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Opus Dei clocks 40 in Nigeria

Last October 19th marked 40 years of the arrival of Opus Dei in Nigeria with the good news that God calls everyone to holiness and that this calling can be lived in the middle of the world, in the workplace in civil society and in the family.

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Many masses of thanksgiving were celebrated in Nigeria last October 19th which marked 40 years of the arrival of Opus Dei in Nigeria (1965).

With it came the good news that God calls everyone to holiness and that this calling can be lived in the middle of the world, in the workplace in civil society and in the family.

The first arrivals were two: a layman, Jeremy White from U.K. and a priest, Fr. Jose Domingo Gabiola, from Spain. The founder, St. Josemaría Escrivá, had sent them to open this path of holiness in daily life among Nigerians.

Opus Dei is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church, as such, it forms part of the hierarchical structure of the Church, not circumscribed by a territory, but by a particular mission: the spreading of the universal call to holiness by persons who have received a vocation in the world. A vocation that does not change them from their simple status of ordinary faithful in the Church or take them away from the positions they occupy

in civil society; but a demanding vocation, nonetheless, to serve God in the midst of secular activities, and by means of one's professional work, with a life-long and all-embracing commitment. The personal prelature is entrusted to a prelate who governs it as its proper Ordinary with a jurisdiction which is limited to the sphere of the special mission assigned to it by the Church.

A vocation to Opus Dei entails committing oneself for life to following Christ, serving God and one's neighbour in and through one's professional work and daily duties. The faithful of Opus Dei, therefore, endeavour 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 holiness that he addresses to everyone.

Jeremy White arrived in Nigeria with a commonwealth scholarship to do a post-graduate degree in the University of Ibadan. After getting a doctoral degree he taught in the University of Lagos, bearing witness to his strong faith and leading many of his colleagues and students to an encounter with God. He also helped to establish the first apostolic works of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Nigeria. Twenty five years later he died in Lagos with a reputation of being a holy person: many have recourse to his intercession and obtain favours and graces from God.

With him came Fr Joseph Domingo Gabiola who was the first regional vicar of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Nigeria (1965-1970). Other members

came from abroad in successive years, joining these first two, some as university lecturers others as workers in the private sector and soon the spirit and message of Opus Dei caught up with Nigerians.

The early years (1965-1975) were met with great challenges; Nigeria was experiencing the trauma of bloody military takes over and a civil war, but after attaining peace the apostolate gradually took roots and it grew up, first among students and lecturers, and later, among other strata of society.

At present Opus Dei has spread among all sorts of people both men and women, single and married. There are about 30 centres in various cities and towns like Lagos, Ibadan and Ilo-Ilo in the West; Enugu, Iwollo and Nsukka in the East. Plans are under way to start in the North with regular apostolic trips to Abuja being

undertaken. There are close to one thousand members and many thousands more are in contact with the formative activities of Opus Dei across the country.

The majority of the faithful of Opus Dei, in Nigeria, as elsewhere, are married, but there are many who embrace a single life of apostolic celibacy, without for this reason ceasing to be fully lay men or women; they all (whether married or single) carry out their professional work, be it prestigious or modest, on their own or, employed by others, often hidden and unknown. It is right in the middle of the world, in their daily situations of work and family, where they endeavour to be like leaven in the mass, reflecting the light of Christ's teachings in a natural way, mostly by the example of their work, conduct and friendship.

During these four decades of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Nigeria, several university graduates, from the ranks of Opus Dei's faithful, have been called to the priesthood by the Bishop-Prelate of Opus Dei and are incardinated in the Prelature to help, with their priestly ministry, the spiritual life of members and contribute to their apostolic zeal and doctrinal formation.

Priests do not form a group or class apart; all the faithful, priests and laity, have the same vocation in Opus Dei, but priests are necessary to provide authoritatively the word of God and the sacraments, along with the spirit of Opus Dei; however, priests do not command in Opus Dei, they are not "in charge:" centres and projects are directed by lay members.

Lay members do not form a group or act as a group in parishes; they do

not call attention to themselves as members, they endeavour to be like leaven in the mass, like salt passing unnoticed but effectively leavening the mass and giving taste to the meal. They do not separate themselves from their fellow Catholics; they belong to the dioceses and parishes where they have their domicile. Members live a particularly demanding programme of formation and spiritual life, which the Prelature provides.

In Nigeria, as elsewhere, a number of projects have developed, under the initiative of some of the lay members along with other citizens, in the fields of education, health care and social work, contributing in this way their quota to the development of Nigerians, especially with respect to professional skills, competence, ideals and values.

These initiatives include youth centres that run programmes (during the term and during the holidays) to help build the character and academic excellence of secondary school students; university residences on or off campus; a university, a college of catering and hospitality management and a technical school to train youths and workers and help them to get qualified jobs; there are also secondary schools, a hospital and two conference centres that offer courses of formation, retreats and seminars; the staff of these centres are also engage in rural development activities to serve the needs of the local people in the area.

The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei asks everyone for prayers in the fulfilment of the mission entrusted to it by the Church: the spreading of the universal call to holiness in daily life by people whose

vocation is to live in the world,
sanctifying it from within with the
spirit of the Gospel.

Good Shepherd (A Catholic
monthly of the Abuja
Archdiocese) // Fr. James
Chapuli

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