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Msgr. Ocariz: "Loving freedom means loving pluralism"

In this interview with The Pillar, the Prelate addresses questions regarding the mission of the laity and Opus Dei's current context. He also talks about those who were previously part of the Work and later left it: "We love them from the bottom of our hearts," he says, "and we sincerely appreciate the good they did while they were in the Work and that they continue to do now."

11/18/2024

One of the main themes of the current Synod on Synodality is the role of the laity in the Church. What does Opus Dei have to contribute to these reflections, given the centrality of the laity in its message, mission, and spirituality?

The laity's role in the Church is not primarily to hold positions in ecclesiastical structures; there will naturally be few of them (and some may be necessary) in comparison to the whole. This idea, which has come up in synodal conversations, is very present in the charism of Opus Dei: enabling each of the lay faithful – each baptised man and woman – to realise the greatness and beauty of their mission. Just as with the early Christians, the responsibility for the

future of evangelization today lies especially with the laity, united to and in communion with the pastors.

The Church is not mainly the temples or structures, but the people incorporated into Christ through baptism. A layperson carrying Jesus Christ in their heart and lifestyle will be a vibrant and open presence of the Church in their neighbourhoods and communities, among family and friends, among believers and non-believers, in the world of sports and entertainment, and in various professional, social, cultural, scientific, political, and commercial fields.

In his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, Pope Francis speaks of the centrality of the laity when he invites us to discover the “holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence.” From its beginnings,

the Work has tried to go in that direction: it reminds us that people, with their virtues and defects, can become God's hand outstretched to many others, even those who might never step into a church.

For this reason, I would say that dedicating time and care to forming and spiritually accompanying ordinary Christians, true apostles in their own environments, is a key challenge. It's a priority in the Church's daily activity and, thanks be to God, it's happening in thousands of parishes and initiatives.

Why is this lay identity so essential for Opus Dei as an institution and as a spiritual path?

It is essential because it is what Saint Josemaría Escrivá understood God was asking from him: explaining, showing, discovering, and reminding the universal call to holiness in the middle of the world and through

ordinary realities, primarily family and work life. The founder started bringing the Work forward by accompanying students and professionals, as well as forming groups, praying, and asking others to pray for them. He also involved those young people in his visits to the poor and sick in Madrid, and organised spiritual retreats and classes of formation. They spread to many cultures and nations, with the same spirit, among people of all classes and backgrounds.

What the Lord and the Church ask of us is to care for this charism and make it fruitful: evangelization, as I said, within the family and at work, in the middle of society, which will always place significant challenges – like war, poverty, illness, etc. – before us. Ordinary believers who live amid these realities are the ones who can witness how Christ is present in their lives and how this pushes them to

become different people and transform their environment. So Opus Dei, as an institution, offers formation, accompaniment, and a concrete spirituality adapted to men and women with families to care for, who have demanding work schedules, undergo economic difficulties and relocations, etc. Some people, upon discovering this spirit, feel a vocational call to spread it through their lives.

In 1946, when Saint Josemaría first sought canonical approval for Opus Dei, he was told that he had arrived a century too early. With the current canonical reform of the Work underway, do you think these words still hold true?

In 1946, Opus Dei was established in four countries, and its message was less known. Even then, it was made up of a minority of priests and a large majority of ordinary men and

women. At that time, the founder's preaching clashed with common thought as he encouraged the laity to seek holiness in the midst of the world, to bring the Gospel to all environments and professions. His message seemed ahead of its time, despite being deeply rooted in the Gospel. Today, the Work is active in more than 70 countries, and its message has been fully embraced and promoted by the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, the law's difficulty in framing new pastoral phenomena is evident. Maybe the protagonism the [Second Vatican] Council wished for the laity still has a long road ahead. Beyond this, I can guarantee that the current modification of the statutes requested by the Holy Father is being conducted with the fundamental criterion of adjusting to the charism, which, today, in many places, is better understood and shared. Law, which is so necessary, follows life,

follows the incarnated message, to support and give continuity to life.

Europe, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America, are rapidly becoming more secularised. Opus Dei is present in many of the largest and most secularised cities in the world. What does Opus Dei do to be a faithful presence of the Church in these societies and to evangelise in these environments?

On March 3, 2017, I was received in an audience by Pope Francis for the first time. In that encounter, he made a very concrete request to the members of the prelature when he asked us to prioritise one periphery: the middle classes and the professional world, which are so far away from God. Without excluding anyone, this priority opens up an apostolic horizon as vast as it is

exciting, which aligns well with the upcoming Jubilee on hope.

Opus Dei strives to be present in these secularised environments, providing comprehensive formation through educational or charitable initiatives. However, the most important aspect is not these initiatives or structures but the people who form them and the hundreds of thousands who participate in their apostolates: the friendship with God that each member of the Work seeks to live interiorly and to share throughout their network of relationships. It is worth noting that from the beginnings of the Church, Christians evangelised in different contexts: some in environments with a deep religious tradition – as we see in the Gospels – and others in which this was not the case. This reality is a light that might give us confidence,

as we can learn a lot from how the Church lived in apostolic times.

