968). We, priests, should realise that many people find their time and energy taken up by their work and family life. It would be unhelpful to force them to be around assisting the priest in Church activities or participating in Church societies. We should accept the fact that they can fulfil their Christian vocation fully in their own places in the world as the Second Vatican Council taught (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 31). What is more, we should remind them of this and give them a

continuous formation and encouragement to help them attain this goal.

With the experiences of the Prelature in Nigeria these past years, how can you assess the Priest-Laity relationship, at least administrative-wise?

In Opus Dei the relationship between priests and lay people is very harmonious and complementary. The priests of the prelatore are dedicated fully to their priestly ministry: celebrating mass, hearing confessions, preaching, and imparting spiritual direction to the faithful of the prelatore. The laity who ask to join Opus Dei do so moved by a divine calling. Such a calling is a specification or determination of the Christian vocation they received at baptism, and it leads them to seek sanctity and participate in the mission of the

Church according to the spirit with which God inspired Blessed Josemaría. However, after their incorporation into the prelature, they remain 100% lay faithful of the dioceses where they live or work but with a lay mentality and without forming a group, acting as leaven. The Holy Father recently expressed accurately this harmonious relationship and its benefits for the particular churches in which Opus Dei is present. The occasion was a gathering convoked by the Prelature of Opus Dei in Rome to study the Apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (L'Osservatore Romano 17th march, 2001).

How does the Prelature assist the Laity in this country in coping with problems of the apparent clericalisation of the Church experienced in this part of the globe?

Clericalisation is not a problem confined to Nigeria. In the prelature we do not have such a problem. The members of Opus Dei remain in the world where they work and live. They come to the centres of the prelature only to receive spiritual direction and an intensive formation, which is given by the priests of the prelature and by other lay members who combine their secular engagements with the tasks of formation. All the members of Opus Dei carry out their individual task of evangelisation in their own environment. The prelature seeks to remind, not only its members, but as many people as come into contact with Opus Dei in one way or another, that all Christians, whatever their secular activity, must cooperate in solving the problems of society in a Christian witness to their faith.

Do you think that the exercise of extraordinary ministries is

**relevant to the Church in Nigeria?
If yes, do you think that the Church
here is making good use of these?**

I would prefer to see the lay faithful in the middle of the world and the priest fully dedicated to their priestly ministry. The extraordinary ministers are meant to be precisely that: "extraordinary". The ordinary thing would be to have enough priests, senior seminarians and religious exercising those ministries rather than lay people that must bear witness to Christ in work, family and social life.

What is the role of Discernment of the Spirit as regards the effective apostolate of the Lay in the Church? And how can this resolve the conflicts of duties experienced among the lay helpers in the Church?

We should be aware that it is the Spirit himself who leads Christians to

holiness and apostolate in the world. To be holy we all need to receive deeply the Christian formation in all its aspects. We also need to receive the sacraments regularly and to practice prayer and sacrifice. Then we can count with the grace that the Spirit gives to accomplish each one's mission in the world. Lay people must realize however, that "whatever they do, they ought to fulfil it in a spirit of union with the hierarchy and following the teaching authority of the Church. If they are not in union with the bishops and with their head the Pope they cannot, if they are Catholics, be united to Christ." (Bl. Josemaría Escrivá)

How does the Prelature assist the Laity in the sanctification of their work and lives?

Incorporation into the Prelature of Opus Dei means, on the part of the prelate, the commitment to

provide the person with ongoing formation in the Catholic faith and in the spirit of Opus Dei, as well as the necessary pastoral care from the priests of the prelature. On the part of the faithful of the prelature, both priests and laity, they commit themselves to seeking holiness of life and to carrying out apostolate according to the spirit of Opus Dei. This involves, principally, growing in spiritual life through prayer, sacrifice, and receiving the sacraments; using the opportunities that the prelature provides for acquiring a deep knowledge of the doctrine of the Church and the spirit of Opus Dei; and taking part in the task of evangelisation carried out by the prelature, according to the possibilities of each individual.

How can the Church in Nigeria assist the laity in an on-going theological formation in order that we may have more lay

involvement in the catechetical office of the Church?

What are the possible difficulties imminent in this involvement?

This is a demanding task for the Church. It seems to me that for the time being, the scarcity of priests in relation to lay faithful, makes this task a very arduous one. Priests are taken up by the celebration of the sacraments and administrative work and can hardly do justice to the task of giving formation in depth to the cadres of lay people who obviously need such formation. But we should not give up, and endeavour to take the challenge. Besides, when the Church can count with more well-formed lay faithful, not only the Christianisation of the world's temporal structures will move forward, but also the work of catechesis and formation.

What kind of spirituality could you advocate for the Laity in Nigeria considering the present condition of our country?

