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Opus Dei marks 40 years in Nigeria

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Masses of thanksgiving were celebrated in Nigeria on October 20: on that day and month in the year of the Lord 1965, the first two members of Opus Dei arrived in Nigeria bringing the good news that everyone is called to sanctity in the middle of the world without leaving the work place or changing status (becoming a priest or a religious). They were a layman, Jeremy White from U.K. and a priest, Fr. Jose Domingo Gabiola from Kenya. The founder, St. Josemaría Escrivá, had sent them to start the apostolate in Nigeria.

Opus Dei is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church, that is, a jurisdictional circumscription similar to a diocese, embracing not a territory, but persons who have received a special vocation; not a vocation to the religious life, but an equally demanding vocation to serve God in the midst of secular activities

and by means of one's professional works in civil society.

A vocation to Opus Dei entails committing oneself for life to following that particular way of loving God above all things and loving others for his sake. The faithful of Opus Dei try 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 sanctity that he addresses to everyone.

When Jeremy arrived in Nigeria he was a Common Wealth Scholar and was admitted in the University of Ibadan to do a post-graduate degree in the Department of History. After

getting his doctoral degree he started teaching in the Universities of Ife and Lagos. Years later he died with a reputation of sanctity: many have recourse to his intercession and obtain favours and graces from God.

Fr Joseph Domingo Gabiola was the first regional vicar of the prelature in Nigeria. Others came years later as university lecturers and soon the spirit and message of Opus Dei caught up with Nigerians. The early years (1965-1975) were not easy; the country experienced a series of bloody coups and an attempt at secession, but after attaining peace the apostolate quickly spread.

At present Opus Dei has caught up among university students and workers, among professionals of all sorts both men and women, single and married. There are about 30 centres spread out in various cities and towns in various states of the

south while plans are under way to start in the north. 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 follow the single life of apostolic celibacy without for this reason stopping being ordinary 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 there in their daily situations of work and family where they endeavour to be like leaven in the mass, reflecting the salt and the light of Christ's teachings in a natural way, mostly by the example of their work, conduct and friendship.

However, in Nigeria, as elsewhere, there are a number of projects and initiatives set up and run by some of the lay faithful in association with other citizens in the fields of education and social welfare, making in this way their quota to the development of the country's people, especially in what respects professional competence, ideals and values.

Without giving an exhaustive list, mention could be made of the following: Helmbridge Study Centre, which runs programmes (during the term and during the holidays) that help build the character and academic excellence of boys from several secondary schools in the country; Wavecrest, which runs similar activities, including home-making and catering for girls and young women;

Irawo University Centre, a hall of residence near the University of Ibadan, which takes care of the overall training and formation of a good number of university students in-campus and off-campus, and Imoran Residence, a similar hall for female students, also in Ibadan; Other halls of residence have been established in Nsukka and Enugu.

There are also some initiatives in the field of health care: the Niger Foundation Hospital also in Enugu and other health centres and rural clinics in Anambra and Ogun States;

Other projects are: the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT) which is a technical training institution established to impart technical knowledge to deserving out-of-school youths; the Iroto Conference Centre and Iroto Rural & Development Centre, off the Epe-Ijebu-Ode Road in

Ogun State and a similar one in Iwollo in Enugu State.

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