To put it concisely, thinking about the times we're in now, we could say that the essential aspect of Opus Dei's mission is friendship and confidence with each man and woman, using Saint Josemaría's words.

Collaborating with the grace of God to help people and nations encounter Christ, person to person, one-on-one. Everywhere, especially the places in which secularisation is more pronounced, we need to trust even more in God's help and demonstrate that strength through our own way of life and varied initiatives. Each Christian is called to make the attractiveness of life *with* and *in* God visible; the Work aims to support those who live out that mission.

Opus Dei seems to face a number of ongoing challenges, including the reform of the statutes, the

situation of Torreciudad, various articles, books, and documentaries in which former members speak against the Work, and a judicial investigation of complaints by 43 former numerary assistants in Argentina. Is this the most difficult time in the history of Opus Dei? How does Opus Dei deal with complaints from former members?

The Work is approaching one hundred years of history, and it's a good time to look back to its origins and take stock of the journey so far. This is the best way to keep learning, correct what needs correcting, find joy in the present, and plan for the future.

In this context, the “ongoing challenges” you mention are also calls to thoroughly examine how well we have reflected the beauty of this charism and, at the same time, in which areas a lack of adaptability

might have prevailed, to change non-essential matters, which – as the founder himself said – is part of the life of any living organism.

As I mentioned earlier, the work on the statutes is progressing well, and we also sincerely hope to reach an appropriate solution regarding the different opinions on Torreciudad, which is in the hands of the Holy See.

Every book, article, or documentary you mention weighs on us since it expresses someone's pain or frustration. As you might understand, we work so that there are no reasons for it, because we wish that living the vocation to the Work is a reason for joy, as it is, thanks to God, for many thousands of people. But we will always make mistakes because we are an institution made up of human beings. Naturally, we wish to detect

them in a timely way and remedy them as much as possible.

At the same time, criticism – even when it does not correspond to reality – might be an aid to discovering aspects in which we can improve. Although they may not be pleasant or always fair, sometimes they can become opportunities for examination and, occasionally, for interior maturation. It is always important to face whatever needs to be improved or corrected with serenity and trust.

Regarding the claims you mention in Argentina, a listening commission was conducted there. With the experience gained, the first office of healing and resolution was established to solve every individual conflict. It was a cause for great joy for us to reach agreements with many people, which also helped us to offer a personal and concrete request

for forgiveness. The broad listening helped to relieve the pain of those who belonged to the institution for a while, or looked in it for help and accompaniment but could not find it. After this job, which is beginning a process of healing, we are creating similar procedures in other countries.

We love from the bottom of our hearts all the people who have belonged to the Work and, for whatever reason, left it, and we sincerely appreciate the good they did while they were in the Work and that they continue to do now. We respect each of them greatly because there was a desire to give their lives to God in that decision of becoming members of Opus Dei. On numerous occasions, I've had the opportunity to ask for forgiveness from those that still bear a wound from a lack of charity, of justice, or any other reason. On many other occasions, I

have witnessed their gratitude for the time spent in the Work and for the accompaniment received, which leads them to continue participating in spiritual and formative activities. In the last year, we have received almost daily a request of admission in Opus Dei from people who have previously belonged to the Work: life shows that reality has more nuance than what we may suppose according to an excessively dichotomous or polarised narrative.

In certain media, especially in the United States, Opus Dei is accused of being behind an ultraconservative conspiracy to make Donald Trump president, among other things. What do you have to say about this?

I cannot tell you much because it's a fantasy. In Opus Dei, we don't give advice or orders of a political nature of any kind to anyone: if anyone

would do it, the rest of us would rebel against that. It's contrary to our spirit. There are good Catholics that vote for different parties and candidates, according to their sensibility. I won't tell them, and no one in Opus Dei will tell them, whom to vote for, whom to support, or which cause to promote. It would also be inappropriate to create, even indirectly, an atmosphere in formation activities that assumes there is only one legitimate option for members of Opus Dei. Loving freedom means loving pluralism.

In the media you mention, there are hypotheses and conspiracy theories that mention people by name who, nevertheless, are not members of Opus Dei. I'm sure they all are fine Catholics, but [these outlets] simply manipulate the truth to try to involve an institution of the Church in political matters.

At the same time, I would like there to be a better understanding of the laity's freedom in political, social, and cultural matters... In public matters, every Christian has the responsibility to form their conscience according to the social doctrine of the Church, know well the proposals of the candidates of parties, reflect on the best option for the common good, and decide freely. This is why the work of spiritual accompaniment of Opus Dei avoids interfering with their legitimate earthly options. It is key to respect the autonomy of a layperson (whether or not they are part of Opus Dei) who participates in politics: their rights and wrongs are their own responsibility, not that of the Church. To ascribe to Opus Dei or to the Church as a whole, the cultural, political, economic, or social initiatives of the faithful is clericalism.

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\(03/29/2025\)](https://opusdei.org/en-ng/article/msgr-ocariz-interview-the-pillar-laity-evangelization-secularism/)