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Opus Dei in Perspective: History, Charism, and Life

We spoke to José Luis González Gullón, co-author of “Opus Dei: A History” (now available in Italian), about the institution’s spiritual and juridical development within the context of the contemporary Church.

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In 2021, historian José Luis González Gullón, professor at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross,

published Opus Dei: A History together with John F. Coverdale. The book is now also available in Italian, published by Ares and titled Opus Dei. Una storia. It offers a broad and well-documented overview of the growth of Opus Dei from its foundation in 1928 to the present day, combining rigorous research with a calm and discerning reading of the human and spiritual processes that marked its development.

In the context of the current revision of the statutes of Opus Dei requested by Pope Francis, we spoke with Professor González Gullón. With a reflective tone, the interview seeks to offer a wide-ranging understanding of the charism, its journey, and its place in the recent life of the Church.

Your book offers a panoramic view of the development of Opus Dei over almost a century. If you had to summarise the institution's journey in the recent history of the Church, what would you say has been its most distinctive contribution?

Bringing joy to countless men and women by announcing that God is calling them to be united with Him where they live, where they work, where they are. The heart of the spirit of Opus Dei, in the words of Saint Josemaría, is to realise and make your own that “wherever your fellow men are, your yearnings, your work and your affections are, there you will have your daily encounter with Christ.”

In what historical and spiritual circumstances was Opus Dei born in 1928? To what extent did it respond to the concerns of the contemporary world?

The message transmitted by Saint Josemaría is rooted in spiritual currents that affirmed the universal call to holiness for lay people — we may think, for instance, of Saint Francis de Sales — and of diocesan priests like Saint John Mary Vianney, the holy Curé of Ars. Through Opus Dei, God reminded us that He calls most people to become saints in the middle of the world, above all through the sanctification of work and the ordinary circumstances of daily life. From the beginning, this charism carried with it a mission entrusted to the founder: to bring into being a Christian family made up of women and men, lay people

and priests, who would make this message their own and share it on a personal and institutional level.

According to your research, how does the core message of Opus Dei relate to its historical development?

The spirit that Saint Josemaría received in 1928 underpins all the changes and developments Opus Dei has experienced over time. I see this particularly today, as I write a new biography of the founder, whose life could be summed up as *being and doing Opus Dei*: his way of union with Jesus was to give his life for the Work and to pass on that passion to his spiritual sons and daughters, for the good of the whole Church.

After the founder, his successors at the head of Opus Dei and the other members of the Work have sought to live, develop and spread that same

message, which has taken root in many countries and cultures. Naturally, the journey has not been linear or free from difficulties. Personal strengths and weaknesses, continuities and changes have all shaped the history of the institution and of its members, and they are key to understanding what Opus Dei means today, on the threshold of its centenary.

Beyond its institutional structure and apostolic initiatives, what have you discovered about the everyday life of the faithful of Opus Dei and the concrete way they live their faith in the world?

When John Coverdale and I set out to study the history of Opus Dei, we identified several aims. One was to carry out rigorous archival research

that addressed the main themes shaping the development of the Work. Another was to move beyond a purely institutional history and look at to individual lives. Although at times it was simpler to recount institutional aspects, we always tried to underline that each member's personal action, in the environment where they lived and worked, helped shape the history of Opus Dei.

More important than just one history of Opus Dei, I think there are as many stories as there are members or cooperators. In every circumstance, each person has responded in his or her own way to God's call. That is the real history of Opus Dei.

Every living reality goes through moments of growth, tension and learning. What would you say are the main challenges that Opus Dei has faced in its institutional and spiritual development?

I would highlight two major challenges. The first was the death of Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in 1975. In any institution of the Church, the passing of the founder marks the beginning of a new stage, in which the charism is no longer directly guided by its originator. In the case of Opus Dei, the presence of Saint Josemaría's first two successors, the Blessed Álvaro del Portillo and Bishop Javier Echevarría, and of those who had lived closely with him for many years, was decisive.

The second challenge began in 2016 with the death of Bishop Echevarría, signalling a new phase in which most members of the Work had not personally known the founder or those who worked at his side. This is a moment in which the challenge arises of remaining faithful to the original spirit while responding — still faithful to the charism — to changes in society, in the Church, and in the institution itself. This naturally involves some evolution in ways of acting and speaking. I believe this period will one day be the subject of study, because it will be clear that the charism itself offers the capacity to open new paths without losing unity with its origin.

Opus Dei has travelled a distinctive juridical path within the Church, from its early steps to its configuration as a personal prelature. What is the significance of this journey?

From the outset, Opus Dei's juridical development within the Church was an organic and gradual process. As with other long-standing ecclesial realities, the particular juridical form adopted by a mission adapts to the possibilities that canon law offers at each moment in history, while the charism remains the essential point of reference. In our case, this journey has been studied in detail in the book *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei: The History and Defense of a Charism*, which shows how different canonical structures have provided a framework for embodying the message received by Saint Josemaría.

If we look at 1982, the establishment of Opus Dei as a personal prelature is rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and its subsequent development in *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and the *Code of Canon Law*. Within this theological and pastoral horizon, Saint John Paul II judged that this juridical figure served the mission of Opus Dei well.

In recent years, Pope Francis has introduced a number of modifications to the regulation of personal prelatures. In 2022 he asked Opus Dei to propose an adaptation of its statutes, and in 2023 several canons relating to this juridical form were specified. The Work has sought to respond to these requests with fidelity to the charism and a readiness to follow whatever the Church considered appropriate. In June 2025, Opus Dei submitted the

requested proposal, following the procedure set out by the Holy See.

The 20th century has been described as a new springtime for the Church, marked by the blossoming of many ecclesial realities. Many of these have now matured and entered a post-foundational phase. How is the Church accompanying their institutional and spiritual maturity?

The relationship between Church authority and a new charism is necessary from the very beginning, at both local and universal levels. This requires calm, thoughtful dialogue, nourished by time, listening and mutual respect. The authority of the Church welcomes new charisms when it recognises

their fidelity to the faith and the fruits of holiness that they produce, while the charisms understand themselves as realities belonging to the one Mystical Body of Christ.

From the earliest days of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaría loved the unity of the Church and helped many people to see her as a mother. In the first residence of the Work, in Madrid in the 1930s, he placed a sign with the new commandment of love that Jesus gave us. And with a phrase that evoked his Aragonese roots, he would say that Opus Dei is “a little part (*partecica*) of the Church.”

In light of your research and the history you recount, how is Opus Dei approaching its centenary in today's ecclesial and global context?

Opus Dei approaches its centenary hand in hand with the Pope, with Christians, and with all men and women of good will, and it does so with great vitality. Many people today discover in the spirit of Opus Dei a path that leads them to identify with Jesus Christ and to transform the world for God.

I think the task of evangelisation is greater than it was a century ago. We see it in Western countries, where many families have lost the faith of earlier generations, and where the conditions are not always conducive to a radical self-giving in the midst of the world among the young; and there are also significant challenges

in Asia and Africa, where great apostolic energy coexists with the fact that the majority are not Christians.

In both contexts, the spirit of Opus Dei helps many people of every background to know and love Jesus. And the people who spread the are men and women who, as Saint Josemaría reminded us, seek to be contemplatives in the midst of the world, united with the Pope and the Church, with a clear sense of mission.

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