A secular spirituality, that is, a spirituality of lay people. I would just outline the following essential traits of such spirituality:

The awareness of the dignity of their Christian vocation: "God's call, the character conferred by Baptism, and grace mean that every single Christian can and should be a living expression of the faith. Every Christian should be 'another Christ', 'Christ himself' present among men" (ibidem). The Christian is a child of God by virtue of baptism. Christians should have a deep awareness of their being children of God. This awareness will help them act accordingly; it fosters confidence in divine providence, simplicity in their dialogue with God. A Christian

with this spirit will also be aware of the dignity of each human being and of the need for fraternity among all people.

The dignity of the vocation to marriage: For the majority of Christians, marriage and the family are among the things upon which sanctity should be built, and should thus be given a Christian dimension: "For a Christian, marriage is not just a social institution, much less a mere remedy for human weakness. It is a supernatural calling" (cf. *Christ is Passing by*, no. 23).

The dignity of work: According to the spirit of Opus Dei, work – the activity one carries out in the world – can be sanctified and turned into a path of sanctification. "Since Christ took it into his hands, work has become for us a redeemed and redemptive reality; not only is it the background of man's life, it is a means and a path

of holiness – it is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies" (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 47). Any honest job, from the most important to the humblest in human terms, can be an occasion for giving glory to God and for serving others.

Love of freedom: God has created man free and only if he co-operates with him freely fulfilling God's will and living according to his expectations can he be saved. This implies also respecting the freedom and the opinions of others.

Prayer and sacrifice: All lay people should strive to incorporate into their lives certain practices of Christian piety, such as prayer, mass, sacramental confession, and reading and meditating on the Scriptures (cf. *Novo millennio Ineunte*, No. 33. cf. also nos. 33 - 39). Devotion to Our Lady must occupy an important

place in their hearts. Also, to imitate Jesus Christ, they should be ready to make sacrifices, particularly those that help them fulfil their duties faithfully and make life more pleasant for others, as well as fasting, almsgiving, renouncing small pleasures, etc.

Charity and apostolate: Trying to bear witness to their Christian faith. In the words of the founder of Opus Dei: "As we work at our job, side by side with our colleagues, friends and relatives and share their interests, we can help them come closer to Christ." (Friends of God, no. 264). This must be done, first of all, by personal example, and then by words. Eagerness to make Christ known is inseparable from the desire to contribute to resolving the material needs and social problems of one's surroundings.

Unity of life: Friendship with God, ordinary day-to-day life, and the effort to evangelise are all harmoniously fused into a "strong and simple unity of life." (Cf. Christ is Passing By, No. 10). "Unity of life" was an expression frequently used by the founder of Opus Dei, and sums up his deep understanding of Christian life. He defined it as "an essential condition for those who are trying to sanctify themselves in the midst of the ordinary situations of their work and of their family and social relationships." (Friends of God, no. 165). Blessed Josemaría explained that Christians working in the world should not live "a kind of double life. On the one hand, an interior life, a life of union with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life" (Conversation with Msgr. Escriva no 114). "There is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life which has to become, in both

soul and body, holy and filled with God." (Ibid.)

What are the possible causes of conflicts of duties between the Clerics and the lay parish administrators? Can you proffer some solutions for these?

I am not aware of any conflicts in the prelature

How can we improve the participation of the lay faithful in the sanctifying, teaching and the governing roles of the Church?

As I have been saying above, by devoting more time to give them formation and leaving them free to be dedicated to their work, families and civic responsibilities. Calling some to participate in consultations and decision-making that have the formation and expertise without wasting their time.

What is the level of participation of the Prelature in the apostolate of the family?

Very great. 70% of the members of Opus Dei are married people. Many of the apostolic initiatives of members and their colleagues and friends have to do with the upbringing of the children and their education. There are family associations that run family programmes to help married couples with the experience they have developed in Opus Dei. Some go as far as setting up and running schools, youth clubs, vocation and training centres asking the prelatore to take care of the doctrinal orientation and of the spiritual formation of those who desire to receive it.

How can we correct the culture bias that militates against the effectiveness of women in the

fulfilment of their roles as lay faithful in the Church?

It would be useful to keep in mind what I have been saying about the proper role and place of lay people in the Church and in the world. If a clerical approach is avoided, I do not think that women would feel discriminated in the Church. In Opus Dei we have a very good experience of women's involvement in the tasks of Christian formation. They are also very active, as committed Christians in many secular fields where some are as professionally outstanding or more than men. Women's contribution into making the homes truly warm and Christian is unique, to say the least about their work in making fashion to reflect Christian modesty or their initiatives in home management and catering training. In the prelature there are many flourishing initiatives in all these

fields where women are the main protagonists.

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